

Conservation calling

Covenantors Brian and Chris Rance are passionate about nature, especially when it comes to native plants

Chris and Brian Rance have worked together as volunteers on restoration and education projects in Southland for more than 20 years. At the Te Rere yellow-eyed penguin reserve in the Catlins, they have organised regular planting and maintenance days and coordinated annual penguin counts. They both serve on the Te Rere Reserve Advisory Committee, and helped set up the Otatara Landcare Group. They are still actively involved with the latter, whose 'Living Legends' project has produced flourishing results at the Bushy Point Restoration Project near Invercargill. The project is a 50–100-year programme to revegetate a 14ha area of pasture grass that lies between two nationally significant areas of remnant native totara forest, providing an extended habitat for native species. Chris is also a representative on the Southland Ecological Restoration Network.

The Rances professional lives are also dedicated to nature conservation.

Brian is employed as an ecologist with the Department of Conservation and Chris runs the Southland Community Nursery and Education Centre, which they established on their property at Otatara near Invercargill. They grow native plants at the nursery for local restoration projects and Chris holds workshops at the education centre on pest and weed control, growing and cultivating plants, and sustainable living. More than 1500 school children have visited the centre since it opened at the end of 2013.

In 2002, Chris and Brian won the Loder Cup, New Zealand's premier award for plant conservation. The New Zealand Plant Conservation Network gave the Otatara Landcare Group an award in 2014 and the Community Nursery was also recognised by the Network in 2011. In 2015, the Rances were recognised with a Queens Honour (QSM) for their services to conservation.

Open Space talked to Chris and Brian about the challenges and rewards of a lifestyle dedicated to conservation.

Where does your passion for conservation come from?

Brian: I grew up on a farm in Southland in the shadow of the Hokonui Hills. The local Dunsdale Reserve was a favourite family place for picnics and fishing trips. I enjoyed science at school, especially biology and geography, but once at University in Otago, botany became my passion for life.

Chris: Living on the coast of Yorkshire, on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors National Park, there were plenty of natural areas to get involved in outdoor pursuits. I think my Dad inspired my early interest in nature. We would spend hours beachcombing and looking in rock pools along the coast. Later on I got involved in conservation projects cleaning up some very polluted industrial sites — a far cry from the New Zealand conservation projects we got involved in here.

When did you establish your covenant?

In 1999. From the day we purchased the property and adjoining bush sections we knew we wanted our special area to be protected in perpetuity, so it was easy for us to approach QEII. We would recommend others who value their special natural places to covenant sooner rather than leave it to the last minute.

What is the most special thing about your covenant?

We are often busy on separate projects but our covenant area, especially the restoration area, is the place where we enjoy working together, sharing both the hard work and the pleasure.

We were fortunate that Gay Munro, our QEII regional representative at the time, could see our commitment and vision. Our covenant area included a restoration area (which was a paddock at the time) alongside the kahikatea remnant we were protecting. This means we have an interesting 20-year-old restoration area complementing and protecting the old kahikatea swamp forest.

It is very satisfying to have created what now looks like a natural area and know that all the work is protected in perpetuity. It also serves as a constant reminder to ourselves and all our visitors that it is much easier to protect what is already there than to try and recreate it!

The old kahikatea remnant on our property and adjoining our neighbours' property is nationally important, being part of a vegetation sequence from forest to estuary. The covenant is also part of the Awarua Ramsar site. We are pleased to be able to protect such magnificent trees for ourselves and others to enjoy.

What made you decide to set up the Southland Community Nursery 20 years ago?

We, our neighbours, Ian and Jenny Gamble, and many friends and other groups who were looking to restore natural areas at the time were all passionate but lacked the money to go and buy the thousands of native plants you need for restoration. There were also no local ecosourcing nurseries or places to get good advice on species appropriate to Southland. So we set up the Southland Community Nursery to fill that gap. We are still going strongly today. Ten to fifteen volunteers come to the nursery each Friday. In exchange for work, they can take away plants (and advice) for free.

And the education centre?

The education centre is a more recent addition. Since opening in November 2013, over 2000 people (mainly school children) have visited the property. We have always accommodated school groups but having a purpose-built centre has increased school use markedly. Our patron for the Community Nursery and Education Centre is 'bugman' Ruud Kleinpaste. We hope the education centre inspires the children and adults who visit it to see the true

wonder of nature and to learn that anything is possible — you just need to start it.

What do you get back for all your hard work?

On our own property we see a lot of beauty in what we have created, complementing the natural areas that we are protecting. There is endless pleasure in just being in nature and our property is like our own private parkland — but one we are happy to share with others.

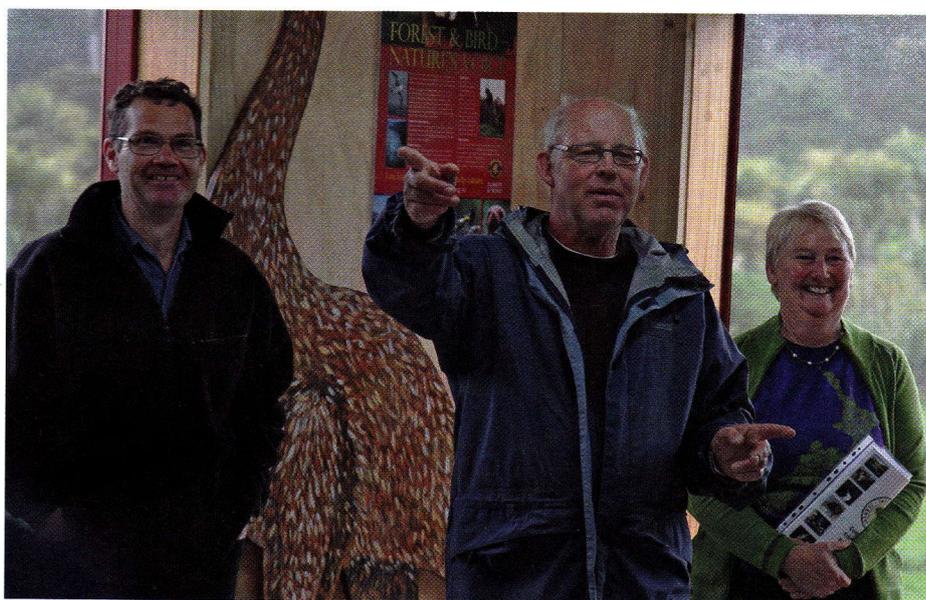
On a wider scale, seeing the conservation projects we are involved with develop into something very special over time is very rewarding. We hope that inspires others to follow and do the same thing.

What do you think are the biggest threats to our open spaces and natural heritage?

It is easy to see that in Southland, and across the country, continuing land development, land use intensification, and unsustainable development are the biggest threats to our natural heritage.

If there was one thing we could do to help make a difference, what might it be?

For everyone to value our natural heritage so much that society will no longer continue to allow its destruction. The loss of our natural heritage will result in the loss of our national identity as New Zealanders. As individuals we all have a role to play in valuing and protecting our natural heritage for future generations.



Brian Rance, Ruud Kleinpaste, and Chris Rance at the Southland Community Nursery and Education Centre.