

Wilderness Lodges of New Zealand

Eco-Tourism & Nature Conservation Initiatives



WILDERNESS LODGE
ARTHUR'S PASS



WILDERNESS LODGE
LAKE MOERAKI

NEW ZEALAND'S WILDERNESS LODGES

Caring for New Zealand's Natural Heritage

New Zealand's only two Wilderness Lodges are run by leading conservationists Anne Saunders and Dr Gerry McSweeney and their family and staff team. Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki sits beside the Moeraki River surrounded by Te Wahipounamu World Heritage. Nature guides share the extraordinary diversity of the rainforest, lakes, rivers and coast with guests from around the world.

The Wilderness Lodges are a family-owned and operated nature tourism business. For nearly thirty years we have been at the forefront of protecting nature in New Zealand.

At Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass, the snow capped Southern Alps and Arthur's Pass National Park surround a 1650 hectare/4000 acre sheep farm & nature reserve. Guests explore mountain trails, kayak alpine lakes & experience life on a working sheep farm. Both lodges actively contribute to protecting local landscapes and wildlife.

Responsible Tourism Checklist

As New Zealand's leading nature lodges we work hard to manage our environmental impacts & educate our guests. We are actively involved in practical nature protection.

- ✓ Take practical steps to minimising the impact of our activities on the environment through waste minimisation, energy efficiency and ethical purchasing.
- ✓ Help our guests appreciate the natural world through nature discovery focused on learning and fun, not just thrills, adrenaline and burning fossil fuels.
- ✓ Giving back to nature. Our business relies on a healthy natural world and it's only right for us to return the favour. Protecting nature is a core priority for us, not a marketing strategy.

NEW ZEALAND'S WILDERNESS LODGES

Lake Moeraki and Arthur's Pass are two very wild & special parts of the South Island with remarkably contrasting landscapes, forests and wildlife. Different challenges and threats mean the conservation initiatives carried out at each location also vary.

Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki

- Campaigning for World Heritage Protection
- Protecting the Rainforest Penguin
- Safeguarding Wildlife From Introduced Pests
- Looking After Freshwater Life



Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass

- Combining Farming & Conservation
- Establishing a Wildlife Refuge
- Caring for Braided Rivers
- A Local Voice for Nature
- Battling Wilding Conifers



WILDERNESS LODGE LAKE MOERAKI

Campaigning for World Heritage

Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki was established by conservationists Anne Saunders and Dr Gerry McSweeney. Gerry had spent much of his life involved in campaigns to protect the West Coast's rainforests and South Island high-country. As conservation director for the Royal Forest and Bird Society he argued that nature tourism could provide a sustainable alternative to destructive logging, create employment and support local communities.

This campaign was eventually successful when the government agreed to protection in 1989. This was followed by the 1990 creation of *Te Wahipounamu World Heritage Area*, covering 2.7 million hectares or 10% of New Zealand.

Anne and Gerry moved to Lake Moeraki with their three young children and built from scratch a business based on sharing this extraordinary wilderness with visitors from around the world. Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki was at the forefront of a wave of change as nature-based tourism expanded on the West Coast.

Today, while the sawmills have closed, visitors come from around the world to experience a land of wild landscapes, rare wildlife and natural beauty. By providing an economic alternative for its people, tourism has played a key role in protecting this wild place.



What Is World Heritage?



The United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) recognises sites around the world as having outstanding universal values. Te Wahipounamu qualified as a natural site because of its:

- Globally significant natural landscapes
- A living link to the plants & animals of the supercontinent Gondwana
- Extensive natural habitats unmodified by human development
- A example of 80 million years of evolutionary isolation.



WILDERNESS LODGE LAKE MOERAKI

Protecting the Rainforest Penguin

Along the Lake Moeraki coast live one of the world's rarest penguins. Tawaki are strikingly beautiful but very shy. They return here each year to breed beneath coastal rainforest between August and early December.



Penguins are incredibly vulnerable on land, they smell strongly and are irresistible to dogs. In the early years following the Wilderness Lodge's opening, it was not uncommon for fishermen to take their dogs with them to the beach. While they fished, the dogs harassed and sometimes killed penguins.

We campaigned for the establishment of a Wildlife Refuge. In 1994 this was successful. This provided a legal basis to prohibit dogs from the coast. Wilderness Lodge guides have since been called as witnesses in a number of prosecutions after finding dogs illegally in the refuge.

Visiting the colonies daily through the breeding season, our guides remain guardians. We work alongside researchers and community groups to better understand & protect tawaki.

