

Margaret Peace, Conservationist

By Jim Kidson

PICTURE A PARADISE of treed tranquillity, bounty, birdsong and butterflies, harmony and handsome plants - the dramatic diversity of nature neatly parcelled into less than a hectare.

On that small holding of the "best soil in New Zealand, if not the world", Forest and Bird Marlborough chairperson Margaret Peace has turned a paddock overrun with docks and thistles nearly two metres high into one of the most bountiful pesticide and herbicide-free zones in New Zealand - a place which has fed her pure, organic produce in astonishing quantities and provided a regular income.

What Margaret achieved in the physical sense lies for all to see along a country road at Tuamarina, near Blenheim. Where other people with smallholdings manage a garden, she has achieved a self-sustaining lifestyle based on the best principles of conservation and environmental care.

Growing thousands of annual and perennial plants from seed helped her establish a dried-flower business which could have been expanded many times over had Margaret decided to specialise.

Diversity the key

But, as in the natural ecosystems, she points out, the key to a successful permaculture venture is diversity, to ensure long-term sustainable production. Other income came from selling organic produce from the garden, as well as high quality hay.

A vegetarian for "politico-economic" as well as health reasons, Margaret from the outset kept a small flock of hens, and one dairy goat. Home-produced eggs, milk, cheese, yoghurt, fruits, nuts and vegetables supplied most of her food requirements.

Three years after starting her venture in Marlborough, she built up a small herd of eight pedigree Saanens, which averaged five litres of milk per head per day for most of the year. The goats' milk fetched high prices.

A couple of Romney sheep acquired as orphans were kept primarily to tidy up the paddocks, though the fleeces were often used in garments Margaret wove and sold.

And three beehives ensured good pollination for twenty species of fruits, as well as honey for sale.

Margaret says a key role in the whole system was played by planting a wide diversity of trees, shrubs and perennial herbs, supplying a succession of flowers, fruits and seeds year round. This provided for the steady build-up of a permanent habitat and food resources for a vast range of insects and 18 species of birds which formed an efficient network of biological controls.

Margaret Peace's friends value her firstly for her tremendous courage and determination. Almost as much, they value her greatly for her knowledge as a teacher of many skills, her vision, her tireless commitment to the welfare of this besieged planet and her expertise over a range of activities. Yet in some quarters in Marlborough she has been slow



Margaret Peace the teacher: passing on her skills to future generations at her home in Marlborough.

to accrue the recognition of the people she shares a province with.

One unfortunate local body politician referred to her as a "rabid greenie who did more damage than anyone else in Marlborough." He didn't realise he was speaking to Margaret's daughter.

But the tributes flow from others, such as many of the 100 Workers on Organic Farms (or Woofers) who have visited Margaret's home over 13 years.

- "Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this enriching stay in your Garden of Eden..."
- "Thank you for sharing your home and garden, you are so knowledgeable. Your garden reminds me of a fairy tale..."
- "I admire your knowledge and experience. I will always remember you and there will always be a place in my heart for you..."
- "I was demoralised for a long while, but now feel the strength for the long struggle ahead. I will no longer apologise to people for my idealism..."

These statements flow from their brief experience of Margaret Peace at home amidst the magic she created on the Wairau Plains.

Encapsulating the very essence of her philosophy, this land was the base for her forays into the contentious and chilly waters of environmental campaigning. From Marlborough, the renewed battle for the nature of New Zealand was launched...

Early life

Margaret was born in Leominster, a little town in Hertfordshire, in 1923, to John and Margaret Stokes. The family moved to New Zealand in 1924.

In the 1930s Depression, the axe fell on his job and they bought a little farm in Henderson (now under concrete).

"It was a quite idyllic time for me," Margaret says.

"There were so many places to walk and ride around. I was an amateur ornithologist

when I was five years old. My brothers John and Robin were both much older than me so, as an only child, I spent all my time by myself learning about nature.

"My father was very interested in nature study. He grew up on a beautiful estate where he photographed birds. I learnt the songs of the introduced birds. I think all very young children have a natural empathy with nature but it gets pushed out of their minds by socialisation."

The young Margaret was learning about the New Zealand she would make such a huge contribution to. She joined Forest and Bird at the age of 12.

She did very well at Epsom Grammar, where she was to teach in later years and at Hamilton High, where she received a scholarship. Ironically, for Margaret graduated M.Sc. in 1975, girls weren't allowed to study science at school. She did cooking instead.

Some of the determination and confidence which allows Margaret to tackle anything and everything with vigour and a conviction that she can do as well as anyone was shining through already.

Having graduated B.Sc. Auckland in 1945, she was asked by the principal of Takapuna Grammar to teach science and botany to the fifth and sixth forms.

Forest and Bird journals

Margaret had no training college experience but accepted the job anyway. She was then approached by the principal of Tauranga College to set up a biology curriculum for the school. At that stage, she was teaching the subject from three books and Forest and Bird journals.

Margaret wrote the curriculum for the third, fourth, fifth and sixth forms before setting off for a year of teaching at Mossvale, west of Sydney. It was a Church of England school for the daughters of foreign diplomats.

Miss Margaret Stokes returned to New Zealand at the end of 1949 and