

Tapuae dreaming

Owners aim to turn land into farming estate

By TERRY TACON
Farming editor

JOHN WASHER is a doer, not a dreamer. But what he is doing with land at Tapuae, between New Plymouth and Oakura, is going to make a lot of people's dreams come true.

He took me for a drive around the 78ha property and, quite frankly, what I saw made my mind boggle. Like most others who travel up and down the Surf Highway regularly, I had done my share of rubber-necking at the bits of redevelopment visible from the road, but I was not prepared for the full scope of the master plan on which John and his wife Mary are working.

Over every hill, along every track, new vistas opened and they just got better and better until finally we stopped at one spot with a 360° outlook that had everything — Mt Taranaki to the east, sweeping views along the coast to the south, Tapuae beach and the Tasman Sea to the west and the Sugar Loaf Islands off the Port of Taranaki to the north. It was stunning.

How John and Mary got to this point is such a long and involved story that they are semi-seriously threatening to write a book about it, but for the purpose of this article we'll let a truncated version suffice.

The Washers leased the land 10 years ago to run dairy bulls and were offered the chance to buy it four years later. At that stage they were living at Rahotu where they managed the milking of 1500 cows and the rearing of 1000 calves.

But after overhearing a chance remark at a large herd conference they attended in Rotorua five years ago, John and Mary started thinking about doing something other than raise bulls on the Tapuae land.

"A financial adviser was asked by someone in the audience what he would invest in. He said he would invest in coastal land around New Plymouth in Taranaki."

John and Mary were approached to sell 20ha at the northern end of the farm by a couple looking to set up a winery venture, and did so. This venture — Okurukuru Wines — is now taking shape with the winery and restaurant



COUNTRY HOME: Part of the Tapuae property of John and Mary Washer, which may be turned into a farming estate with 26 resident owners.

Photos: ADRIAN MALLOCH

building under construction on a site with magnificent views. John and Mary reckon it will be a real winner.

With their feeling that they were sitting on something special confirmed, the Washers sat down and reviewed what they would do with the rest of the farm. To proceed they were required

The landowners will have a role in managing the whole estate

by the New Plymouth District Council to employ a landscape architect and while they were initially reluctant to do so, went to the best they could find and hired Ewan Henderson of Boffa Miskall. After viewing the land he was as enthusiastic as the Washers about its potential for a major development.

Their options, after careful consultation with local authorities, have boiled down to two — a farming estate or a traditional easy subdivision

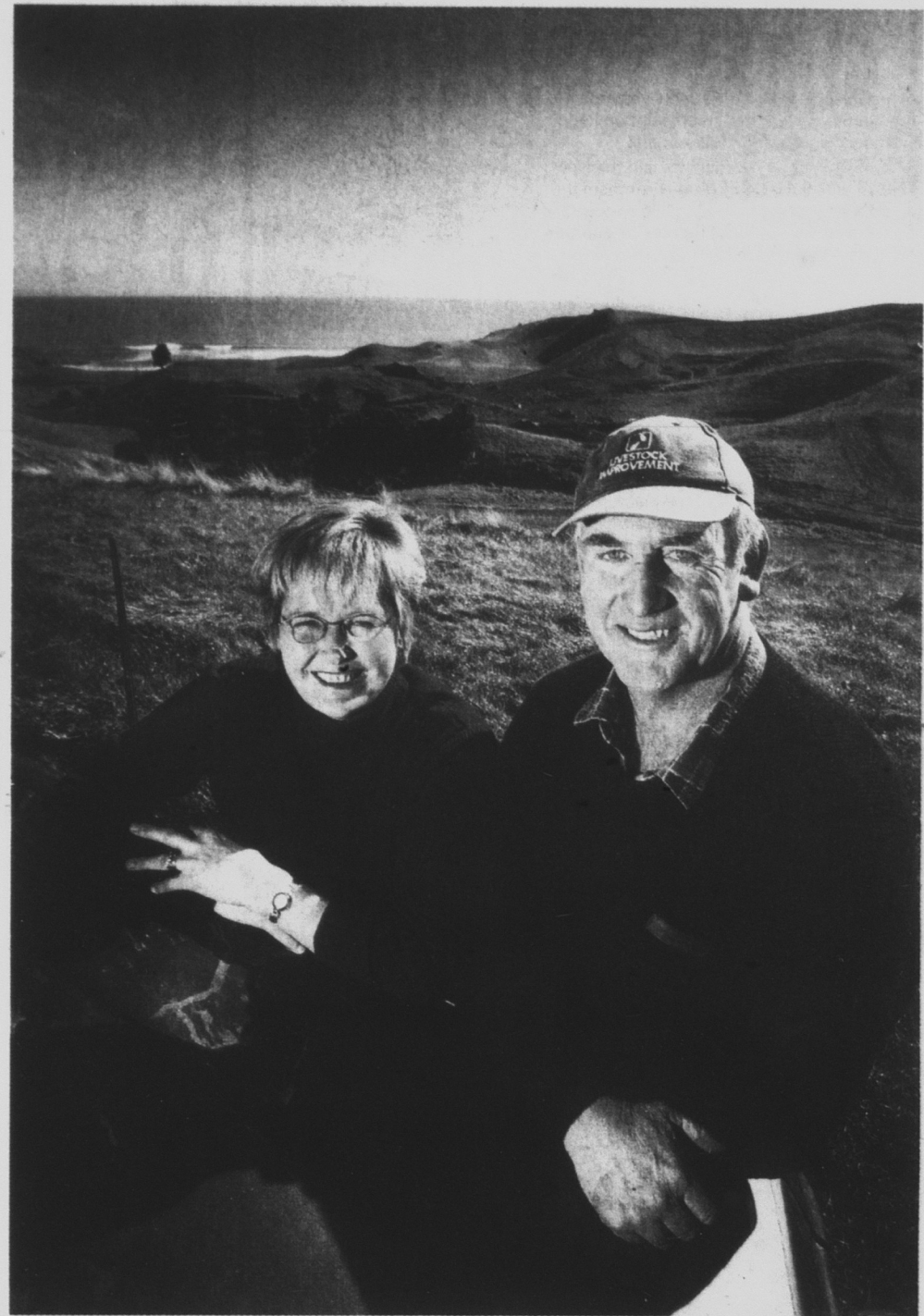
with people buying 4ha farmlets.

