

## Trailblazer

Caption(s): New home: a small population of eastern-buff wekas live in a predator-proofed area on the Beatties' Lansdowne Valley property. Perfectly polished: paua has become a valuable commodity in New Zealand's fashion industry. Roger Beattie: "I'm not driven by money, I'm driven by projects." Incredible breed: Pitt Island wild sheep are at the top end of a footrot test, have a natural worm resilience, and avoid dagging problems.



TIM CRONSHAW meets an entrepreneur whose projects range from farming paua to Pitt Island wild sheep.



Roger Beattie has branched out since he dived for paua in the remote waters of Pitt Island. The common thread running through the paua trailblazer's many and varied businesses is that they all revolve around native or near-native species.

As well as two Banks Peninsula farms which are home to a flock of 3000 Pitt Island wild sheep, he has five paua farms dotted around the South Island which double as growing bases for a lucrative blue-pearl business.

He and his wife, Nicki, farm seaweed to make it into kelp pepper at the family base in Lansdowne Valley, in the Port Hills near Tai Tapu, where the pearls are processed.

Part of the 13ha property is set aside for a small population of eastern-buff wekas which were brought from Pitt Island, a 16km by 10km island in the Chatham Islands. Returning the wekas to the mainland came at



considerable expense for Beattie and not without a good bureaucratic arm wrestle. The birds live in a predator-proofed area on the lifestyle block and a ringfenced site of 20ha at their Wainui farm.

Then there is 911ha of dense native forest in Wanganui, in the North Island, which will be sustainably logged to provide an eco-tourism venture.

Another 24ha block next to Lake Ellesmere could be developed into a tourist stop-off point, with visitors free to shop for blue-pearl and paua jewellery and gaze at the lake's many birds.



This seemingly jumbled collection of assets points to Beattie's strong conservation and harvesting philosophy.

"They are all native or near-native inventions, and they are all entrepreneurial in that no-one has done them before," he says. "Even with paua farming, no-one has been successful yet, and we're not there yet either. It's been a case of five steps



forwards and six backwards, but I think we are on neutral ground now. The blue-pearl operation is very successful and well out of the tunnel and into the light."

His entrepreneurial inventing talents run in the family. From the family home in Kaikoura, his father, Doug, went on to invent "by far the best insulators in the business" for electric fencing, and holds 50 patents.

"My mother hated my father having long baths," says Beattie, "because he would sit there and invent something new, and there would be more money going into patent fees or a new die." By the age of four, Beattie had put his first insulator on a fence, but he was to deviate from the family engineering business. After taking

up a two-week shearing course, he applied for a shearer position on remote Pitt Island.

This led to diving work for paua. Within 15 years he had built up a three- diver and two-crew team into one of New Zealand's large paua operations. He drove a reseeding project of 80,000 baby paua, spread throughout Chatham Island waters in 1989 to 1991, which was the largest yet attempted in the southern hemisphere.

His astute buying of paua quota after the system's arrival meant that he will never be short of money, but about two-thirds of the 34-tonne quota he used to hold has been sold to pursue other business interests. The remainder has been contracted out.

Beattie, whose family assets are "in the millions", says the money is only a means to an end. "The money is a way of keeping score. I'm not driven by money, I'm driven by projects."

The Beatties moved to the mainland in 1992 to raise a young family, buying Kowhai Vale, 688ha of land south of Wainui on Banks Peninsula. It had a sea frontage for paua and blue-pearl farming, native bush for conservation projects, and good land for farming. Today, the paua, blue-pearl and seaweed businesses are combined in marine farms in the Chatham Islands, Wellington Harbour, Tory Channel and two in Akaroa Harbour.

A paua hatchery at Stewart Island supplies the seeding paua for the marine farms. Among many innovations, he introduced the commercial barrel culturing of paua to New Zealand after visiting United States and Australian operations. As a diver he had come across blister pearls in the shells and had always thought they had farming potential. Over the years he has perfected their culture. Small plastic inserts are glued on the inside of a paua shell. For three years they live in 200-litre aqua barrels positioned two metres under the water, and are fed seaweed once a week. When they are taken out, the paua shell has grown over the inserts to create a mabe (half-round pearl), and this is cut out, provided with a paua platform, and polished into a perfectly convex blue pearl for jewellery. All the pearls are measured precisely and sold in four grades of eight colours for \$500 to \$5000, depending on the grade. Beattie's Eyris Pearls now produces and sells 90 per cent of New Zealand's production for high- fashion outlets, and he is in talks with icon retailer Tiffany and Co.

Before even a single pearl was sold, the Beatties spent two years developing a marketing strategy aimed at this upper market. Each pearl has a certificate tracing its specifications down to the name of the diver. The business became profitable



last year and sales are expected to double each year during the next three years.



The shift to blue-pearl farming in Akaroa Harbour arose after an algal bloom wiped out 95% of the fingernail- sized paua obtained from a North Island hatchery, but the larger paua for blue-pearl farming survived. The meat operation was then downsized.

