

INTERVIEW WITH AN ECCENTRIC BILLIONAIRE

Sarah-Jane O'Connor

Apparently it's not enough that the fruit of his loins started TradeMe – economist, philanthropist and all round dude Gareth Morgan is now raising cash and awareness for the Subantarctic Islands. Sarah-Jane O'Connor had a yarn with him and learnt why you don't have to be a tree-hugging hippy to care about the environment.

What is it about the Subantarctic islands that got under your skin?

I think the abundance of life on them. Sitting on the beach you've got penguins walking across your legs. On the Antipodes in order to walk through a penguin colony you've actually gotta nudge the little penguins aside. That's cool eh. Or you're sitting four or five metres from a four tonne elephant seal. We go to these places around the world, the Serengeti and that to see wildlife, but this is all in our own backyard.

I just don't think Kiwis are aware. You know we used to have Hooker's sea lions all over New Zealand, from Cape Reinga to Bluff, and now because of use they've been pushed down now to just the Subantarctic Islands. And it's quite clear that environment is not suited to them because their live weights and numbers just continue to deteriorate. That particular species isn't far off extinction, I'd say.

We've got to get rid of the bloody pests that we put there. So one of the projects that came out of this was Million Dollar Mouse. We're halfway [to our goal], so we're pretty happy with that. Hopefully we'll have that knocked over by Christmas with a bit of luck.

You're matching public donations for Million Dollar Mouse. To you, what's the role of this semi-private funding

for conservation? Are you starting something new?

It is new. I noticed that funding by the government just continues to fall. So DOC's ability to do stuff is getting less and less. I feel that people who have an interest in this area, they always say to you, "Oh what can we do?" What you can do is not ask that question, you can get off your butt and actually do something.

We were on *Close Up* with it [Million Dollar Mouse], they said "Well shouldn't DOC be doing this? Why are you going to the public?" And the head of DOC, obviously he's gotta be careful what he says, so I stepped in for him and said they'd love to do it, but the point is their funding continues to get squeezed, so if we want it done we have to bloody do it ourselves. I think you'll find if we're prepared to put up at least some of the money as the public, the government will put up the rest.

I think if we can get New Zealand to give a bit more substance to the clean and green thing, then it's like Sir Paul Callaghan said, that's exactly the sort of thing that will make NZ a desired destination where someone wants to live.

What should UC students be doing for this project?

Volunteer work forces for these projects, and there's a lot of them now going on around NZ with environmental restoration, they need labour. But also, just agitate for it. Say, 'Hey, this stuff is of value.' It's not just a "nice to have" for a bunch of tree-huggers, actually at the end of the day, put it this way – non-sustainability doesn't sound too good, does it? So sustainability is worth pursuing, we've just gotta pursue it in a balanced and rational fashion. You won't be able to afford every blimmin' conservation project that's out there, and doing cost-benefits does matter to get the priorities right.

The Million Dollar Mouse idea actually came up when we were in the Auckland Islands, and I said to the DOC guy how much would it cost to get rid of predators on the Auckland Islands and he said about \$25 million. 'Holy shit,' I said, 'you got anything cheaper?' And that's when he said the Antipodes, I said 'Righto, how much for that one?' He said a million, and I said 'Oh yeah right, let's consider that done then.'

What's the next adventure going to be?

The next really big motorcycle trip is from the top of Siberia down to NZ. So I've just been up about a month ago in North Korea negotiating with them to ride the motorbikes through next year and they've given us approval so that actually makes it a world first, I can't believe it really. Now I'm negotiating with the South Koreans so that we can come through the demilitarised zone and do the whole peninsula. Just gotta keep thinking of stupid things to do.

Gareth's national tour will be rolling through Christchurch:

Tuesday August 14, 6pm

Aurora Centre, Burnside High

Tickets \$20 – all proceeds to the Million Dollar Mouse appeal – eradicating mice from the Antipodes Islands.

For more info check out

www.milliondollarmouse.org

