

ITEM 5 VEGETATION VANDALISM IN THE DUNES BEHIND WOONONA BEACH

Woonona Beach has been the site of ongoing vegetation vandalism including poisoning, pruning and removal of seedlings, shrubs and trees within the dunes. The latest reported incidents occurred in July and October 2018 making 22 incidents of vegetation vandalism recorded at Woonona Beach since Council undertook dune management works in 2014. Council has previously undertaken a range of response measures to address the issue including distribution of educational flyers, installation of information and deterrence signs and meetings with the community and prominent community groups.

On 23 July 2018 Council adopted the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Policy. Under the Policy the latest incident is considered a high impact incident. Consistent with the Policy, Council endorsement is sought to install a large tree/vegetation vandalism sign and covert surveillance cameras at the site (subject to a supportive feasibility assessment for the cameras). In addition, Council support is sought to undertake additional response measures to further obstruct views if vegetation vandalism continues at the site, being the installation of barriers such as bunting, sail or shade cloth or fence.

RECOMMENDATION

- 1 Note that the Woonona Beach dune system has been subject to a significant spate of ongoing vegetation vandalism since Council undertook dune management works in 2014.
- 2 A large tree/vegetation vandalism sign (1800 x 1200mm) be installed at the location as indicated on the map (Attachment 4) attached to this report, to inform and seek information from the community and to block the view created by this vandalism incident.
- 3 An assessment of the ability and effectiveness of installing a covert surveillance camera(s) at Woonona Beach be undertaken, in accordance with the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Covert Surveillance Camera Procedure, with the view to installing cameras if the assessment is supportive.
- 4 Should vegetation vandalism continue to occur at Woonona Beach, Council install appropriate barriers at the site to block views in accordance with Council's Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Policy.
- 5 The barriers remain in place until such time as vandalism is determined to have ceased, plants have been allowed to establish/recover and environmental conditions have been restored to Council's satisfaction for a minimum of 12 months.

REPORT AUTHORISATIONS

Report of: David Green, Manager Environmental Strategy and Planning (Acting)
Authorised by: David Farmer, General Manager

ATTACHMENTS

- 1 Photographic timelines showing change to dune vegetation at Woonona Beach following dune management works by Council
- 2 Map of Woonona Beach in 2012 prior to dune re-profiling
- 3 Photographs of vegetation vandalism incidents at Woonona Beach since 2014 Woonona Beach
- 4 Map showing the location of vegetation management work since 2014, the incident in July 2018 and October 2018 and proposed vegetation vandalism sign

BACKGROUND

The *Wollongong Dune Management Strategy for the Patrolled Swimming Areas of 17 Beaches* (DMS) was adopted by Council in 2014. As an outcome of this Strategy Council undertook dune reprofiling work at Woonona Beach in 2014. This work included removal of vegetation from the frontal dune and

reprofiling to improve sight lines for lifeguard and lifesaver operations, beach width and beach access. This has been followed up with installation of low growing species in bare areas in the back zones of the dunes to stabilise the sand. Council's bush regeneration contractors continue to work at the site to remove weeds and ensure that the vegetation at the front of the dune does not extend forward over time in accordance with the *Woonona Beach Dune Vegetation Site Plan*. Council invested \$150,000 for the reprofiling works in 2014 and an additional \$50,000 in follow up vegetation management. Comparative photographs and aerial maps showing the differences in the dune landscape at Woonona Beach as a result of Council's efforts are provided as Attachment 1 and Attachment 2 to this report.

The photographs show that prior to 2014 the vegetation was dense and substantially comprised of species such as Coastal Wattles, trees including Banksias and Tea Trees and weeds. Council works significantly reduced the extent of the vegetation within the area to a state determined to adequately address the aims of the Dune Management Strategy. The bare areas that resulted in the back of the dunes were replanted with low growing native species. Prior to dune management works being undertaken by Council in 2014, Council officers are unaware of any vegetation vandalism at the site.

Despite Council's efforts to manage the vegetation at the site under an endorsed Dune Management Strategy, vegetation vandalism has continued to occur here since the work in 2014, targeting both established vegetation at the back of the dune and newly installed low growing grasses and shrubs over a 300 metre stretch of dunes.