Meat is now produced only at the Stewart Island hatchery for contract canning in Australia and sale to China, where it is a New-Year delicacy.

The hatchery was bought from a receiver by five partners, including Beattie, for just under \$400,000 after the previous owners went bust spending \$2.5 million. Another \$100,000 has gone into its upgrade since, and the plan is to sell two million 10mm paua a year to the industry and to Maori and recreational people for reseeding wild areas.

While setting up the Chatham Islands marine farm was a breeze, a wad of paperwork followed later applications. It explains Beattie's less than approving view of bureaucrats. "When we set up the first marine farm in the Chatham Islands, the Ministry of Fisheries sent two people from Dunedin to support our application in 1992. We went for an extension on our paua farm in Tory Channel, and we went through the resource consent process. The council gave us approval, but the Ministry of Fisheries are now charging people outrageous fees and making them go through another layer of bureaucracy. The shift in thinking and philosophy of the ministry has been unbelievable."

He continues to wage battles against regulators. His ability to farm mussels in Akaroa Harbour has been challenged, his long-running idea to harvest giant kelp and bull kelp in the same area is still in the court system, and the ministry has released only short-term permits, even though the High Court ordered it to pay \$50,000 in costs in his favour. As the only person to hold a permit to farm, harvest and sell undaria seaweed (wakame), Beattie is fighting against a biosecurity rule change listing it as a noxious weed. He is also objecting to the proposed size of a mataitai (Maori reserve) in Tory Channel.

A legal fight that ended up in the High Court with Ngai Tahu when he opposed a taipure (a community fishing scheme), because it cut against his rights, has been settled amicably with both partners now in a joint venture. Beattie says going

through the court system and delays in consents and permits has cost him a fortune, but harvesters need secure rights to become farmers.

Last year he and Nicki bought 303ha of peninsula land on a farm called Ataahua, between Kaituna Valley and Prices Valley, for their expanding Pitt Island wild-sheep flock and a herd of murray-grey cattle. Distributed between the hill-country property and the Wainui farm are the 3000 Pitt Island wild sheep, including last year's lambs.



Beattie first came into contact with the unusual sheep after obtaining a contract to shoot, trap and pluck their greasy wool on the island.

"Towards the end of the project, I began to think that these sheep were incredible. The lambs were born almost running and they didn't get sore feet or wool blind. They were agile, they tasted great, and they didn't seem to get dags. They were never drenched, were unaffected by ticks and lice, and were healthy year round." Beattie believes the preservation of their genetic traits since they landed on the island in the 1840s will make them valuable for sheep farming. Weighing one-half to two-thirds the size of a conventional sheep, they lamb from the start of June to the end of January. Research has confirmed they are at the top end of a footrot test and have a natural worm resilience, despite strong competition for grass from other farming livestock and wild pigs. The sheep avoid dagging problems because the wool drops off of their rear end when they are two-tooths, while a tail helps them to direct excrement.

In time and with the right breeding, this could remove the need for controversial mulesing \_ slicing off wrinkled folds of skin around a sheep's backside to stop wool from growing.

Early research indicates that about 30% have a cold-tolerance gene, and their ability to store extra food around the kidneys is an unexplored asset. Their wool, averaging 25 microns, has high bulk, and Beattie believes its high grease content has an insect- repellent quality which, combined with their



browsing tendencies, explains why they never need to be drenched. They are farmed on the peninsula as they would survive in their natural state, he says. "I'm not selling. We want to put a ringfence around the entire genetic stock. Then we can capture the benefits and be secure in being able to harvest a lot of money in research and development, marketing and branding.

"At the moment our sheep farm is probably the worst performing in the country from a production and profitability point of view, but in time we will have one of the lowest-cost operations and one of the most profitable." At the conservation block in Wanganui, he has applied to harvest a set number of native trees, including rimu, rewa rewa and tawa. Money from the harvested trees will be spent on predator control to protect a kiwi population, improve the native forest, and develop walking tracks for an eco-tourism business.

Beattie says more private people and organisations need to become involved in conservation to ensure bird species are not lost. His 20ha predator-proof reserve in Wainui was the first large conservation area of its kind in New Zealand. "We had huge battles with the Department of Conservation over trying to get 34 eastern-buff weka here. They put up all sorts of roadblocks. "We had gone through the usual process two or three times before 20-odd questions were raised in Parliament. Soon after that the Minister of Conservation phoned and said we would have a permit in a week."

His views on the procrastination and obfuscation of top conservation and fishery officials are best left unrecorded, but a plan to set up a company called Conservation Over Doctrine (COD) is unlikely to endear Beattie to them.

### **FARM FACTS**

**Land:** Kowhai Vale, on 688ha south of Wainui; Ataahua, on 303ha near Kaituna Valley; and Lansdowne Valley with 14ha.

**Marine farms:** At the Chatham Islands, in Wellington Harbour, in Tory Channel, two in Akaroa Harbour, and a paua hatchery at Stewart Island.

**Products:** Paua meat, blue pearls, seaweed, Pitt Island wild sheep, and murray-grey cattle.