

Ep 12 - Opportunities in Agritourism

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.

Welcome back to Catchment Convos. I'm your host, Rachael Halder, and today we're heading into the exciting world of agritourism. What is it? Why it matters, and how could it be a game changer for our rural communities?

My guest today is Marijke Dunselman, founder of Agritourism New Zealand. She worked with hundreds of farmers and landowners across the country, helping them build agritourism businesses that not only bring in extra income, but also connect urban and rural communities in a meaningful way. In 2024, she launched the [00:01:00] Agritourism Academy and Community, a first of its kind online hub, packed with training, resources and connection for anyone wanting to start or grow in this space.

Originally from Europe, Marijke brings an international outlook, decades of experience, and a real passion for supporting rural New Zealand. We'll chat about what agritourism actually looks like on farms, how it fits into the wider story of catchment groups, and how Southland's unique landscape and people could make it a real hotspot.

Let's get into it.

Welcome to the show Marijke.

Marijke Dunselman: Thanks very much for having me, Rachael. It's so nice to be here.

Rachael Halder: So, I thought we'll start off with some easy, warmup questions. For those maybe who haven't heard of this term agritourism before, how would you describe it simply for us?

Marijke Dunselman: Well, agritourism is interesting because there are a lot of different ways to explain what it is, but to keep it really simple, it's basically a tourism business on a working farm, as a way for farmers to diversify their farm income and for [00:02:00] visitors to enjoy, you know, off the beaten track

experiences and connect with the land, the people, and the animals as well, and the food. So, yeah, it's a way to diversify for the farmers and keep the farm in the family as well. That's often, a reason, to get into agritourism.

Rachael Halder: What led you into starting Agritourism New Zealand back in 2019?

Marijke Dunselman: Some people may already have met me in the past because I've been in New Zealand, 31 years now. I came from Holland originally, and, my grandfather was a tulip farmer. So that's sort of, my background in farming. And, when I first moved to New Zealand, we moved to Southland, just out of Invercargill.

And spent 12 years in Southland. And, three of the years at the start of it were managing Tourism Southland. So that was the regional tourism organisation in Southland and we were on a little farmlet ourselves back then. And I worked with right from the start with lots of farmers, because there were already, back then farm tour and farm stays.

Over the [00:03:00] years after I left Tourism Southland and I set up my own marketing consultancy and training business in tourism , and then over time I found that farmers sort of have slightly different needs , and situations than the general, , motel owner or hotel, or activity owner, of a, business. Because they already have the land, they have this resource that they can use, to set up an agritourism business, which is something that, the other businesses don't have.

But the other thing is that they had often no background in tourism, so they needed to really learn about it. And then I have worked with , what's now called Great South and about eight or nine years ago now, we, did several projects, on really sort of looking at what are the opportunities for agritourism in Southland and one of the, recommendations out of that was to, to brand Southland as, the home of Agritourism or the capital, so Southland's [00:04:00] already way ahead of any other province in the country. So then, in 19 I was like, well, it's more of a niche, so, it needs niche attention so that's where I thought with no sort of, industry organization in New Zealand focused on agritourism, I thought, well, it's an opportunity to set that up and really meet the needs of the farmers basically in this area.

Rachael Halder: Can you give maybe like a couple examples of some businesses that you've seen farmers set up for tourists in Southland or in New Zealand?

Marijke Dunselman: Yeah I've worked with, many of the operators in Southland, and currently still am. One of them is Cabot Lodge, down Cathedral Station near Manapouri. It's an amazing, amazing location. It's a high-end lodge bringing in very high-end visitors who spend a lot of money and, so that's a real success story. They've done extremely well.

Then there are, people that do farm tours. Um, there are people that [00:05:00] do , like standalone, beautiful, cottages, but a bit higher end. It's really trying to get the most out of these visitors, but building experiences that are gonna generate a little bit more income than, like a, cottage on Airbnb, for example.

It's also people, for example, that have, an alpaca farm and, they have a stud, so they have like animals , that are used for breeding and they sell them all over the world. But as part of their business, they also have a really nice little gift shop where they sell like products made with their alpaca. You might've just seen, Davaar Station. I've worked with those guys and they've done extremely well. And, now the, the kids , the two girls, they've set up their businesses and have done really well. They also do farm tours for groups. I've, worked with them on that, a number of years ago.

So it's really exciting to see those type of situations, but it's also, some people say, well, we don't have time to, to spend all our time on a business. So sometimes they work in with other people that come in and help them [00:06:00] that , they pay, like, they might have a partnership with someone else on the farm.

