

Tony Pearce address to the Elk & Wapiti Society 30th Anniversary Celebration

Both the Shawnee and the Sioux revered elk, which they named wapiti for the distinctive white rump patch. Wapiti bulls were regarded spiritually and viewed by these tribes as the ghost kings of the high country and one of the most elusive and powerful creatures in North America. With that slightly tenuous link I think it fitting to acknowledge our own society's spiritual forebears and acknowledge founding and past members of the EWSNZ who are no longer with us.



[With respect we remember](#)

Terry Beardsmore Alan Bradley Jack Bringans
Bernie Chaney Ryan Clark (CANADA) Sir Tom Clark
Peter Crapper Graham Cribb Winston Day
Sir Peter Elworthy Charles Falconer Lyn Glasier
David Hughes John Jackson Gordon & Elfin MacDonald
Terry Mahoney (AUST) Evan Meredith Bob Robertson
Eric van Schreven Paul Searall Bert & Mrs Smith
Steve Thomson

We also remember Murray Hamer and Bob Heenan, both closely associated with the society.

The New Zealand deer farming industry officially began in June 1971 with granting of deer licence No 1 to Rex Giles in Taupo but was built on the back wild shot venison recovery and frozen export of game meat.

These early successes could only be sustained by developing farming systems. NZDFA formed 42 years ago, in 1975, led by Sir Peter Elworthy and 25 founding members. But wider interest in wapiti was there from the start in Fiordland, Southland and Otago and spread rapidly to small pockets of innovation across New Zealand. This was championed by Sir Tim Wallis, Sir Peter Elworthy, Evan Meredith, John Barber, the Macdonalds, Smiths, Winston Day and MAF Invermay among many others. Motivation was all about large antlers and the size and majesty of wapiti, and as the ability to meet EU and US specifications grew, the value of the growth rate, size and venison yield of wapiti as terminal sires emerged. After the shambles of Chernobyl, when it was understood that New Zealand venison was not differentiated in the market place, we realised there was a chilled season

with premium pricing window. At the time, the founding red deer wild herds of the day had progeny that needed to be retained until 18–21 months to let you achieve optimum weight 55–60kg for chilled markets, but the Fiordland-type wapiti and wapiti–red crosses could meet that at 9–12 months.

Then as now, there is a conflict between timing of antler harvest and its sector profitability and the chilled season supply. However, the principles of terminal sires, where high-yielding crossbred females were also heavy enough later in the peak season, were attractive.

This concept was supported by the Invermay programme which had been granted whatever consents or approvals were required to establish a research herd under the care of Ken Drew and steered via Evan Meredith, Tim Wallis and other key figures involved in the Crown herd wapiti management programme. That work began and was widely adopted particularly in the lower South Island. The practicalities for farming wapiti were evolved and refined in Fiordland and Southland and at Alpine Group in Wanaka by the legendary farmers who founded the Society and had wapiti in their blood. These outstanding farmers understood the feeding and breeding management of captured Fiordland wapiti that were being successfully farmed in many diverse environments under a whole lot of pressures that raised new questions about farming deer, especially wapiti. That perfect solution emerged rapidly and was pivotal to the success of the deer industry, particularly for wapiti. Alongside the excellent research was the evolution of an outstanding group of young vets predominantly based at Central Southland Vets with Mike Bringans and Dave Lawrence. But there was a network of these talented vets across New Zealand, who became successful red and wapiti farmers and breeders in their own right. These guys serviced not only the health needs of newly farmed deer but also the production systems, nutrition, and then the advanced reproductive management that quickly moved to AI and embryo transfer work that's revolutionised the breeding genetics in NZ and international deer farming. That model was being repeated across the country and alongside the research effort of AgResearch and Massey and the Deer Branch of the Veterinary Association which started its conferences and producing its papers for vets and the industry in Te Anau in 1981.

Things were going well for wapiti farmers. In 1983 the first imports of Canadian elk (I think 80) arrived –23, a somewhat controversial \$65,000 gift from the Canadian Government to Invermay and the main shipment to Tim Wallis and Alpine Group at Wanaka. These were selected for size and antler genetics and signalled the start of a new era in breeding and expansion. However there were headwinds out there apart from politics and Roger Douglas's dismantling of the livestock taxation scheme that effectively destroyed the city and farming sharefarming investment that drove the early deer industry's expansion. It very nearly brought the industry to its knees. Vested interests in red deer breeding, negative press coverage and uninformed commentary around the apparent challenges in wapiti farming were being promoted somewhat sensationally within the industry. While there were a few quite frisky crossbreds around for sure, that even at a young age could give you an adrenalin rush, you could also get that buzz in any group of red deer!

