Sonchus kirkii

COMMON NAMES
puha, shore puha, New Zealand sow thistle

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | At Risk – Declining | Qualifiers: CI
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Herbs - Dicotyledonous composites

FLOWER COLOURS
Yellow

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Biennial to perennial herb (50-)150-600(-1000) mm tall. Taproot stout and swollen above. all parts exuding white latex when ruptured. Stem erect, simple or branched, finely grooved and ribbed, glabrous, hollow. Leaves thick, dull glaucous, lanceolate to narrowly oblong or linear oblanceolate (30-)80-200(-550) x (10-)30-60(-150) mm, margins dentate. Rosette and lower stem leaves pinnatifid to c.1/2 way to midrib; lobes broadly triangular, spreading or deflexed. Upper leaves not lobed, narrowly triangular to linear, or narrowly oblanceolate. Inflorescence cymose to umbellate. Capitula few to many. Involucre 10-15 mm , turbinate to cylindric, bracts imbricate, recurved at fruiting. Florets yellow. Achenes elliptic, brown, strongly flattened, (3-)4 x1-1.8 mm, 3-ribbed on each face, winged, wings and ribs smooth. Pappus hairs, fine, white.

Ex cult. Kariotahi. Photographer: Gillian M. Crowcroft, Licence: All rights reserved.

Otauwe, Chatham Island. Photographer: John Sawyer, Licence: CC BY-NC.

SIMILAR TAXA
Easily distinguished from all the other naturalised Sonchus species by the very large, glaucous, non-spinose leaves.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. Three Kings, North, South, Stewart and Chatham Islands.

HABITAT
Coastal. Usually on cliff faces in or around damp seepages where it often grows with the blue green alga Nostoc and fern Blechnum blechnoides. This species has a distinct preference for base rich rocks such as basalt, calcareous mudstones, siltstones, limestone or apatite-rich greywacke faces. On some offshore islands this species extends up into coastal scrub and herbfield. It occasionally grows on stabilised sand dunes. Indications are that this species once occupied a wider range of habitats but has retreated to those less suited to other faster growing introduced weeds.

THREATS
Appears to be declining over most of its range but especially in the North Island. The main threat seems to be from competition by faster growing weed species. Specifically there is some evidence that suggests it may be outcompeted by the introduced sowthistles Sonchus asper and S. oleraceus which grow faster, and thus can more quickly colonise the habitats preferred by S. kirkii. The species has also declined markedly along the south Wellington coast. Here it was once very common up until the mid 1980s subsequently it has disappeared from many of its former haunts, partly as a result of weed invasion and quarrying for rock, but it has also vanished from apparently stable, mainly indigenous habitats. The exact reason(s) for this loss are as yet unclear.

GENUS
Sonchus

FAMILY
Asteraceae

AUTHORITY
Sonchus kirkii Hamlin

SYNONYMS
Sonchus asper var. littoralis Kirk, Sonchus littoralis (Kirk) Allan

TAXONOMIC NOTES
The relationship of this species to the Chatham Island endemic, monotypic genus Embergeria, and New Zealand endemic genus Kirkianella needs critical study.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
August - April

FRUITING
September - June

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Pappate cypselae are wind dispersed (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easy from fresh seed. Short-lived and best treated as an annual.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
FAC: Facultative
Commonly occurs as either a hydrophyte or non-hydrophyte (non-wetlands).

ETYMOLOGY
sonchus: Sow thistle
kirkii: After Thomas Kirk (18 January 1828 - 8 March 1898), a NZ botanist and lecturer in natural sciences and regarded as a leader of botanical enquiry in NZ for over three decades. One of his most significant publications was Forest flora of NZ (1889) but he also contributed over 130 papers to the Transactions and Proceedings of the NZ Institute and other journals.

NVS CODE
SONKIR

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 36

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
2017 | At Risk – Declining
2012 | At Risk – Declining
2009 | At Risk – Relict
2004 | Gradual Decline
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Auckland: 2025 | Regionally Threatened – Regionally Endangered | Qualifiers: DPR, DPS, DPT, EF, PF, RR Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Auckland conservation status information is sourced from the "Conservation status of vascular plant species in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland" Simpkins E et al. (2025) report.
Otago: 2025 | Regionally Threatened – Regionally Endangered | Qualifiers: CI, DPS, DPT, PF, RR, Sp Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Otago conservation status information is sourced from the "Conservation Status of Indigenous Vascular Plants in Otago, 2025" Jarvie S et al. (2025) report.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Cameron, E.K. 2000. Native sow thistle *Sonchus kirkii* rediscovered in the Auckland region. Auckland Botanical Society Journal, 55, 21-24.
Thorsen, M. J.; Dickinson, K. J. M.; Seddon, P. J. 2009. Seed dispersal systems in the New Zealand flora. Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics 11: 285-309

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet prepared by P.J. de Lange for NZPCN (1 June 2013)

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MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/sonchus-kirkii/

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