

Merino 2014 and Francois van der Merwe

Francois van der Merwe who is leading the team organising Merino 2014, is a Merino farmer from the Calvinia district of the Northern Cape. He is also a lawyer by training and has been involved in the corporate world for most of his working career.

“It’s great to have the opportunity to host this conference in our country which is such an important and influential member of the world Merino family,” says Francois, who brings his experience of the business and farming world to the organisation of the 2014 World Merino Conference or *Merino 2014* as it is called.

Van der Merwe strongly believes the Merino is as relevant to the sustainability-focused global agri-produce market today as it has been to the growth of South Africa’s agricultural economy over more than two centuries. A number of the South African Merino farmers who will attend the conference will have been farming with the royal breed for several generations. Van der Merwe’s family is one of them.

His farm *Tierhoek* has been in his family for six generations. He bought it from a cousin 15 years ago when he was still living in Stellenbosch and permanently moved to the farm ten years ago. “Initially we only came to the farm during holidays but then it dawned on us that with a bit of travelling we could live here, and we relocated permanently,” Van der Merwe explains.

It’s a 400km drive to Cape Town, and one that he makes a few times a month to attend board meetings at Allan Gray and other companies where he is a director. “It’s well worth the commute to be able to live on the farm.” He runs 1200 ewes and is part of the Hantam Veld Ram Club, which holds its auction at the end of August every year. He has one lambing season from mid-April to the end of May and he shears twice a year – once in autumn before lambing and again in late spring.

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special to be able to continue this tradition and to think our forebears were doing the same – grazing and managing Merinos in fine Succulent Karoo veld and striving to ensure that we do so sustainably and in harmony with nature”

Tierhoek (or its original name *Tijgerhoek* – literally *Leopard’s Corner*) is mentioned in the writings of a German doctor named Henry Lichtenstein who visited the area in 1802. Lichtenstein travelled widely through the Cape, commenting on the landscape, economy and people he encountered. In *Travels in South Africa* he writes about “the very friendly reception in the house of a colonist, by name Van der Merwe” (Francois’ great-great-grandfather) with whom he shared “a great deal of conversation” about the ailments effecting sheep in the area “I judged him, from the nature of his remarks, to be a sensible man,” Lichtenstein wrote, and further remarked about the “rich harvest of rare plants and insects” he was shown.

Several generations later Francois van der Merwe has retained this interest in the natural world and is a keen amateur ornithologist and botanist. “Our whole family is interested in biodiversity conservation, it’s a very important aspect of farming for us. We try to minimise our livestock’s impact on the veld and do whatever we can to promote biodiversity,” he explains.

“In ten years we have not killed a single predator on *Tierhoek* and we only use non-lethal methods to discourage predation or otherwise accept that low-levels of predation, as we generally experience, is part and parcel of farming in natural veld. We are proud that there are still leopards on our farm and feel privileged to share our springbok, ribbok, klipspringers, dassies and the occasional ewe with them. Healthy apex predator diversity on any farm is a sign of happy co-exists.”



Rams in front of the restored early 19th century farm house at *Tierhoek*. Van der Merwe is a member of the Hantam Veld Ram Club, which holds its auction at the end of August every year.



Adult and newly fledged Verreaux's Eagle over Tierhoek. Van der Merwe is a keen birdwatcher with a rich variety of birds of prey on the farm, including the Verreaux's, Martial and Booted Eagles.

As a birdwatcher, nothing pleases him more than the rich variety of birds of prey they have on their farm, ranging from the Secretary Bird, Verreaux's, Martial and Booted Eagles to Chanting Goshawks, Gymnogenes, Black Sparrowhawks (including a pair breeding outside his study window), the rare Black Harrier (with as many as three breeding pairs on the farm) and other falcons and kestrels. "To be the custodian of such a variety of birds, animals and plants is a blessing!" he states.

His wife Marian, whom he met at the University of Stellenbosch has a BSc in Agriculture and has always wanted to farm. "It's not easy with two farmers on one farm – both of them opinioned!" he smiles. Their son Albert, who has a law degree and is currently doing his MBA at the University of Cape Town, also

takes a great interest in the farm, as do their two daughters, both at the University of Stellenbosch. Rona is in her third year of a Conservation Biology degree and Emily is in her first year of Law. Perhaps one of them will decide on farming as a career and join the next generation of Merino farmers, which appears to be slowly on the increase globally now that the price of wool is looking good once more.

"I think the global trend towards the traceability of agricultural products is equally good for wool worldwide," Van der Merwe adds. "Consumers should be willing to pay more for products if they know their origin and have the assurance that the farms they support are strong on environmental sustainability, have good labour practices and good animal welfare standards."

South Africa is currently producing about 50 million kilograms of wool per year, which is less than 2% of the total world production. "Our wool is nevertheless of a very good quality, and we remain an important Merino breeding country and a world leader in terms of the development of Merino genetics," says Van der Merwe who would like to see far more support for farmers from the South African government in a range of areas, including maintaining the rural infrastructure, increasing rural safety, funding for scientific research, assisting farmers with predator management, supporting emerging wool farmers and extending wool farming with suitable support into the communal areas, notably the former Transkei and Ciskei.

"Wool is a strong export earner for South Africa and if we manage our affairs well, we can only get even stronger and greater. *Merino 2014* will hopefully stimulate further interest and help to promote wool farming that has already done so much to develop and sustain rural communities over many generations."



The Van der Merwe family are all interested in farming and biodiversity conservation: From left to right: Rona, Albert, Francois, Marian and Emily.



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