Keeping Tawaki Safe

- Penguins & dogs don't mix. Dogs must be left at home if visiting penguins.
- Pest control is important to protect penguins from predators.
- Tawaki are shy. Giving them space, staying still & remaining quiet gives the best chance of seeing their natural behaviour.
- Penguins are killed in fishing nets but most go unrecorded. In 2016, almost all reported penguin deaths occurred on the 3% of fishing boats with observers onboard



The Tawaki Project is a long term research effort investigating the ecology, biology and population dynamics of Tawaki. It is financed entirely by sponsorship and crowd-funding. If you want to support them visit:

<http://www.tawaki-project.org/>



WILDERNESS LODGE LAKE MOERAKI

Safeguarding Wildlife From Introduced Pests

Introduced pests pose a serious threat to New Zealand's wildlife. The main culprits in the Lake Moeraki rainforests are possums, rats and stoats (weasel family). Brought here by humans, these animals wipe out certain plants, compete with wildlife for food, raid nests and kill adult birds.

Across New Zealand, an estimated 26 million birds are killed by introduced predators annually. Without pest control, only 5% of kiwi chicks survive their first year. Males make up about 90% of kaka (bush parrots) populations in unprotected forests because the females are killed while nesting. The life in many of our forests is a shadow of what it was a thousand years ago.



Reversing the Decline

Thankfully, we have some effective tools to combat this. In the forests around Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki we maintain an intensive network of bait stations. The bait is dyed and flavoured to deter non-target species, but is very effective at controlling possums, rats and stoats. By keeping pest numbers low, we have created a haven where birds can live and breed in safety.

Our own efforts complement a large scale programme run by the Department of Conservation (DOC). Since 1998 there has been aerial pest control across 80,000 hectares (200,000 acres) around Lake Moeraki, using biodegradable 1080. Today the forests are noticeably healthier. There has been an remarkable recovery in birdlife. In 1989 we would hear a kaka perhaps once a month, now we see flocks daily.



We are strong supporters of this landscape-scale pest control. Gerry McSweeney regularly [speaks publicly about the work](#) and is a vocal advocate for expanding it to other areas in need of effective pest control.

What Is 1080?

"Ten eighty" is a poison used widely in New Zealand to control possums, rat & stoats.

- It is a synthesised version of a poison naturally found in some Australian & South African plants
- It is broken down by microbes in soil and water and does not accumulate in the environment
- It is cost-effective over large areas, kills all targeted pests and poses a very low risk of by-kill.
- Its use is supported by ecologists, Department of Conservation, Forest & Bird & all main political parties.
- In 2011 NZ's the Environment Commissioner carried out a detailed investigation into 1080. She concluded that not only should its use continue, it should be expanded to better protect wildlife.



WILDERNESS LODGE LAKE MOERAKI

Freshwater Guardians

The saying '*water is life*' has particular relevance in the Moeraki Valley. An annual rainfall here of 3.5 metres (10ft) nourishes a rich ecosystem of lakes, rivers and wetlands. Inaccessible by road until 1965, this valley never saw the forest clearance and wetland drainage common across much of New Zealand.

These waterways are the closest that you will find anywhere to those that greeted the first Polynesian arrivals, 800 years ago. At Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki daily life revolves around freshwater. We are attuned to changing river levels and to the seasonal patterns of life in the river.

Moeraki's River Monsters

We love sharing the freshwater world with our guests. The stars of the show are giant New Zealand longfinned eels. These apex predators are the world's largest freshwater eel, growing up to two metres long and living for 100 years.

Despite being an endangered species and breeding only once, at the very end of their long life, commercial fishing of longfinned eels is still permitted. Most are exported live to top-end restaurants around the world.

Though an informal agreement with fishers, we have gained some protection for eels in the river below the Wilderness Lodge but this relies on the goodwill of fishers. We have long argued longfinned eels deserve better and continue to advocate for full protected status.



Whitebait: A Delicacy in Decline

Another fish supporting a commercial fishery is whitebait. These tiny fish travel up rivers in the spring. They are caught in fine nets and fetch up to NZ\$100 per kilogram (\$45/pound).

Whitebait are actually the juveniles of 5 different species of native fish, 4 of which are classified as threatened. Prompted by declining numbers, calls to change fishing rules have so far gone unanswered.

Despite being a local delicacy, we have chosen to remove whitebait from our menu due to the questions around sustainability.



WILDERNESS LODGE ARTHUR'S PASS

Combining Sheep Farming & Nature Conservation in the Southern Alps

Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass sits on a 1650 hectare (4000 acre) working farm in the heart of the Southern Alps. Sheep have been raised here since the 1860s.

In 1996 the Wilderness Lodge was established. At the same time a change in farm management brought protecting nature to the core of operations. First, an ecological survey identified areas with high conservation value. Around half the property was fenced to create nature reserves. A sustained programme of pest and weed control was also introduced.

The farm had to remain a viable business. To balance a reduction in grazing area, a drive to improve pasture quality was begun. By fostering nitrogen-fixing legumes like clover, and focusing efforts on the most fertile soils, productivity gradually increased, without relying on synthetic nitrogen fertiliser or imported animal feed.