Vested interests in red deer breeding, negative press coverage and uninformed commentary around the apparent challenges in wapiti farming were being promoted somewhat sensationally within the industry. While there were a few quite frisky crossbreds around for sure, that even at a young age could give you an adrenalin rush, you could also get that buzz in any group of red deer! There is nothing wrong with a raised rump patch and a bit of teeth clicking and a spray of snot now and again if you can see it, although not so good when it's coming from behind you!

There seemed to be a concerted paranoia campaign in some circles about the big deer and their farming and certainly wapiti people themselves didn't take too many backward steps when

challenged. The conversations were vigorous. The issue was probably best summed up with an early industry identity who had to transport the really difficult ones: "I think all wapiti should be shot at birth followed shortly after by their owners."

Far from an insult, I think that really is a compliment, describing both the resilience and challenges of wapiti and also by you as wapiti farmers.

- In mid-1986, an initial meeting was called and coordinated through Tim Wallis and Mike Bringans who contacted about 40 mostly southern-based wapiti farmers, but also with good links to rest of NZ. These visionaries strongly supported the idea of forming an association to promote the wapiti breed and its true value and act as a formal body to counteract some of the negativity and misinformation that had been promoted in media and conversations. That meeting's minutes noted these real issues:
- The price prejudice against larger prime lean carcasses of young age
- Uncertainty of velvet buyers about elk and wapiti's velvet size and style and little understanding that wapiti velvet is also the Supreme premium product in its own right
- People with little experience or knowledge of the breed and to some extent its people often led a negative campaign about the breed and its role.
- This often led to our people and animals as well, being badmouthed by many, often without the benefit of having experience or working knowledge of farming elk/wapiti. There was some validity with the folklore that crossbred progeny and individuals animals could be quite aggressive and certainly at times unpredictable, and there may have been some truth in the commonly held belief that the solution in the south was to sell these as quickly as possible to the North Island interests!

STRAIGHT DOWN TO BUSINESS!!

- At the first steering committee meeting on 28th October 1986 and at an SGM on the 29th at Winton, it was resolved to:
- Form the Society (a draft constitution had already been in the making through an Invercargill Law firm)
- Arrange and hold an open public wapiti field day and information session within 2 weeks
- Develop and hold its first differentiated wapiti velvet antler pool in association with Dalgety and Wrightson NMA.

Constitutional objectives were to maintain and improve the role wapiti/elk breed of deer in NZ with national and regional emphasis.

- To obtain information of all aspects of the wapiti/elk breed for dissemination to those interested in this breed of deer
- To promote and carry out research into all aspects of the wapiti/elk breed of deer
- To provide services and expertise for those interested in the wapiti/elk breed of deer
- To encourage and promote ventures of benefit to those interested in the wapiti/elk breed of deer
- To promote schemes for financing the activities of the Society that are of benefit to all those interested in the wapiti/elk breed of deer
- To act as a representative society to those interested in the wapiti/elk breed of deer.

On 29th October 1986 the Society appointed Tim Wallis as President, Mike Bringans as Secretary and Winston Day as Treasurer. The committee comprised Graham Joyce, Robbie Travers, Jack Pullar, Evan Meredith, Dave Harroway, John Barber Neville Cunningham and Ken Drew.

The constitution and society was formally convened at the inaugural open meeting on 11th November 1986 following the previous day's inaugural field day in Winton. This field day at Jack Pullar's property, Littlebourne Wapiti, was an amazing affair, held in some giant dark brown overgrown marquee. Most of Invermay's deer group staff talked at some point and were well received. But this was alongside the real gold of the day with practical and pragmatic advice from local wapiti farmers and experienced vets.

Then there were farm tours and static displays all coordinated through the Winton wapiti farming community whose men and women arranged and delivered all this in under 2 weeks.

I don't mean this unkindly but that is was typical of wapiti events. Ideas sown, dates set, impossibly short deadlines created, all action and commitment in a wild ride to the opening bell and without exception an outstanding event delivered with precision each time.

For example, at Barbers Oxford field day, Ken Drew and I arrived two hours before and had been assured everything was organised and John then said "right what's the field day programme?" Maybe it was just a wind up, but simple messages, simple presentations and basic on-farm relevant Q&A were the secrets of success and that event in Canterbury, a tough area for wapiti advocates then, was very successful.