Dune reshaping works occurred at Woonona Beach in mid-2014. A number of vandalism events occurred at the site between then and July 2015, including the pruning of trees and shrubs, removal of newly planted spinifex and low growing grasses. Council officers tried to resolve the vegetation vandalism occurrences at Woonona Beach through a range of responsive actions, initially focused on education and community involvement in the site. These measures included:

- Discussion at Wollongong Estuary and Coastal Zone Management Committee meetings regarding the matter and deterrence measures.
- Holding a community education meeting at Woonona Surf Life Saving Club on the importance of dune vegetation, explaining the dune reshaping project and ongoing dune management works.
- Creation of a dune care program for the City for volunteers to assist in the management of dune vegetation.
- Ongoing communication with the Woonona Surf Life Saving Club.
- Letters to residents explaining the dune vegetation works.
- Installation of signage on the types of low growing species being planted at the site.
- Site plans for works, including planting regimes, being available on Council's website.
- Replanting of vandalised plants.
- Installing two small signs at the site highlighting the occurrence of vegetation vandalism in March 2015.

These measures appear to have been effective for a period of time, with no further vegetation vandalism events occurring until late 2016.

From late 2016 to early 2017, a series of vegetation vandalism events again took place. Response measures were undertaken, including:

- Installation of a large Vegetation Vandalism sign north of the Surf Club, the sign was subsequently moved to an alternate location south of the Surf Club due to concern from adjacent residents.
- Letter box dropping of residents seeking information on the perpetrators and providing details on the plant species to be used in the forthcoming planting program in April 2018.

- Ongoing communications with Beach Care Illawarra, Woonona Surf Life Saving Club and Woonona Boardriders including meetings, site inspections and significant correspondence.

Again, the vegetation vandalism ceased for a period of time (12 months) until early 2018, where there have since been a series of vandalism events.

Current Position

On 24 July 2018 Council officers attended the site for routine operations and observed two 2m tall *Banksia integrifolia* (Coastal Banksia) trees along an access way north of the Surf Club building having been poisoned and cut and numerous other branches in the vicinity pruned. Whilst this report was under preparation on 9 October a Woonona resident reported another vegetation vandalism incident to Council, being the pruning of 10-12 branches from 1-2 *Acacia sophorae* (coastal wattle) trees located approximately 40m south of the surf club.

These latest incidents mark 22 incidents of vegetation vandalism detected at the site, since Council undertook dune management works in 2014. Council officers have sighted vandalism to 28-29 mature trees and uprooting of over 1,100 seedlings (planted by Council contractors undertaking works in accordance with plans formulated under the auspice of the DMS) since 2014. Woonona Beach is one of the most prolific sites for vegetation vandalism in the Local Government Area. Photographs of some of these incidents are provided in Attachment 3.

The true cost of these acts is difficult to calculate as it includes significant amounts of staff time in monitoring, investigation, stakeholder discussion and response, notwithstanding the environmental cost. However the impact on works undertaken by Council contractors translates to a financial loss to Council of approximately \$7,700 (including cost of labour, stakes and guards).

On 23 July 2018, Council adopted the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Policy. In accordance with the Policy these acts have been determined to be a high impact vandalism incidents due to the repeated number of incidents at the site. As a result, the following response measures have already been undertaken:

- A letterbox drop to local residents encouraging anyone with any knowledge of the incident to report it to Council or the local police. The letter also advised that a large sign would be placed at the site of the vandalism.
- A similar letter was sent to the relevant local community groups (Beach Care Illawarra, Woonona Surf Life Saving Club and Woonona Boardriders).
- Memo to Councillors advising of the vegetation vandalism and proposed response.

In response to the letterbox drop, representatives from Beach Care Illawarra contacted Council staff and requested a meeting to discuss the issue. On Thursday 27 September Council staff met with representatives of Beach Care Illawarra, Woonona Boardriders and other local residents. They expressed concern over the use of an apparently punitive approach in accordance with the policy which would predominately punish the residents that live directly across the road, who (they state) are not responsible for the vandalism.

Further to this, the residents asserted that a large sign specifically implies that the adjacent residents are responsible for the vandalism acts. Based on previous experience, beach users have displayed negative behaviours by staring at the houses across from the sign and even making unsolicited judgemental comments to residents. All beach users are also penalised by having their views of the beach restricted.

The meeting representatives advised that they would like to work with Council to disseminate a positive message and proposed a series of actions as an alternative. Their proposal is outlined in the section below along with Council staff's proposed recommendation.

PROPOSAL

Vegetation vandalism has continued to occur at Woonona Beach regardless of Council's response to date. Council staff propose a series of actions in accordance with the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Policy to address the issues at the site, referred to as Option 1. Alternatively, the proposal put forward by the community representatives is outlined in Option 2 for Council's consideration.

