

Ep. 16 Starting the animal pest conversation

Rachael Halder: [00:00:00] Catchment Convos with Thriving Southland, your link to Southland Catchment groups and their impactful projects. Each episode will dive into grassroots effort by local farmers and communities that are driving change and sustainability in our regions. Listen in for inspiring stories and insight. Real people, real change, the Southland way.

Sarah Thorne: Welcome back to Catch Convos. My name is Sarah Thorne, and I'm your host today. I'm one of the Thriving Southland catchment coordinators. In today's episode, we're starting the conversation on animal pest control, which is a hot topic for many of our catchment groups.

Today I'm joined by Peter McDonald, a sheep farmer from Caroline Valley, former Environment Southland councillor, Dipton local, born and bred, and a family man involved in lots of local groups, committees, one of which is the Greater Dipton Catchment Group. Peter and his family fulfilled a family dream in [00:01:00] 2025 of protecting 56 hectares of their farm in perpetuity to a QEll covenant involving a 4.3 kilometer deer exclusion fence and a lot of hard work removing animal pest by family, friends, and the wider community. Often the pest control conversation starts in catchment groups because of damage to paddocks, fences, and livestock. But for many catchment group members, seeing their native bush blocks and tussock lands being damaged is devastating too.

In many parts of New Zealand, feral ungulates and possum numbers are on the rise. Feral ungulates are pests with hooves like pigs, deer, and goat. All these pests cause a huge amount of damage to our land and water, and can help spread diseases and kill livestock too. Pigs expose large areas of paddocks through rooting. Possums, deer and goats strip our bush areas bare killing plants and damaging our land's ability to be a sponge, which helps reduce flooding downstream.

Mobs of feral deer are very good at traipsing, well-worn paths through the bush, [00:02:00] and creating muddy wallows, allowing more sediment into our streams, damaging our fresh water, estuarine and coastal areas too.

For many catchment groups, pest control is an important first step in their work to look after the land and water. So let's get into it.

Welcome, Peter. It's really great to have you here to talk about all the work you've done to look after your special part of Southland. I know it's been a huge family effort spearheaded by you and your lovely wife Kim, and it's wonderful that you are able to join us today and talk about it.

Peter McDonald: That's no problem. Gidday, Sarah.

Sarah Thorne: Would you like to tell me a bit about your farm and what got you into animal pest control?

Peter McDonald: I've sort of been here all my life on the place born and raised on the farm and you know, just growing up it was about the possums and the possum skins. We used to do that as youngsters. It was just your everyday sort of rural kid. So been on the farm, we've been running it ourselves since, [00:03:00] 1997 but my parents moved here in 1964. The place is pretty, um, 20% is Cultivable area and 80% is hill country, and about 135 hectares of solid bush and scrub. Pretty challenging sort of hill country that's always been the case with the farm, so we've had to do things a bit differently over the years. But it's fair to say those forested areas when I was a younger farmer and was thinking about production and how am I gonna do this and how am I gonna make more of that, I used to get a bit frustrated about those areas. I wished I could have the big wide open spaces and the big paddocks. But as I've got a bit older, I've mellowed a wee bit and started to see the value in those areas. That's probably been my latest sort thing that we've been on for quite some time, probably the last 10 or 20 years.

Sarah Thorne: I was lucky enough the other week to [00:04:00] come to your beautiful farm and go to a really good field day where you opened your Gavinwood Covenant. And that's been something that you've been working on for a few years?

Peter McDonald: Yeah, it has been. But it's not the first, the first we did a Covenant a 17 hectare one, so that's up there. But even way before that, we had a history of fencing off those thick scrub and bush areas first. We did it in the 1980s and for many years people would come up and they would think, oh wow, you've done all this environmental stuff. And it was a bit for that too, but mostly it was to keep the stock out of the bushed areas, especially cattle.

So we've had that history of those blocks being left alone and being protected. But the last one we've just completed is a 56 hectare covenant, and it's just got registered now. And the special thing about that, that it's got a full high grade deer fence [00:05:00] right around the 56 hectares.