Back to Winton – about 250 attended. The Southland Times reported "Deer farmers have earned a reputation for professionalism when it comes to promotion. Today's event's success and attendance may have even surprised the organising committee."

The main issue raised (not by the society) was affiliation with DFA. That group had councillors and DFA executive preaching and speaking. The first utterances of division were from the DFA councillor Piers Hunt. In the press it was reported "It would be a pity if separate breed societies were to weaken the unity of the NZ Deer Farmers Association." In spite of the strong DFA presence and views, the society agreed it would remain independent for a year and then review. In fact this went on for 6 years.

Tim Wallis is quoted, "The Society had been founded by farmers who believed the breed should be identified and promoted. The Society could now meet as a group and discuss matters specifically relating the larger breeds and work to promote both wapiti-type venison and velvet products. The venison needs to be marketed and identified as being wapiti type and the velvet also needs to be specially marketed so that farmers can receive a better price." From Day 1 at the field day the discussions from the floor for ideas and directions for the group still form the heart of the society and its members, and are totally relevant 30 years later.

- 1) A register for pure Canadian elk (blood and subsequently a DNA test) based be established
- 2) Open field days to be established to demonstrate the principles and attributes of elk/wapiti in the NZ industry
- 3) Membership drives and information availability: initially this was through publication of member contacts for new farmers to approach
- 4) A resource booklet to be produced on elk and wapiti farming
- 5) Society velvet antler pool with Wrightson NMA
- 6) Other items flagged were elk/wapiti venison pools and the establishment of a 2 monthly newsletter
- 7) AGMs to be held in association with the DFA

Further highlights included a comparative carcass display between 12-month-old wapiti and crossbreds and the 12- and 24-month-old red carcasses. Dramatic!

Exhibits also included antler displays and these were followed by a boning demonstration from

Game Foods Butchers with the carcasses supplied from Richard Hayes and Evan Meredith. That momentum created then has never really been lost.

The following 6 months of operation saw 49 NZ national members and 2 overseas. Membership has been between 80–150 members and over history around 100 consistently and it's always been \$100/subs/pa.

Velvet pools. Year 1. 1986/87

Elk and Wapiti velvet distinguished on a type and graded independently by Society representatives into 1 of 3 grades for each elk/wapiti based on an agreed description (450kg elk style and 206 wapiti (1.66kg piece to 2.85/antler \$110.70–\$126/kg where SA and A red were achieving \$106.70)

By year 2 prices in the pool ranged from \$181–\$191/kg with a 10-15% premium achieved maintained for many years with these pools later peaking at 16 tonnes when the elk grades were confirmed.

We must acknowledge PGG Wrightson for its support and running of the pools Elk and Wapiti Society members would attend and assist with the grading (until it was standardised). These were huge days and really enjoyable, with PGGW paying the Society a royalty into general funds then and now which provided essential revenues for the group and funded many other projects.

YEAR 1 Done: 29 to go!

THE COMMITTEE

This is the heart of any Society and the following adjectives apply to its meetings:

“Inspiring, unpredictable, informative, hostile, amusing, amazing, tense, lengthy, constructive destructive, leading, glamorous, nocturnal and memorable, pivotal.”

These are just a few take home words that cover the average society committee meeting. I can say from personal experience mock them at your peril. Unreserved apologies for doing that play thing! Being in committee, the details must remain there, but it would be fair to say that within the deer industry, only the firebrands of the Waikato DFA come a distant second to the intensity of debate and emotion but also and productivity of 30 years of EWSNZ committee meetings.

There have been debates on what moral standards one should have to be a committee member, and at one meeting at Invermay the intensity and volume of debate coming from the board room was of such passion that some of the staff were considering calling either the police or the fire brigade. Then as now the business conducted in committee meetings covered national and international elk farming, relationships with the press and DFA and the commercial companies.

Key goals always included better ways to promote the value and use of elk/wapiti in the industry in commercial terms while ensuring that integrity of the breed and animals were enhanced through the science projects, registration schemes, etc were commissioned with research, communication channels and field days. Unique for travel distances for virtually all, generally a combined 2000km could be logged and in the early days 3.00am returns to home weren't uncommon.

PROMOTION AND COMMUNICATION

The Society has excelled in promotion, communication and events. The goal of an annual significant field day per year was pursued and achieved through to the 2000s, attracting great crowds and a mine of information delivered by the key wapiti farmers supported by industry research and commissioned work from the Society. A key example was the major event coordinated by David Tipple at Lincoln in 1995 that had 200 plus attending and was a full technical and practical conference. But there are so many similar success stories.

