



Errol Croad on his Otaki farm. Since buying the property in 1975, Croad has fenced off bush remnants, created wetlands and shelter belts and encouraged birds to his homestead with native plantings, efforts which won him and wife Adele a Farm Environment Award in 2003.

Change of Heart

A decade ago, Errol Croad had nothing good to say about 1080. Now this award-winning Otaki farmer and onetime hunter says it's a saviour; both for the environment and for farming.

Home is where the heart is, and Errol Croad has seen a change in both.

He and wife Adele call that home Seaview, an immaculate 200ha deer and beef farm snuggled up to the Tararua foothills behind Otaki that they've owned and run since the 70s.

We bump in and out of the little watercourses in Croad's ute, scattering manic red hinds and paradise ducks. He's pointing out the evidence of decades of hard work, like the neatly-fenced stands of remnant broadleaf forest. The commercial woodlots, the erosion control. Fenced streams and flood retention. The wetland he and Adele made and planted.

It's impressive. Impressive enough to win the couple a supreme prize in this year's Wellington Regional Council Farm Environment Awards.

They do it because they love the place, he says. Have done since they first set eyes on it.

Croad remembers as a boy helping his father milk the family's town supply herd across the river; remembers too, the first time the man came to test for bovine tuberculosis.

"Our neighbour didn't used to test because it wasn't compulsory in those days. Our cows used to meet his at the

boundary fence, and our herd was forever showing signs of Tb."

Nowadays, Croad reckons Tb testing costs him about \$2,000 a year, even though his deer haven't tested positive in seven years.

"It's a drama. We have to muster all the deer, shave their necks. We have to have the vet there at \$60 an hour, and you need at least two people to put them through the race. If it goes well, you might get around 130 animals an hour through.

"And it always seems to rain..."

Three days later, he has to go through it all again to check for any reactors.

It's about constant vigilance, he says.

"The biggest problem is that you can have an infected animal in your herd for up to seven years before it becomes apparent. It'll ward off the Tb; it's not spreading it and it's not reacting to the test, until it gets older and suddenly its immune system breaks down.

"Then the disease takes over and it'll spread. So if you're not testing regularly and you've got a sleeper, you'll have a hell of an outbreak in two or three years' time."

Which is why the Animal Health Board wanted to come

to Errol's farm a few years back to start controlling the possums with 1080. Possums carry bovine Tb, and so do deer, a potentially catastrophic liaison for farmers like Croad.

At the time, Croad was a deer hunter, and had been a member of the Deerstalkers' Association for more than 30 years.

"I'm passionate about deer and hunting, and I was very apprehensive about allowing 1080 on the property," he recalls, "because of my indoctrination through the Deerstalkers' Association. I believed that it could kill everything.

"All my gullies have now been ground baited with 1080, plus we've had bait stations all around the boundary with brodifacoum."

There have also been two 1080 aerial drops over Tararua Forest Park right next door.

He got a pleasant surprise. "We didn't lose any deer or birds to 1080, in fact the bird life here has just multiplied since," he says. "When we first came here there were hardly any birds. We used to be doing well to see one or two tuis a year. Now we see up to a dozen or so fighting in the pohutukawa tree when it's in flower.

"These days", says Croad, "tui and bellbirds are nesting in the bush around the house. The other day we counted a flock of 21 wood pigeons."

Now he's a convert; a staunch advocate of 1080 and what it can do for the farm and the environment in general. He's lost patience with "the anti-1080 lobby," which he says has captured the media and is simply responding at a visceral level to a toxin he believes is far less dangerous than cyanide or brodifacoum.

"The word 1080 has become an emotional trigger," he says. "It's fever pitch. Do we change the name? Would that do it?"

He takes me for a walk through Seaview's expansive garden, planted in a mix of natives and exotics. Grubbing through the mulch are nine fantails. "That's nothing," he can't help bragging. "I once counted 25 fantails out the back beside the bush gully.

"We've got these fanatics that say 1080 kills all the insects. What are these birds eating?"

Croad still has firm beliefs, though, about feral deer, although he hasn't hunted for years. (Much of his 1000-strong red deer herd came from animals he caught himself from over the fence.)

Hunters can still gain from 1080 because it enhances the experience of being in the bush. "The real benefit of 1080 for everyone, be it birdlover or deerstalker, is that it also takes out the ferrets, the wild cats and the rats, so the bird population multiplies.

"The experience for the deer hunter will be that he'll be able to hear plenty of birdlife in the bush after 1080 drops, contrary to the view of a lot of hunters."

Croad is Chairman of the Deer Farmers' Association Executive Committee, and sits on the board of the Game and Forest Foundation, and the Representatives Committee of the Animal Health Board.

But nowadays, he's mostly content to let Seaview do the talking for him. "All I can do, as one person, is tell my story. And if people want to argue with it, they can come up and see for themselves the benefits of two 1080 drops on this property.

"Or we can do nothing and see the bush die."



Adele and Errol Croad enjoy the birdlife on their Otaki farm with 2 year old granddaughter Alena. Croad says pest control operations, including aerial 1080 drops, have transformed his 200 ha deer and cattle farm.