

Innovative approach to Conservation in Action wins national recognition for Lochmara Lodge

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Conservation, art and luxury have proven a winning combination for Lochmara Lodge in the Marlborough Sounds.

The Lodge won the DOC Conservation in Action category at the Tourism Industry Awards tonight, to the delight of owner Louise Bright. "We are still wowed by what we have done at Lochmara, but so we're so happy that the judges were wowed by it too."

The award recognised the innovation behind the lodge's Wildlife Recovery Centre, which is funded through art sold at Lochmara and visitor entry fees. The lodge was also a finalist in the Small/Medium Attraction and Activity category for its innovative day trips.

Louise and partner Shayne Olsen established a backpackers at Lochmara 13 years ago, then transformed it in 2007 into a stunning restaurant, lodge with 14 chalets, Wildlife Recovery Centre and Arts Centre. Now paths wind through four and a half hectares of native bush, past an art studio, sculptures, hammock haven, and wildlife refuges for kakariki, weka, weta, gecko and more.

Louise says Lochmara has a natural advantage with its location in the stunning Marlborough Sounds, just 15 minutes by boat from Picton, or two hours walk along the Queen Charlotte Track from Mistletoe Bay. "Then when they get here, people see all the different aspects of Lochmara. We are not just accommodation and a lovely restaurant. We are a total experience."

Art and conservation are integral to the fabric of Lochmara, allowing Shayne and Louise to stay true to their environmental and community commitment, while giving their tourist destination a vital competitive edge. "We're the only ones mixing those elements to this extent, and people really do love it," Louise says.

A portion of all art sales at the Arts Centre and of the admission fee to the walkways, go directly into the trust funding the Wildlife Recovery Centre. In coordination with the Department of Conservation, the centre breeds native species like kakariki, for eventual release to predator free areas, and has a rehabilitation facility for injured native wildlife. This year it will open a unit dedicated to "nurturing them back to wellness".

Fellow co-creator Shayne Olsen said: "It's a big achievement for the centre and very satisfying knowing that our work here will make a difference. The opportunity for us as members of the public to work alongside the Department of Conservation is great. We think that Lochmara is an example of the progress that can be made when private groups are able to support the work of DOC and be involved actively in conservation and restoration work."

DOC Director-General Al Morrison said: "DOC supports this Award because it celebrates the role of business in maintaining the health of New Zealand's environment.

"We want to encourage tourism operators to continue to invest in conservation. As a result of successful tourism operations many more people have the opportunity to experience what is so special

about New Zealand."

Lochmara Lodge attracts families and couples from throughout New Zealand, as well as independent travelers, but many Marlborough residents also make a regular beeline in their boats to enjoy the restaurant. Now new day trips are giving more people the chance to enjoy this slice of paradise, says Louise.

"We have opened up a market for people who are short on time or are staying with friends or family in Marlborough. They want a destination, not just lunch." A new Bath House means one such day trip, the Friendtastic Day includes lunch, a massage and an hour long soak in luxurious twin tubs overlooking the beautiful bay.

Louise says after many years of hard work, she and Shayne finally feel like Lochmara has grown into the haven they dreamed it could be, and the recognition from their tourism industry peers is the perfect celebration of its "coming of age". The award would also give their customers added confidence to visit, "knowing we achieved to this scale". But there's no time to rest, she says, with plans for an art residency programme this summer, the rehabilitation unit to launch and the constant development of the property. "It's about always evolving our business and making it even better tomorrow than it is today."

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