

SEA TO SHORE

Tourism and conservation working together.

Brian Templeton and his son, Shaun, are passionate about wildlife conservation. As we shake hands, a shock of cold air reminds me we're on the edge of the sub-Antarctic. But it scarcely ruffles their rugged southern-man exteriors – Shaun's T-shirt notwithstanding.

These icy blasts are part of a triangulation of happy accidents, including the proximity of the continental shelf with its upwelling ocean currents and rich food chain. It all makes for a unique wildlife habitat on the Otago Peninsula, right on the doorstep of Dunedin.

Seeing the opportunity to combine conservation and eco-tourism without leaving home, Brian launched Elm Wildlife Tours in 1991; Shaun joined a decade later. From its humble backpacker origins, the company has grown to include a self-funded conservation sanctuary that's become HQ for Hooker's sea lions recolonising the mainland, while hardy travellers also come to see rare yellow-eyed penguins, little blue penguins and New Zealand fur seals (www.elmwildlifetours.co.nz).

Shaun and his staff keep busy over winter – often in atrocious weather – upgrading the viewing platforms, trapping predators, and recreating

coastal habitat for the yellow-eyed penguins that rely heavily on it for breeding. It's not well known that the peninsula's penguins are bush dwellers, and Brian reckons they've spent tens of thousands of dollars over the years on tree planting.

Climate change, overfishing and bycatch have seen sea lion numbers plummet by 50 per cent in the past 10 years, an alarming statistic that lead Brian to fund the establishment of the New Zealand Sea Lion Trust (www.sealiontrust.org.nz).

This year, all the talk has been of young penguins starving because of a lack of food. "Our chicks have bucked the trend and we have had a total of 11 fledge," says Shaun. "That's about half of last year, but a lot better than elsewhere."

In 2013, around 70 yellow-eyed penguins died on the peninsula due, it's conjectured, to a biotoxin in the food chain. Such mysterious events are random but deadly; the last major episode was in 1990.

Shaun talks of his hopes for the future with quiet determination. "If we can stay on top of things and maintain a proactive stance, one day I hope this will be something I can pass on to my own children."

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Above: The Otago Peninsula is a unique wildlife habitat; in winter, conservation work is often carried out in atrocious weather.