



The Third Way

Kinnoull Station owner Wes Garratt near the South Karori Stream.

If it's steep country land, you roller-crush it and put sheep on it, or plant pines on it. Or do you? A Wellington landowner has been thinking about a different future for our fragile hill country. Story and pictures by Dave Hansford.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. The land looked like it would grow pine trees, and growing pine trees is what Wes Garratt knows – or thought he did.

But looking out over the rumped, scrubby hills of Kinnoull Station, he knows different. “We actually planted 3000 pine trees up here,” he says. “Maybe 100 survived. The goats took them out. We would have shot well over 1000 goats here in the last three years, but they just kept coming in.”

Their depredations – coupled with the salty, desiccating winds off Cook Strait – had Wes throwing out his business plan for his 529 hectares of former failed farm.

So, if it was no good as a farm, and it was no good for pines, what was Wes to do with Kinnoull? He was in a bind. So he came up with the idea of subdividing the station into lifestyle blocks instead. But there was a problem with that, too.

“The only things that are permitted in a rural zone are farming and forestry, and City Council planners worried that it would set a precedent for other subdivisions,” he says.

But his would be no ordinary subdivision. There would be just 12 titles averaging 40 hectares each, spread widely across the station, and no land clearance would be allowed, except for a hectare's house site on each block.

“Your neighbour's land is your view,” says Wes. “You want some certainty that he's not going to start clearing that lovely hillside. So it's protecting everybody.”

And because the idea is to encourage regeneration of native forest, all grazing animals are banned, although, Wes recalls they struggled over horses. “People warned us that if we took them out, we were eliminating a large part of our potential buyers market. But our feeling was that horses actually need a lot of grazing, so we ruled them out.”

Cats are out, but dogs are allowed for now unless his own private dream – the reintroduction of kiwi – should ever be realised.

And so that all that regenerating bush has a chance of surviving, the land will come with a legally-binding covenant on the title, committing new owners to contributions to a pest control fund. There will also be concerted planting schemes to help it along.

“It’s all legally robust,” says Wes. “In other words, if you come into this place, you’d better be serious.”

That means being committed to eco-friendly construction. Wes wants only sympathetic design (there will be no white houses, for instance) and green technology used – state-of-the-art insulation, maybe even off-grid energy like solar and wind power.

“You could have the whole package; you could provide a single turbine to service the entire community, or people could install their own. We haven’t made a final decision on that.”

In view of all this, a Council Hearings Committee found in Wes’ favour. “They considered the land should not have been cleared in the first place ... and that if we were willing to retire the majority of it, then that was the best use.”

He’s yet to decide whether he’ll also open Kinnoull up to commercial wind energy projects. But with Meridian’s West Wind on one side, Wes says it’s a possibility. “I must say that we have looked at wind turbines – I don’t believe they are incompatible with this lifestyle.”

He does, however, have a preference for “something more discreet,” and is talking with a local engineer about small “vertical” turbines.

Something that won’t feature at Kinnoull is fences. “We don’t want any boundaries between lots,” says Wes. That’s because he wants to establish a network of walking tracks around and between neighbouring properties. “Landowners will have access to the whole 529 hectares, or at least a good percentage of it.”

The public wins as well. He’s offered Wellington City Council the provision of public access along the South Karori Stream from the road end down to the coast, and all that regenerating forest might even help Wellington on its way to “carbon-neutrality”.

Wes means to apply for carbon credits under Landcare’s carbon farming brokerage. All he has to do is demonstrate that the land was cleared prior to 1990 (he has the photos), and that he’s now ensured its retirement. “We’ll probably only get about one and half tonnes per hectare per year, but that may amount to 30 dollars per hectare.”

Kinnoull may yet show us a whole new, more sustainable way to make hill country earn its keep.

Right: The steep faces of Kinnoull Station, once burnt and grazed, are slowly regenerating. Thickets of gorse will add vital nitrogen and nurture an understorey of native seedlings. Wes Garratt hopes such regrowth will provide passive income under carbon credit provisions in the Kyoto Protocol.