The farming estate appeals most to the Washers and provided planners give their proposals the final seal of approval, this will be the way they proceed. The development work they have been doing is all aimed in this direction, but if they have to go to the subdivision option it will work for that as well.

Under the farming estate plan, buyers will get one of 26 house sites — each of 4ha — that the Washers and the landscape architect have identified, plus a 4% share in the remaining freehold property, which will continue to be run as a farm in the export industry forever. The 26 landowners will have a role in managing the whole estate and receive the income.

"The downside for us," the Washers say, "is that most development and huge investment in a farming estate has to be done before marketing, whereas a traditional subdivision can be staged with little financial risk."

Continued on page 17



COASTAL PLAN: John and Mary Washer on their Omata land, with the mouth of the Tapuae Stream in the background.



PRIME PROPERTY: The Tapuae farm, looking south towards Oakura.

Photos: ADRIAN MALLOCH

Tapuae farm plan starts to take shape

□ Continued from page 13

"The upside is that the developers can set up with the local authorities the building positions, covenants, landscape viewshafts, land use and planting indefinitely.

"Very few houses would be seen from the road and the whole area would be farming and residential only, where residents would leave their businesses in town or elsewhere and return to a strictly residential area where security can be implemented."

John has gone to great lengths to ensure that the development meets all technical and cultural requirements, consulting with Maori and Historic Places Trust representatives about heritage issues.

He cannot speak highly enough of the co-operation and prompt attention received from local iwi in identifying former pa sites and sacred areas so they can be protected during the development.

There have been some humorous moments in this process as well, such as when an official from the Historic Places Trust told John a flat area near the mouth of the Tapuae Stream would have to be avoided because it was clearly the site of a Maori meeting house.

"It was actually the ninth green of the old Kaitake golf course," John said with a laugh.

While John has been overseeing the development of roads and culverts around the property, Mary's role has been to plan the aesthetics of what will become walking tracks, bridle paths, wetlands and native bush areas on the estate.

Already her ministrations are bearing fruit with a lake already populated by wild ducks and wood pigeons, pukeko, pheasants, quail and rabbits inhabiting some of the bush areas. The Taranaki Regional Council and Boffa Miscal have helped her prepare a huge planting plan for the autumn.

Interest in the project, which the Washers estimate will take them some time yet to complete, is already keen, but as yet they are



SCENIC SPOT: Mary and John Washer walk around wetlands at Tapuae.

not ready to sign up buyers.

"Whichever way we decide to go we will give prospective buyers plenty of notice, and anticipate sales taking place by Christmas," John said.

With prospective owners likely to be spoiled for choice in the unique development, the final figures seem certain to vindicate the decisions the Washers have made. Originally they envisaged the whole project would only take them about six months, but they have realised that dealing with bureaucracy takes time and, to fit in with their mission statement of "retaining the value for everyone", they are reconciled to paying attention to detail and completing the project to the highest standard regardless of the time frame.

John cannot believe he has spent a lifetime hunting, draining and developing agricultural land and is now reinstating wetland, replanting native trees and providing sanctuary for wild game.

"There might even be a chapter for me in the book," he confessed. Working title? *Wonky Donks and Dingbats Met Along The Way.*

If John can write as well as he can talk, it should be a fascinating read . . .