Fostering Nature: Twenty Years On

Two decades after opening the lodge and changing the way the farm runs, nature is doing well on the Wilderness Lodge property

- Once-rare mistletoes are abundant thanks to seed propagation & intensive possum control
- Mountain Beech forests are regenerating following the removal of grazing sheep
- Introduced pest numbers are kept low using baitstations. Wildlife is flourishing as a result.
- Intensive control continues to target invasive weeds threatening rare mountain ecosystems.
- We still to delight in sharing conservation stories and new discoveries with our guests.



WILDERNESS LODGE ARTHUR'S PASS

Establishing A Refuge For Wildlife



Many of our guests have joined us to kayak on Moana Rua/Lake Pearson. Carved out by glaciers during past ice-ages and surrounded by the Southern Alps, it is a restful and beautiful place and a hotspot for wildlife. The lake's rarest residents are Crested Grebes.

Lake Pearson was a favourite place for power-boat enthusiasts, with unfortunate results for the Crested Grebes. Their floating nest were incredibly vulnerable to being swamped by the wake created by powerboats and nesting success was nearly zero.

The Wilderness Lodge led a conservation campaign to establish a wildlife refuge on the lake. With the support of local community and conservation groups this was achieved in 2004. Many of our guests contributed to this campaign by writing submissions support the idea of a refuge. A ban on powerboats led to a noticeable improvement in breeding by Crested Grebes.

We were also involved in a publically funded project to safeguard water quality by preventing sheep and cattle from the next-door farm gaining access to the lake. This involved fencing of the lakeshore and construction of an alternative reticulated stock water supply.

On our regular guided kayak safaris to Moana Rua we continue our role as kaitiaki (guardians) and ensure that restrictions on power-boat and stock access are respected and that other threats are quickly addressed.



The Southern Crested Grebe

- Less than 1000 of these elegant birds remain in NZ. Their decline is attributed to introduced predators and to human-induced changes to their lake habitat.
- Their feet sit well back on their body. While they are strong swimmers and can fly, they are unable to walk on land.
- They build a floating nest, often amongst willows on lakeshores. These nests are vulnerable being swamped by the wakes from boats.
- They use elaborate courtship rituals: head shaking, gifting weed & 'walking on water'.



WILDERNESS LODGE ARTHUR'S PASS

Caring for Braided Rivers

One of the most special and unique ecosystems in the Southern Alps are braided rivers. These vast expanses of open gravel and shallow channels carry water east from the main divide. They provide special habitat for mountain wildlife and low growing drought resistant plants. Birds migrate annually from Australia and the north of New Zealand to breed here. In the open gravels they can spot predators at a distance and find abundant food.

Braided rivers and their wildlife are under threat. Nitrogen fixing introduced weeds like Scotch Broom, European Gorse and Russell Lupins thrive in the open gravels. They shade out native plants, choke bird habitat and prevent channels from naturally moving during floods.

Weeds also provide cover for introduced predators. Cats and other predators travel even further into weedy riverbeds because there are also more rabbits and hares for them to hunt. This all adds up to make life difficult for ground nesting birds.

Braided rivers dissect the Wilderness Lodge farm. Our Waimakariri Valley Track follows the course of Bruce and Broad Streams and the main stem of the Waimakariri River. The open gravels of the Cass River form our eastern boundary.



The braided Waimakariri River flowing from the Southern Alps



Wrybill Plovers return each year to breed in the Waimakariri River

Our Braided River Protection Work

We undertake Russell Lupin control in Bruce Stream, knapsack spraying to stop their spread across the gravels. Lupin seed remains viable for decades, so this is a long term project but already we see fewer germinating plants.

Elsewhere we use strategic sheep grazing to slow lupin spread. Sheep will eat lupins and while not removing them entirely, early spring grazing helps keep riverbed areas in a less weedy state.

We also provide logistical support to the braided river bird surveys conducted each year by the conservation group [Braided River Aid \(BRaid\)](#). Encouragingly, these surveys suggest that breeding bird numbers in the Waimakariri River have remained steady over past years.



WILDERNESS LODGE ARTHUR'S PASS

A Strong Local Voice for Nature

A Presence in the Parks

We work closely with the Department of Conservation (DOC). Spending their days in the field, our guides are often be first to notice anything amiss on surrounding public lands. This may be farm animals in conservation areas, dogs taken into kiwi habitat or people not respecting park rules. DOC rangers cannot be everywhere at once, so looking after these places needs to be our shared responsibility.



Expanding Protected Public Lands

We have successfully advocated to expand protected areas. Wilderness Lodge founder, Gerry McSweeney, has been a member of the [Nature Heritage Fund \(NHF\)](#) since 1990. This contestable government fund has protected 1.3% of New Zealand's through purchases and covenants. In the Upper Waimakariri, NHF purchases created the Korowai Torlesse Tussocklands Park and improved conservation and access in the Castle Hill limestone basin.

