

MĀNUKA MED

What do a French beauty product, dangerous war zones, and the Wai 262 claim have in common? To find out the answer, *Jasmine Kaa* spoke to Denis Watson, the founder and CEO of an innovative and rapidly expanding mānuka honey company.

Watson & Son is a company specialising in the production of premium mānuka honey. With its head office based in the Wairarapa and sub-branches in Muriwhenua and Southland, the company has over fourteen thousand beehives situated in some of the most remote mono-floral mānuka areas of Aotearoa. The company was established in 2003 by Denis Watson (Kahungunu Ki Te Wairoa), a scientist with over thirty years of experience in the apiary industry. The business currently supplies markets in Australia, Asia, Europe, North America and Dubai, and last year took first place in the Deloitte/Unlimited top 50 list of New Zealand's fastest growing companies. However it is cultural and social imperatives, rather than commercial, which motivate the company's long term plans.

"I see a real synergy between what the company is trying to achieve and what could be achieved for our people," says Watson. "We want to empower mana whenua to create sustainable businesses from their manuka resources. We also want to develop medicinal products from the mānuka rongoā which could treat diseases and alleviate suffering around the world."

The company has recently been involved with funding research conducted by Dr Peter Molan, a Professor of Biochemistry at Waikato University. In 1983 Dr Molan discovered the strong antimicrobial properties present in mānuka honey and through the collaboration, exciting commercial applications for the new research have been found. In the near future they hope to launch many of the twenty-two medical devices they have developed under the company's MānukaMed division. Treating respiratory disease is one of the applications the company has investigated, as well as nursing wounds caused in battle.

"In the area of advanced wound care we have created a range of dressings with powerful healing benefits. Military groups, we have talked to have taken a particular interest in these developments. They have major problems with infection and inflammation when treating trauma wounds. Our products can be used to stop bleeding and reduce pain and scar tissue."

The company has also developed skincare concepts for major cosmetic and nutraceutical applications that have attracted the interest of French-based beauty leader L'Oréal. L'Oréal markets



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WHITTAKER



over 23 global brands in more than 130 countries and had a sales turnover in 2008 of EUR17.5 billion. Watson says this could potentially present an excellent opportunity for Māori mānuka honey beekeepers.

"L'Oréal has a special division, 'Worldwide Innovative Raw Materials', charged with proposing exciting new innovations in ethical and sustainable cosmetics and skincare. They are keen to explore the antioxidant and anti-inflammatory values in our mānuka honeys. They also want to source their products from sustainable resources and assist indigenous peoples."

A pōwhiri for representatives from L'Oréal was held by the company and their JV partner Watson & Murray Associates at Waitangi in the Taitokerau. One of the JV's shareholders includes Saana Waitai Murray, the last living signatory of the Wai262 claim, renowned for her efforts to promote and protect

the environment. Watson refers to Murray as the matriarch of the company.

"She's our whaea and right behind everything we do. She's fully behind the kaupapa of what we are involved in."

The kaupapa of transforming the economics of Māori land, creating employment and researching the medicinal properties of mānuka rongoā lies at the heart of the company's activities. Another important kaupapa Watson says drives the company is the Wai 262 claim in respect of mātauranga Māori.

"The bottom line for me is that Māori own most of the resource even if it's under Crown Guardianship. The resource is still owned by Māori and people who tie back to those areas should have first access to them like kaimoana. Māori should be able to exercise sovereignty over their whenua and rongoā."

ABOVE L-R: Denis Watson, Sanna Murray and Ripene Murray are the driving force behind efforts to bring mana whenua groups into the very lucrative mānuka honey business.