Option One

Council staff recommendation (based on the adopted policy):

- A large vegetation vandalism sign (1800 x 1200mm) be installed at the site of the July vandalism, to inform and seek information from the community and to block the view created by this vandalism incident. The site has been selected due to the history of vandalism in the immediate area and its visual impact for beach users. The location of the proposed sign and its nexus to the latest incidents and historical extent of vegetation vandalism is shown in the map which is provided as Attachment 4 to this report.
- That an assessment of the ability and effectiveness of installing a covert surveillance camera(s) at the site be conducted in accordance with the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Covert Surveillance Camera Procedure. Should this assessment show that cameras are likely to be effective in monitoring activity in the area it is recommended that Council endorse their installation.
- That if vegetation vandalism persists at the site, further action be undertaken to obstruct views at the site, including the installation of appropriate barriers, such as bunting, sail or shade cloth or fence. Such barriers should remain in place until such time as vandalism is determined to have ceased, plants have been allowed to establish/recover and environmental conditions have been restored to Council's satisfaction for a minimum of 12 months, in accordance with the Policy.
- Council officers continue to implement the vegetation management program at Woonona Beach in accordance with the Woonona Beach Dune Vegetation Site Plan, including the planting of low growing native shrubs and grasses in bare areas of the dunes.

Option Two

The actions proposed by the community representatives in the meeting on 27 September are listed in the table below along with corresponding comments by Council staff in regards to their feasibility of implementation and/or effectiveness.

Community Representative Proposed Action	Council staff comment
Update of the site plan for the site and implementation	Woonona Beach Dune Vegetation Site Plan was prepared in 2015 and is updated annually to reflect vegetation works required. Works for 2018-19 have been delayed due to drought.

Community Representative Proposed Action	Council staff comment
Creation of a Dunecare group	Dunecare groups are initiated in response to community interest. They are trained by experienced Council staff and subsequently left to manage the dune (largely) independently with support from Council. Given the history of

	vandalism in the area Council staff are not confident that this approach can work at this location.
Community planting day with local school children	This action is supported by Council staff.
Installing a low height educational sign near the lookout (beachside across from the intersection of Kareela Road and Kurraba Road), which includes information on the species being planted and the impacts of vegetation vandalism	A low sign would not blocks views, and would not be considered as punitive. However, current educational signage has not been effective in curbing the vandalism.
Installation of a viewing platform to complement the educational signage proposed above	Further investigation will be required into the design and cost of a viewing platform.
Media and education for the community	A range of educational responses have already been undertaken as outlined in the background section of this report.

It should be noted that Council staff met with some of the same representatives at a meeting in late 2017 where they were advised that should further vandalism occur at the site a large sign would be erected directly within the vicinity of the vandalism.

PLANNING AND POLICY IMPACT

This report contributes to the delivery of Our Wollongong 2028 goal “We value and protect our Environment”. It specifically delivers on the following:

Community Strategic Plan	Delivery Program 2018-2021	Operational Plan 2018-19
Strategy	3 Year Action	Operational Plan Actions
1.1.2 Manage and effectively improve the cleanliness, health and biodiversity of creeks, lakes, waterways and oceans	1.1.2.1 Protect and conserve the health and biodiversity of our waterways and coast	Continue implementation of priority actions from the Dune Management Strategy

Ecological Sustainability

The long term protection and management of trees and vegetation on Council owned or managed land is integral to maintaining the economic, cultural, environmental and social values of the area. Trees and vegetation contribute significantly to environmental health and to human health and wellbeing. In the case of dune vegetation it has the additional benefits of dune stabilisation and coastal protection.

RISK ASSESSMENT

If Council does not respond appropriately to these ongoing incidents of vegetation vandalism there is a high risk that the dunes behind Woonona Beach will be subject to further vandalism. A reduction in vegetation in the dunes can de-stabilise the dunes and impact on coastal hazards risks.

On 23 July 2018 Council adopted the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Policy. Consistent implementation of this Policy should be taken in regards to response and enforcement actions. Not acting in accordance with this Policy may have both financial and reputational risks.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Council has invested significant funds in delivering actions under the Dune Management Strategy at Woonona Beach and the vegetation vandalism incidents continue to undermine the efficacy of these works and result in further spending for remediation. As outlined above, vandalism of recently planted vegetation has been conservatively estimated as a loss of approximately \$7,700 (including cost of labour, stakes and guards) however this does not account for damage to shrubs and mature trees. Other costs are difficult to calculate but include installation of signage, significant amounts of staff time in monitoring, investigation, stakeholder discussion and response, notwithstanding the environmental cost.