What actually drove that project is that we first tried for some environmental enhancement fund from Environment Southland to put some plantings in that block. We are gonna put a hectare there in it just to fill up a few gaps in it. And I just knew that we would probably have quite a bit of deer damage and I just didn't want to go down that track.

So we actually got turned down from that fund. And it was actually a blessing in disguise, so it shifted our thinking around protecting the area around the fence. So what we did after that, we worked in conjunction with QELL, and the local rep down here, Jesse, and what we did is that they had, Brian Rance the long term, ecologist from DOC, Brian started to do some work for QELL. So we got Brian along and Chris Stowe, a well-known [00:06:00] ecologist botanist from Riverton, and they compiled a report, high value assessment report on that area. They found is that in that 56 hectare there was such a concentration of locally and nationally endangered plants that that was a real driver for the funding. So as soon as we had that information and the recommendation of those two people was it's completely feasible to put a deer fence around it.

Through QELL we got the normal QELL funding for the fencing, and then we got a deer fencing funding package on top of that. We also got funding from Environment Southland. It was secondary lot of funding, but really well appreciated.

And then myself did the rest with a few contributions from the neighbors on the boundary. The whole project I think come in just about [00:07:00] \$123,000 for that fencing 4.12 kilometers. It was quite a big project.

Brett Middleton fencing contractor from Otapiri fenced it, you know Brett does a fantastic job. I just love working with experts at people that know what they're doing. . And that's one thing I've learned is to trust people. And just before I finish on the fence, the fence is what you call a high grade deer fence. So there's six inch posts at five meters. We did quite a lot of what you could say, vegetation clearance on that fence 'cause we're really aware if you don't do that, you'll have debris up on the fence within a year or so. And as most farmers will know on sort of harder hill country access is the key to maintaining a fence. There's also what I was told early on the piece, I have a legal obligation to maintain that [00:08:00] fence indefinitely so, that stuck in my mind, everything is about the future.

That's the key part. I've always sort of believed if we get that fence, make a good job of it, the rest will take care of itself.

Sarah Thorne: That's really special. You've given us some great bits of advice already, any pieces of advice for people starting out on this journey?

Peter McDonald: I would say know what you have. I go back to that high value assessment. If you think you've got something special that you want to protect, understand what it is. And you'd be surprised what sort of funding could be out there to drive a project.

But it was a big commitment for us too financially. And sometimes you do things, you're not really too sure what the end game's gonna be, but this was the time that we had to do it.

Another thing that you may ask, but I'll just preempt this question, is the pest control part of it. People ask, well, why did you put a deer fence [00:09:00] around? And that was obviously to keep the deer out. So we had a major problem.

We are on the Hokonuis. And the Hokonuis is one of the largest fallow deer concentration in the country. That's a big statement to make, but that's what evidence sort of shows us anyway. Fellow or an animal that gets set into a place will stay there unless they're pushed out for any reason.

So that was a big factor for us to recognize and start to do something about that. To be honest, the deer issue over the years I sort of started off, I thought it was quite good to have some hunters up here. We had a trophy operation for many years but the money we're making off that we're losing it at the other end. With a lot of deer all over the farm they were just getting away on us, so learned a lot of lessons on that.

But then again, that wasn't new to us. We've gone back through the 1990s when we had a [00:10:00] massive goat problem, too and that took us a whole decade to get our heads around that and to learn how to control goats. So that was a big lesson to learn and that was around coordination with neighbors. It's no point just a couple of neighbors really pulling out all the stops to do a lot of work 'cause the blocks just get re infested again. But once you have a coordinated effort amongst everybody, that is the absolute key. So we took those lessons away through into the deer control program.

Sarah Thorne: That's a really good point to make, you've gotta work with your neighbors to solve this animal pest problem.

Peter McDonald: You you absolutely do.

One of the big takeaway points, is that when you think you've done enough, when it comes to animal control, you have to do more. And the doing the more bit is really hard. I still think recreation's important but you've gotta get those numbers down to acceptable level.

Sarah Thorne: I [00:11:00] think you've got it down to four fallow deer in that 56?

