

Maurice Yorke – Farmer and Conservationist

by Louise Matthews



Catlins farmer Maurice Yorke: a closet Forest and Bird member. Photo: New Zealand Herald

FARMERS AND CONSERVATIONISTS do not always see eye to eye.

And the way Maurice Yorke talks, albeit with a twinkle in his eye, about his various run-ins with “the greenies” he would, at first sight, appear to be another farmer to whom conservation is a dirty word.

However, Mr Yorke, aged 51, with a proud settler and pioneer ancestry, whose family has given its name to part of the South Island’s south-east coast, is a closet member of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society.

“I don’t boast about it. It would cause a heck of a lot of arguments with my friends on the West Coast,” he says.

He also does not boast about his part in ensuring the safe future of the yellow-eyed penguin’s biggest single reserve on the Catlins Coast.

Until recently the 123 ha section of bush at Falls Creek was part of Mr Yorke’s farm in Progress Valley.

In a sale taking six years to “get through red tape” the land passed to the Forest and Bird Society, which will ensure that land clearing stops at the boundaries, enabling the world’s rarest penguin to carry on nesting there.

The land, although in trust for his two daughters, passed out of the Yorke family to “outside fellas,” – fishers – about 12 years ago, but Mr Yorke bought it back.

Fergus Sutherland, a Forest and Bird executive member and past chairperson of the Southland Forest and Bird branch, and Mr Yorke’s “sparring partner” on green is-

sues, was quick to point out the significance of the land.

“Fergus was round like a shot actually to make sure I wasn’t going to clear it,” said Mr Yorke.

“I would have sold it to the Department of Conservation but that’s run by the Government and you never know when they’re going to start selling off their assets.

“The people in the department are dedicated but it’s the Government who pulls the strings and my main wish was that the penguins would be safe forever there.

“Forest and Bird are close to the action and more democratic. I knew they’d look after it – now they own it outright,” he said

Although good farming land, it was sold to the Society for the same price Mr Yorke paid for it six years ago.

Mr Yorke says he joined the Society to “stir things up a bit,” but is also keen to “put something back.”

The Haldanes were the first European settlers in the area, giving their name to the nearby town. In 1858 they set up a sawmilling business “where we live now”.

From a prosperous family, with tutors and governesses, they saw their business collapse and themselves destitute.

The Yorke ancestor was a 16-year-old Irishman, a bullock driver, who married one of the Haldanes and settled down to farming.

The farm passed to Mr Yorke’s father, who died tragically when he was hit by a crop-spraying aircraft, but it was only in Maurice Yorke’s lifetime that a fairly comfortable living was to be had from the farm.

“When I was growing up we had no heating and it was bitterly cold,” he said.

Now the family, which includes his wife, Mere, daughter Tracey, a keen farmer, and daughter Megan, a keen conservationist, has about 300 sheep and 500 cattle on “about 1,400 acres” (573 ha) although he does not know for sure how big the farm is.

“But all my ancestors and myself were bush clearers, chopping everything down in sight whether to sawmill or to farm. It didn’t matter so much then, there was so much bush still left.

“Now it’s nearly all gone and ideas change about what’s important, like saving that bit for the penguins and knowing about erosion.

“It’s silly really that there’s still fighting between the conservation camp and the farmers because over here we’re all working to the same end,” he says.

Apart from being the biggest single yellow-eyed penguin reserve on the mainland, the land is strategically important for the Forest and Bird Society because of the possibilities of expansion.

About 30 pairs of penguins nest there, but most of the large acreage acts as a “buffer zone” between encroaching farmland and disturbance by cattle and the secluded bush which the birds need. 🐧

Louise Matthews is a journalist working for the New Zealand Herald. The article has been reproduced with kind permission of the Herald.