

A crimson footprint

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Clive Paton's older vine Ata Rangī Pinot Noir gets five stars from Robert Parker, but he wins just as many accolades for conservation – from the Department of Conservation to the Queen: this year he was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for his services to conservation and viticulture.

The “mad tree planter” tells Amanda Witherell about his great love of the land:



Clive Paton with his fierce dog Rata and Bridget Abernethy of Project Crimson

I thought the owner of an award-winning, internationally renowned winery would be all about grapes, but Clive Paton is all about trees. His work in the vineyard supports his work in the bush, literally: sales of his young vine pinot noir go to Project Crimson, a national effort to replant rata and pohutukawa trees.

“I had an auntie who ran the Otago Forest and Bird,” says Paton, who grew up a “classic rural city boy” in Wellington. “She used to send me Forest and Bird magazines when I was in my twenties. She’s long gone and I can’t really ask her why she did that, but it made me aware of the special flora and fauna we have.”

Paton spent his childhood in Waiouru, where his father was a soldier, and Linden, attending Tawa College. His parents moved to the Wairarapa and Paton “disappeared for a while,” returning in 1980 to buy some stony land and try his hand at wine, one of the first people to take advantage of the Burgundy-like microclimate of Martinborough.

In 2002, Ata Rangi purchased 300 acres adjacent to the Aorangi Forest Park. "All the forest areas that were left were grazed underneath. The river was completely bare of any vegetation. It was a bit of a disaster really," he says. "I put 150 acres into covenant immediately and I've been planting trees ever since. I've probably planted 50,000 trees since I started."

He has also worked on the gorse, fenced off from roaming stock, and replanted with hundreds of natives like kanuka, manuka, and especially rata. Called "The Bush Block," the half that is not in the covenant is being planted with ground durable eucalypts to harvest for vineyard posts, replacing CCA-treated pine posts. That, and sheep on weed patrol, are part of the transition toward making the vineyard completely organic.

Ata Rangi is already one of the founding members of Sustainable Winegrowing of New Zealand and one of the few ISO 14001 accredited wineries in the world, which requires on-going adoption of best environmental practices.

When it comes to the tension between conservation and production, Paton is firm.

"We have to have an economy. Productive lands are fair enough, but those lands that are not should remain in forest and should be looked after without destroying every last bit of vegetation, replacing it with grass."

He achieves biodiversity in the vineyard by planting native tree shelter belts, which encourage "native birds and native insects that evolve with those types of trees. Grapes are a monoculture but you should plant weeds as food for the birds and the bugs. If you screened them from your vineyard all the time you'd be in trouble."

Paton has been invited to speak at this weekend's Forest and Bird's Face up to the Future 2012 Conference, where he'll be talking about his efforts to expand conservation into his surrounding community. After purchasing the Bush Block, he convinced neighbours in the catchment area of Waihora Stream to form Waihora Watch, fencing off the water's edge and doing 1,000 hectares of predator control. Six months ago he set up the Aorangi Trust after three years of planning and negotiations with the neighbours, DOC, deer hunters and Greater Wellington Regional Council.

When asked how he convinces the hunters, farmers, and other locals to put some of their land into covenant, replant it with natives and enforce predator control, he answers:

"You start off by saying, 'some people think this area is worth World Heritage status.' Hopefully that turns a few heads. Then you go through the reasons why – it's that generational thing we have to get into, we do it for our children, our grandchildren. Conservation in New Zealand needs a lot of help. Conservation can't all be done by DOC. The community has to take ownership of it."

He's inspired by other land preservation efforts like Pukaha Mount Bruce and Karori Wildlife Sanctuary and people like Geoff Park, author of *Nga Uruora*, and pioneering bird conservationists Richard Henry and Don Merton. His long term vision is for a "mainland island" in the Aorangi Ranges.

"The goal is to have it in good enough condition to reintroduce native species, from whio (blue duck) to kiwi. I certainly hope I can see that day," he says.

An admittedly soft-spoken man not seeking the spotlight, it's found him anyway in the form of a Queen's Birthday Honour. He's quick to credit the countless people who've helped him along the way, but his own leadership shines through.

"We've come a lot further than I expected in a short period of time. You don't know what will happen until you put your foot in the water. It just takes someone to do it and then other people to see."