The major early project was the production of an elk/wapiti handbook summarising all the accumulated knowledge. This saw Wapiti Behind the Wire eventually edited and published with the help of David Yerex in 1990. This was 3 years in the gestation including a spell in Fiordland on the

Ranganui with Tim and I writing the draft chapters. This was done in shifts from 5.00–9.00am followed by a giant cooked breakfast and then with the young Wallis boys we'd go cray and cod fishing. All were taught to scuba dive, check the proper lines, then back for lunch, 2 hours more book, more scuba and fishing, hot spa and informal discussions, great meal and 3 hours more book.

The late 1990s then saw a nationwide distribution of an elk/wapiti annual to all deer farmers coordinated by Tracey Maclean preceded by a 20 page sponsored supplement in the NZ Farmer monthly that went to all NZ agriculture. The society was a key major sponsor (on the back of generous financial donations from individuals) for the inaugural World Deer Farming Congress in 1993. Regrettably we had constant battles until the modern era with Trev Walton and The Deer Farmer that I've never understood but it certainly encouraged a free and fierce debate and response from the Society in letters and response articles. To some extent that's been a rehearsal for the dialogue initiated with Deer Improvement's arrival in the industry and provocations from both quarters. The breeding war of words are prophetic in many ways.

The next round of designer terminal sires are in development following elk breeders' commitment to the Deer Progeny Test and DeerLINK. This will see high-yield, fast-growth-rate elk/wapiti sires mated to a 75% base of highly selected maternal trait dams, built on lactation ability, early gestation and health resilience, particularly around parasitism and bacterial disease. Commercial farmers will be finishing stag and hind venison at 65–80 kg in 8–12 months.

We have also to pay tribute to Tony Pullar and associates who have put together the Society's website today that bugles at you on opening. Great showcase.

SPECIAL EVENTS

- Evan Meredith Award and the outstanding Evan Meredith Memorial gun shoot.
- Heavily armed society members strolling about the hills of Tai Tapu in a wonderful event orchestrated by Janey Hayes and Gun City/DavidTipple.
- 20 years ago Inaugural EWSNZ velvet/hard antler competition championed by Lloyd Morgan and Brian Kenton in Ashburton that also dovetailed into the First EWSNZ Premier sire sale where our leading studs all sent featured top animals physically to a single venue as an industry showcase
- Contacts NAEBA in NZ and overseas, 1998 a two week tour of NZ by NAEBA's top board members and elk farmers (John Barber founding NAEBA member and founding Wapiti Society Board member)
- Recently, upmarket velvet awards evenings
- Professional fashion shows
- Culinary demonstrations
- Carcass competitions
- Annual and incredible fundraising auctions most distinguished by the astonishing \$43k raised in Te Anau in 2001 but a central feature of all events.

RESEARCH

- For 15 years from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1980s, the research programme at Invermay investigated all aspects of hybridisation with wapiti and later imported elk, totalling over time \$7.2m in 2001 dollar terms.
- In 1990, wapiti hybrids accounted for and estimated 5% of the venison. By 2001 this was 50%, with an estimated \$10.3m benefit net present value, increasing to \$23.6m by 2006.
- Velvet antler composition based on ash content, growing out elk velvet dimensions and grading implications was a major piece of work, also supported by the Game Industry Board

that allows the accurate specifications for elk/wapiti grading with definition still in use today based on an early cut read standard and market about 12 days' difference.

- Deer hair underdown, Bob Bennett 9-11 micron fibre, now men's socks in Harrods at \$1800 pair and woven into women's high value fashion underwear.
- Major investment and use genetics, bloodtyping, gene markers for purity and the Genometer now moving into micro-satellites and shortly will be linked to key productive traits and disease resilience and genomic selection.
- Badly named "elk wasting disease", susceptibility to red deer varieties, ongoing issues with parasitism and drench resistance and the need for solutions.
- Cross breeding and growth
- Antler and by product medicinal properties and bioactivity.
- Elk and wapiti nutrition.
- Copper and trace minerals.
- A key to developing a niche elk meat market the mid-2000s work with Canterbury Polytechnic Institute and their associated Culinary School who with society backing and individual sponsorship invested in developing knowledge of young heavy weight carcasses yield for primals and sub-primals and a great variety of new cuts and processing options for standard elk meat butchery options and new products, smoked hams, bacons and new recipes.

I'd like to leave this here with all of the things that have been missed or glossed over, but with a commitment over the next year to write the history of these fabulous 30 years as a record for the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to recall those early heady and exciting days and that continue to be an outstanding part of the modern deer industry.