Implementation of Council staff's proposal will be funded using existing Natural Area Management operational budget. The installation of the vegetation vandalism sign is estimated to cost \$1,000 for materials and labour. The cost of camera installation will be assessed as part of the feasibility assessment and additional funding requested through the business proposal process if required. However, a broad estimate based on other Council actions to install a covert camera is \$8,000 - \$10,000.

Should Council determine to proceed with the proposal put forward by the community, it is projected that the cost would be approximately \$5000 (for the construction and implementation of the sign and delivery of a community planting day), this does not include the installation of a viewing platform or the creation of a dunecare group.

CONCLUSION

Woonona Beach has been subject to significant vegetation vandalism since dune reprofiling and management works were undertaken by Council in 2014 including poisoning, pruning and removal of established vegetation at the back of the dune and newly installed low growing grasses and shrubs. The vandalism at the site is considered high impact vandalism and consistent with the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Policy an appropriate response is to install covert surveillance cameras and to take action to block views in the damaged area.

It is recommended that:

- A large sign (1800 x 1200mm) be installed at the location as indicated on the map in the Attachment 4, attached to this report, to inform and seek information from the community and to block the view created by this vandalism incident.
- Council officers undertake an assessment of the ability and effectiveness of installing a covert surveillance camera(s) at the site in accordance with the Tree and Vegetation Vandalism Covert Surveillance Camera Procedure with the view to installing cameras if the assessment is supportive.
- If vandalism persists at Woonona Beach, appropriate barriers to block views be installed and that these barriers remain on site until such time as vandalism is determined to have ceased, plants have been allowed to establish/recover and environmental conditions have been restored to Council's satisfaction for a minimum of 12 months.

Attachment 1: Photographic timeline showing change to dune vegetation at Woonona Beach following dune management works by Council