They, may have like accommodation where it's, completely hands off. They don't even see the people. So there's all these different, business models . It's good to sort of create awareness of those because there, there's so many things that are possible that people may not realize or have thought of.

And the other thing that is going to probably happen, in the South a bit more as well, is to try to get people to work together with other farmers, and develop a multi-day experience, like a multi-day walk, and things like that.

That's one thing that I've really, always loved in working with farms is that they're really keen to share information together and also keen to work together which is something you don't necessarily see in another industry . So there's a lot of opportunities in Southland and, Southland's so diverse with massive potential for Agritourism.

Rachael Halder: What kind of [00:07:00] support or guidance do farmers usually need to get started? How does Agritourism New Zealand and you help with this?

Marijke Dunselman: So initially, like a lot of people start with a little cottage on the Airbnb because that's easy. But if you want to build it into a income earning business you need to learn about this whole new industry called tourism.

So we've set up the Agritourism Academy, it's got a three months program that people can start right away when they join and every two weeks they get a, new, module, and it covers every aspect of starting a tourism, and agritourism business. So it's assessing your farm. So looking at what have you got, on your farm in terms of assets. You could have trails, you could have accommodation or huts or , what sort of skills have you got that you might enjoy doing farm tours or dog demonstrations, or whatever.

I know someone, for example, that is really good at growing vegetables and they run little workshops [00:08:00] to city dwellers on how to set up a veggie garden. I mean, how cool is that?

So it's looking at that, it's looking at all the compliance, like your health and safety side. It's that's always a big one. We look at, how much to charge the whole marketing side, having a website, having online booking. And then we also look at international distribution, so about 60 to 70% of our international visitors come through what we call inbound tour operators and wholesalers. So basically people that booked through a travel agent overseas. If you're not linked in with those type of, agents, you miss out on quite a large chunk of that market. So it's really learning about everything that's involved and then you can make , an informed decision of how are you going to invest in the tourism industry?

Rachael Halder: Talking more on those numbers do you have some stats on how many tourists, are, coming into New Zealand or how many are making it down to [00:09:00] Southland?

Marijke Dunselman: Yeah. So over the last sort of 50 years, we've had a compound annual growth rate of about six and a half percent a year. So tourism is an ever growing industry. Of course we've had this little blip called COVID, , which had a big downward spike for international visitors but domestic people still traveled a lot. Actually, I've worked with people on Stewart Island, a lot

over the years and tourism businesses there and they have had their busiest time ever during COVID. Going overseas was going to Stewart Island.

But if we look at sort of the Southland , visitor numbers or visitor types if we look at the Fiordland area, they get more international and the other parts of Southland, a little bit more domestic market.

, I think it's about 60, 70% international for Fiordland, 'cause they'll come for Milford and Doubtful. But if we look at the other areas, if we look at this last summer, the US market has been really strong. I mean, they've been stronger than ever. But then we have to Southland [00:10:00] because it's a little bit more off the beaten track we get a lot of Europeans, Australians , also some Asians, but, that's a smaller market. So the people that like to go off the beaten track a bit more it's growing a lot. There's a massive trend for what we call experiential travel. That's a global trend where people love going, you know, experiencing the real New Zealand, not just, jet boats and bungee jumping and all that.

There's definitely demand and opportunity like the Catlins, for example, and same in Northern Southland, the more mountainous areas. And, and then you have the whole, we've got the Hump Ridge Track now. That's a great walk so, I mean, there's stuff you can do around that, you can piggyback on that. So it's different and it's beautiful.

Rachael Halder: We've mentioned lots of opportunities there. Is there any untapped opportunities in Southland , or something that we're missing out on?

Marijke Dunselman: I think there's, a really opportunity for people to work together and develop multi-day experiences. That's something [00:11:00] that I'm really try to encourage. So in the Agritourism Academy you also have, like weekly sessions where people connect from all over the country. But, the other thing that's going to happen, in the next wee while is it's gonna be pilot group in Southland with agri tourism operators. It's working in with Thriving Southland working in with the catchment groups because they're already working together and they're already doing these amazing projects, which could also be really , interesting for visitors to learn about. So that's happening and that's going to be an ongoing project. And again, Southland will be the first in the country to have a, sort of more formalized, collective of agritourism businesses that could be working together, helping each other, developing products and businesses together.

For example, one farm might have accommodation, and there's a few of those around that might have say horse trekking so instead of just people having to

travel from say, Invercargill, wherever to go horse trekking, build it into like [00:12:00] couple of days where people go stay somewhere for two days and they do a couple of horse rides, so suddenly it's becoming an experience.

