



# PETER YOUNG

## counteract falling farm income

his report from Kerry, argues that focusing on what you love to do can lead to a successful and enjoyable

### Adopt a Kerry sheep

ANNE and John Kissane have an undoubted passion for sheepdogs, sheep and the beautiful mountains they live on near Molls Gap, Kenmare, Co Kerry. Their passion for the Kissane heritage of a traditional family farm has led them to set up a unique way of supplementing farm income.

Over 300, mainly Dutch and American, people are paying €45 to adopt a sheep in the Kerry Mountains. Turnover from this enterprise plus tours and demonstrations is expected to top €20,000 this year. "And by 2010 we will become a viable, sustainable farm able to survive without subsidies," says John.

"Last year we were talking about hill farming and the likely end of subsidies in 2013 — possibly even earlier at the 2010 review," recalls John. "I couldn't see the farm surviving on the income from lambs and wool alone. Last autumn, we got €15 to €20 for wether lambs and 50c/kg for wool. Costs of feeding, veterinary and tagging have all gone through the roof. We use 70% of the Single Farm Payment to cover costs. So, we decided that another source of income was needed if the farm was to survive."

EU regulations, declining supports and rising costs threatened the future of the 1000-ewe flock of Scottish Blackface that has been bred by five generations of Kissanes over the past 100 years. A way of life was under threat. That is what John and Anne are passionate about.

Anne, who comes from Holland, hit on the adopt-a-sheep idea. "In Holland, I knew of an adopt-a-chicken scheme where people got six fresh eggs a month from their adopted chickens. We now have adopt-a-cow and adopt-an-apple-tree schemes as Dutch farmers try to increase income.

"I know how people love seeing sheep on the mountains. In Kerry, sheep and mountains go together. But



The Kerry Mountains; Anne and John Kissane have teamed up with LEADER to set up a unique alternative enterprise near Molls Gap on the Ring of Kerry.

many tourists were disappointed at not seeing sheep on the mountains. So, we saw an opportunity that would keep sheep there and give us an extra income."

That opportunity is 'Adopt a Sheep'. In December 2004, Anne, who has expertise in marketing and public relations, set up a website and started marketing 'Adopt a Sheep' in Holland.

By the time the scheme was fully launched in May last year, 50 Blackface ewes had already been adopted by Dutch people. A year later, this has risen to 307 — adopted by 'parents' from the US (40%), Holland (30%) and other countries.

'Adoptive parents' pay €45 to adopt a sheep, which they can name. They are told that this covers the yearly costs of maintaining a mountain sheep and helps keep them on the mountains. Every 'adoptive parent' receives a certificate with the tag number of the adopted sheep on it. The 'parents' can visit the farm and see their adopted sheep as well as experiencing life on a working sheep farm.

"We are selling an experience," says Anne. "We send

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—Anne Kissane

out a newsletter every two months about what's happening on the farm. When they visit — and they do — they can see John shearing, feeding and they can go to the mountains with him. They love to see the dogs working and lambs being bottle-fed."

Looking ahead, Anne and John aim to have 500 ewes adopted.

In addition, they are developing the farm as a place to visit for tourists, families and walkers. Supported by South Kerry Partnership — LEADER — they have invested in upgrading the farm yard, car parking, tea facilities and upgrading mountain walks. This



Under the 'Adopt a Sheep' scheme, 'parents' pay €45 to adopt a sheep, which they name. The 'parents' can visit the farm and see their adopted sheep as well as experiencing life on a sheep farm

summer, they are targeting coach tours and families. A puzzle walk and a treasure trail have been built for children.

Three walks to suit all tastes have been marked out to cater for people who want to experience the uniqueness of the Kerry bogs and mountains.

All this development has

been done at low cost. Capital spending was kept to around €20,000 with LEADER providing a grant of just over €6,000.

"We didn't want to borrow heavily," says John. Anne adds, "it is like an adventure. We didn't know if it would succeed so we kept costs down".

From my visit, I have no doubt that it will succeed.

There's a great combination of passion, skill and knowledge. There is also a market of people eager to 'adopt' a Kerry sheep! Well worth a visit if you are travelling between Kenmare and Killarney.

• The Kissane Sheep farm is open from April to October, 10am to 5pm daily, except Mondays. See the website at [www.adopt-a-sheep.ie](http://www.adopt-a-sheep.ie) 064 34791