Beachfront



May 2014 - Prior to reprofiling under DMS

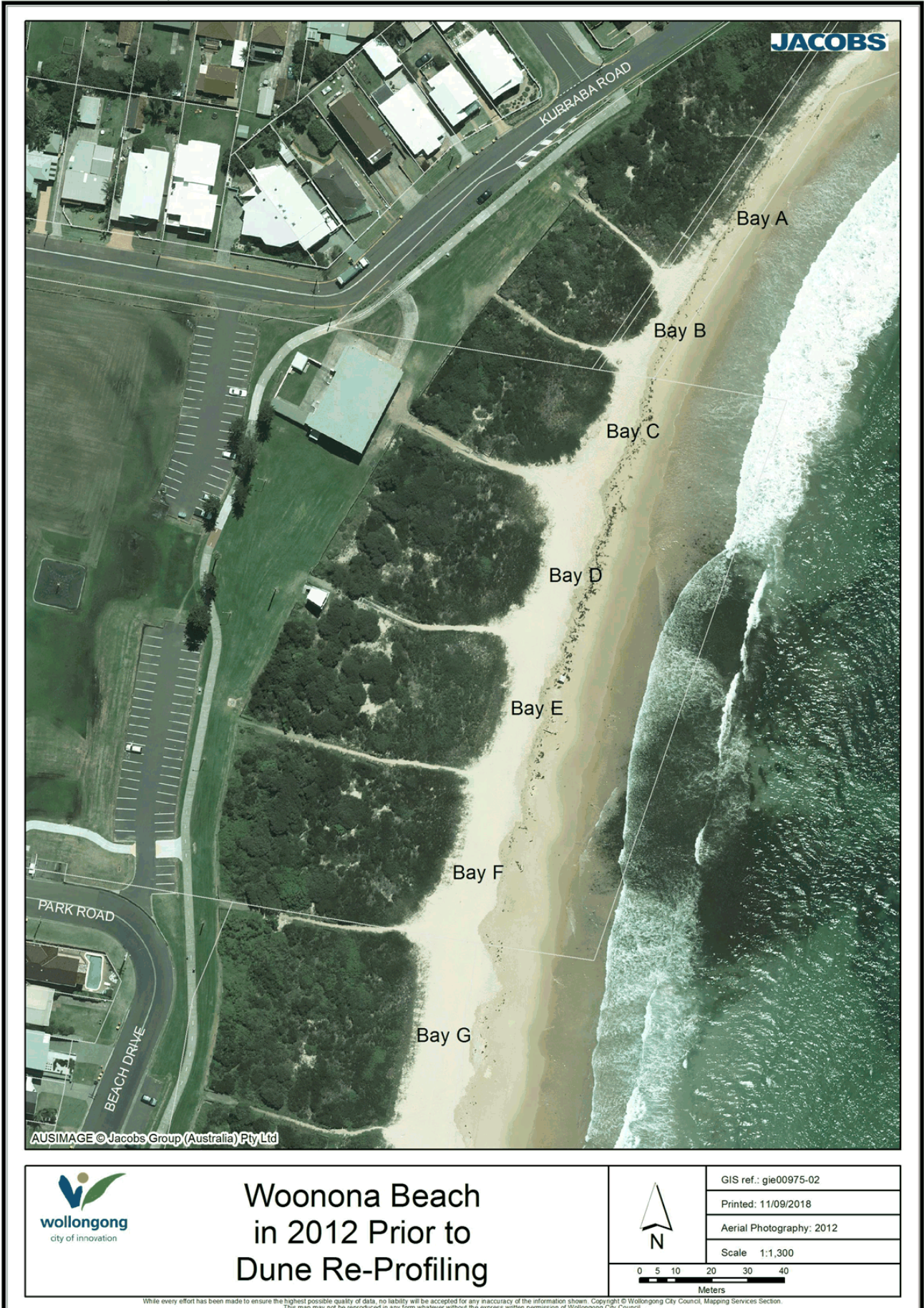


June 2014 - Following reprofiling



April 2018 - Following Council works to remove weeds and senescent Coastal Wattle and revegetated with low growing spinifex

Attachment 2 - Map of Woonona Beach in 2012



Attachment 3: Photographs of vegetation vandalism incidents at Woonona Beach since 2014

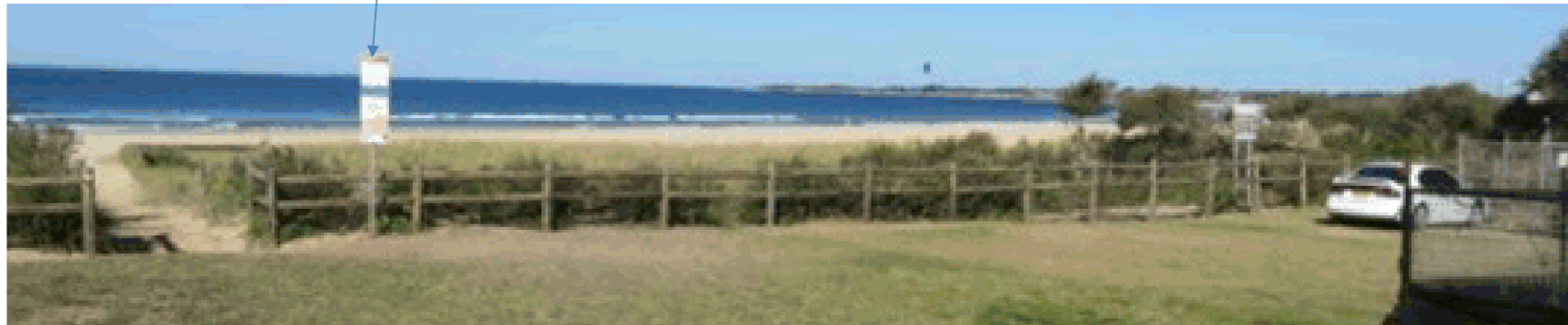
Roadside views of vegetation at Woonona Beach

May 2015 - Following reprofiling and vegetation management works



Comparison point

July 2018 - Following 21 vandalism incidents



Attachment 3: Photographs of vegetation vandalism incidents at Woonona Beach since 2014

December 2014 - Seedlings pulled out



Attachment 3: Photographs of vegetation vandalism incidents at Woonona Beach since 2014

February 2017 – 25 mature trees pruned



Attachment 3: Photographs of vegetation vandalism incidents at Woonona Beach since 2014

July 2018 – Poisoned and pruned Coastal Banksia



Attachment 3: Photographs of vegetation vandalism incidents at Woonona Beach since 2014
October 2018 – Pruned Coastal Banksias



Attachment 4 – Map showing the location of vegetation management work since 2014, the incident in July 2018 and October 2018 and proposed vegetation vandalism sign