Fishing, you know, there's, all sorts of different ideas and opportunities. For example, there's some of these other multi-day experiences in the country, but if you look at, for example, the Hump Ridge Track, which is a three day walk. They have , a guided walk, which is about \$2,100 for this three days. And people pay that easily . You see others like you might have seen a Tora coastal walk in the Wairarapa. They charge also about \$1,100 for a three day walk, and they're fully booked for the whole coming summer and part of the summer after. So that's three farms working together and developing these multi-day experiences. And there's a lot more of those around the country. If you get your marketing right, you know, to have multi-day experiences can be two or can be three, or more, you know, or it could be retreats or it could [00:13:00] be food focused.

Rachael Halder: So is that like kind of part of that whole story, isn't it? Just trying to sell the Southland asset.

Marijke Dunselman: Totally. Yeah. And, there's the whole food and fibre, you know, if you look at, the Davaar girls who have the food and the fibre sort of covered, you know, with the jerseys that they , produce and then the food side. And that's so exciting people can work together. If you have, accommodation, but you don't want to do the food yourself, you could use one of those , businesses that do food to provide local food. People love that local food, , so there's all sorts of ways of working together and, get that tourism dollar to generate income.

And that's, that's what agritourism is all about.

Just coming back to what you said before about all these people coming, if you look at certain areas, for example, the Catlins, where they have thousands and thousands of people a day in summer going through there , visiting Curio Bay. Go see, the wildlife and not spending a cent because there's [00:14:00] virtually I don't wanna say nothing. There's a couple of great little cafes and in Curio Bay and the one in Fortrose, but there's nothing to spend money on. Yes. Apart from some Airbnbs where people might stay in the odd little farm stay, but it's not that much. And, it's like, how can we keep people here, and spend money? We don't want those people that, just come , and not spend any money, but there has to be something to spend money on.

Rachael Halder: Shout out to the Waikawa catchment group down there, have been busy , on that southern coast track doing lots of wetland work, so they might have to put their thinking caps on .

Marijke Dunselman: Yeah, we actually just recently, run a couple of workshops in Tokanui and the other one in, uh, Lumsden and will be doing some more stuff. But initially it's really looking at, is it for me? Is it something that I could be doing or could I work it with someone else?

So, there's also an Agritourism New Zealand Facebook group that people can join. It's a free group. On our social media channels like Instagram we always , [00:15:00] post things that are happening. We run these free little webinars where people can see if it's for them, or join the Agritourism Academy. It's very good value and , people really learn a lot, and make a really informed decision. But I'm always happy for if people say, oh, just wanna have a chat just send me an email and we can set up a time for a chat. Because in the end, I'm passionate about getting people into this and, keeping the farm in a family, and generating more income and working in together, getting kids involved. And that's really cool to see where the farm is sort of marginally profitable and maybe have to sell eventually. And, then suddenly kids are coming back to the farm and they can keep the farm in a family, and generate really good income.

And that's what it's all about. But the biggest challenge I've had over the years, is, I guess the word is educating. Also farming organizations like Beef and Lamb, and Dairy, New Zealand or all those different organizations about the [00:16:00] opportunities in agritourism, a lot of them underestimate I guess. They just often didn't realize what those opportunities were. And I think now people are starting to slowly realize that there are a lot of possibilities and a lot of different business models.

Rachael Halder: It's awesome to hear about an opportunity that is growing and that has potential. And I think, like you said, Southland, we're just learning about all of this. And it's awesome to see some farms and some families making the most of all of these, people who are visiting our province. And the more we have things for people to come and see and do the more people we're gonna see coming down here and I love the thought of these catchment groups, being able to harness some of that.

So, is there any last thoughts or , feelings that you wanted to leave our listeners with Marijke?

Marijke Dunselman: Well, just go to the, agritourism nz website , and join our Facebook group or follow us on, Instagram.

And, like I said, most happy [00:17:00] to have a chat because I'm very passionate about Southland and I know, I don't wanna say every nook and cranny, but, I know, a lot of the farms and a lot of the tourism operators in Southland. So I just really can't wait to do more with the farmers there, and, develop agritourism businesses and put it even more on the map.

Rachael Halder: Well, hey, over this winter period then maybe we can get a few people thinking of ideas so we can hit the spring in the summer with maybe a little bit of action.

Thank you very much Marijke, for joining us. It has been awesome to have your expertise and really appreciate you offering your support to our rural community there. But can't wait to see what you Southlanders do. And we look forward to watching what you do too with, Agritourism New Zealand Marijke.

Marijke Dunselman: Great. Look forward to seeing you in Southland.

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. We appreciate your support. [00:18:00] 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.