Opposing Inappropriate Development

While supporting positive conservation projects, we have also spoken out against threats to local landscapes and wildlife. In 2013 we submitted against an application to [irrigate and intensify 550 hectares of nearby farmland](#) within a sensitive lake zone.

Widespread opposition saw the application declined, but then appealed in the Environment Court. Proceedings continue (2017).



Protecting the Legacy of Past Generations

In 2017 we once again spoke out against a threat to public land. Across the Waimakariri River from the Wilderness Lodge farm lies Riversdale, a thousand hectares of short tussock grassland forming the eastern gateway to Arthur's Pass National Park. In 1901 far-sighted conservationists recognized the area's value and set it aside as public reserve.

A bureaucratic error however saw Riversdale mistakenly included in the pastoral lease of neighbouring Mt White Station. In 2017, for the first time in 100 years, this perpetual lease came up for sale. To the disappointment of many, the public lands of Riversdale were advertised as part of the sale.

We brought this to the attention of local and national media and Gerry McSweeney featured on an [evening television news feature story](#), demanding the area protected status be upheld. This led to a [debate in the New Zealand Parliament](#) where the Minister of Land Information announced an urgent investigation.



WILDERNESS LODGE ARTHUR'S PASS

Battling Wilding Conifers

A big issue in the South Island high country is the spread of introduced conifers. Conifer seed blows from plantations and seedlings quickly grow into a dense monoculture. Left unchecked they disrupt mountain landscapes, shade out native plants & eliminate wildlife habitat.

Keeping Our Reserves Wilding Free

On the Wilderness Lodge property, we work hard to control the spread of Douglas Fir. Upwind of us lies a plantation planted on public land by the now-defunct Forest Service. Seed blows from here across our network of reserves and grazing land. Every year we remove thousands of seedling Douglas Fir by hand-pulling seedlings and cutting larger trees.

Our Wilderness Lodge team has been assisted by guests, local council, Department of Conservation, and volunteers. Every six months we host an Ecoquest study abroad group from the University of New Hampshire (USA). These enthusiastic student volunteers have been helping us manage wildings for 15 years.

Saving the Dragon's Tooth Shrublands from Invasion

We also work to control wildlings elsewhere. We have 'adopted' a frost flat in Craigieburn Forest Park, home to threatened orchids, hebes and 5 species of dragon-tooth shrub (*dracophyllum*). Our guided nature adventures visit this special site and over 20 years our guests have removed tens of thousands of wilding trees. Without this effort, this unique community of plants and the wildlife it supports would have been lost.



What's the Problem with Wildings?

- Conifers like Douglas Fir and Lodgepole Pine were planted for timber & erosion control. In the South Island high country they grow rapidly.
- Conifers replace complex grasslands, shrublands and forests with a monoculture of trees. Exotic conifer forest in New Zealand is a 'green desert' supporting very few native species.
- Once established it's too late as most native species will have already gone. Removing seedlings before they become well established is critical.

NEW ZEALAND'S WILDERNESS LODGES

Protecting & Sharing Natural New Zealand

The Wilderness Lodges are a family business built on celebrating nature. We rely on healthy natural landscapes and wildlife so we have a responsibility to look after them. For three decades, our practical conservation work has been making a real difference to these two special corners of the South Island. This wouldn't be possible without our guests.

Conservation has to include opportunities for local communities. On the South Island's West Coast, protecting the rainforest brought an end to native forest logging. Today sawmills have been replaced with a vibrant tourism industry. Visitors come to experience a land where nature rules and the impact of people is slight. Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki shows that protecting nature can create jobs and help local communities

When setting up their second Wilderness Lodge at Arthur's Pass, Anne and Gerry sought to expand the concept to include high country farming and conservation on 1650 hectares/4000 acres of pastures, forests and mountain lands. Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass combines nature tourism with farming and practical conservation.

As wilderness becomes scarce, wild places face increasing pressure from development and exploitation. The enthusiasm of our guests for exploring wild New Zealand and contributing to its protection demonstrates that, when done well, nature tourism can be a powerful force for protecting nature. When our guests return home with an enhanced appreciation of nature, we know of many who get involved with conservation in their own countries.



Wilderness Lodge Arthur's Pass is midway between Christchurch and the West Coast on Highway 73.

Experience fine dining, stylish accommodation and guided nature and sheep farm adventures in the heart of the Southern Alps.

Contact:

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Wilderness Lodge Lake Moeraki is located on Highway 6, between the West Coast Glaciers and Wanaka/Queenstown.

Surrounded by ancient rainforest and wild seacoast, the lodge offers stylish accommodation, great food and exciting guided nature and wilderness adventures.

Contact:

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