Peter McDonald: Within that 56 hectares, yes. What we did is that we flew a thermal drone. Paul Jacques came from DOC. So he brought it out one night and we identified 12 there.

We had funding from QEll also for deer eradication and we used a helicopter for that. Fraser Sutherland from Te Anau got a helicopter and he is got the night vision gear attached to that. So they spent two and a half hours and it's all GPS tracked up there and they got 10. And Fraser just sort of said at the end, we're pretty certain we're chasing around the last five. He reckons there's four or five left there. So since that, we've shot three from the ground and I think there's about another three or four left between me and my neighbour.

Sarah Thorne: Amazing. [00:12:00] And I know that you you pour your heart and soul into this really your family, and that's one of the wonderful things, isn't it? 'cause you guys have all worked together on it and you've secured future access to the site, haven't you?

Peter McDonald: Yeah that's probably one thing that I haven't mentioned through all this. We've had a large change around of ownership. We've sold a large block, that the track goes through. So we've created an easement. We're still farming on the flat land here, but we've sold a large block there and that's in trees and so we've secured that easement and also a right of way around the fence. So that was really important. A four meter right of way. I wanted to make sure I could get down there with a tractor and a thumper and put another post in if I had to. So we've secured that easement. For the family and for anyone else.

Sarah Thorne: My next question, I mean, I don't think this is gonna end you're so invested in this project and your family are what are your [00:13:00] future plans? I know you've got an interest in biodiversity credits and the carbon credits as well.

Peter McDonald: Yes, we have. So the first thing I would like to do, and we've done this already, is get a benchmark or a stock take of what is in the forest. So we've started on that, um, and we've already put in some 20 by 20 squared area

plot, just with aluminum stakes to look at regeneration. So I'm really keen to see what biomass is there. So we understand what's there now, so in the future we got something to measure against.

I would like to put in some sort of perimeter possum bait stations. And I understand that being a covenant, I will get those for free. I think that's still the deal with the council i'm not too sure, but I'll probably put in quite a few more to create some sort of perimeter.

And then there's wild [00:14:00] cats up there. I know that Wild cats everywhere give them a bit of a tackle up at some stage. Everything I'm gonna do, I'm gonna document. The credits, everyone's talking about them arriving, they haven't quite arrived in a usable form I could say we're off the shelf sort of turnkey yet, but I'm pretty confident that will happen and I wanna be ready for when that does happen to have all that information there. So we'll be doing all that groundwork as we go on.

Sarah Thorne: Pete, thank you so much for talking to me today. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Peter McDonald: Yeah, look, not really, I covered a lot of things. But I would just go back to those key points around pest control is coordination with neighbours. So coordination with them and you need to go further. So when you think you've done it about right, you need to go further. That's all I can say. And, and one thing I'll [00:15:00] always remember when we took our first 150, it was 175 out in their first helicopter shoot. I went up in the hill about a week later, and there was just something different about it. It was like the whole land sort of let out a sigh of relief. It just looked and felt a bit different.

Animals come and go. And this might sound a bit, um, ruthless, but always look after your land. That's the most important thing. 'Cause if you treat that poorly, it'll treat you very poorly.

Sarah Thorne: Well thank you so much, Pete, for joining me today and for sharing your family's experiences and dedication to looking after their special part of Southland.

And I love that you've arranged ongoing access to your special place for generations to come.

Peter McDonald: Thanks, Sarah.

Rachael Halder: And that's a wrap for another episode of Catchment Convos, brought to you by Thriving Southland. A big thanks to our guests for being a part of the conversation on today's episode, and for you guys for tuning in.

[00:16:00] We appreciate your support. Don't forget to like, subscribe, and follow us wherever you get your podcast from so you can stay up to date with all the latest episodes as they're released.

For more information on this episode, check out the show notes or head to the Thriving Southland website where you can also learn more about the awesome work happening across the catchment groups here in Southland. And if you've got a project or an idea you wanna share, don't be shy. Reach out. So until next time, keep up the good work out there on the land and as always, stay connected and keep driving those changes for a thriving Southland.