

In 1948 Arthur and Pat Cowan bought a property next door to his childhood home. The previous owners were Maori who made a practice of burning the fern and manuka on the ridges in order to create tracks in and out of the land, but fortunately the bush in the gullies survived. Today, hundreds of hectares of mature forest still remain, enveloping their home in a green embrace.

For the Cowans, the saga of the sale of Rangitoto began in 1979. Climbing to almost 3000 feet, the mountain is the headwaters of the Waipa River. Most of the land was owned by timber company Henderson and Pollard, who over the course of 25 years cleared out the podocarps first, then took out the tawa. By the late 70s they wanted to sell and interest was high in the farming community for land that contained good contours and had a ready water supply. It was also a fine habitat for kokako.

"Once we knew it was going to be for sale we moved everything. We tried the local council, Lands and Survey, the Forest Service to see if they would save it. It was far too important an area," Arthur Cowan recalls.

It became well known that the Cowans wanted to protect the land. A local farmer then let on that he had made an offer, and in what Arthur sees as a way of easing his conscience, the farmer allowed the Cowans a month to put in a similar figure. If they could raise the money, the land was theirs.

"The next day we went to Auckland

and by the greatest amount of good luck we discovered Mr Pollard was sympathetic. He said that if we came up with an offer to meet the one he had (\$125,000), we could have it. We were given 24 hours to make up our minds," says Arthur.

Drastic measures were called for, and taken; the Cowans mortgaged their farm and worked out that they could continue for two years before feeling the pinch. After the sale, they investigated the possibility of running a deer recovery operation, which showed that they could hold on for a further two years. Always, of course, they could have sold to a developer, a tempting prospect once the price of land started to soar in the 1980s. That was never a serious option, however.

One agency the Cowans initially overlooked was the Wildlife Service. In fact the Service had been interested in buying the land when it went up for sale, but money was (and still is) scarce for buying reserves. Regretfully they had to pass up the chance when Henderson and Pollard first offered it, but after the Cowans had bought the land the Service got into contact with them.

The Wildlife Service, in conjunction with the Department of Lands and Survey, then bought the property, taking the financial weight off the Cowans' shoulders. Wildlife are negotiating at present to buy a block adjacent of a similar size.

The officer who was dealing with the Cowans at the time was Graham Adams, now an assistant director of the Wildlife Service. He says he had heard the land had been sold, but any apprehension he felt about its new owner disappeared

during a flight over the Rangitoto Range.

"It became apparent during the flight that Mr Cowan was a very committed person to the area. I was deeply impressed about his concern for many things — the threatened blue duck, flooding downstream and so on.

"He was a man of the land who had been living there a long time and who understood its values.

"I have never encountered another person in New Zealand who has matched him in what he did. He could have suffered financially from what he did, but he went ahead and did it from a deep-seated feeling for the land," Graham Adams says.

By now the Cowans had "got the bug", and when a smaller block was offered of 363 hectares they bought that too. The land, also on Mt Rangitoto, has had an open space covenant placed upon it.

As an executive member of the Native Forest Restoration Trust, Arthur Cowan has been keenly involved in replanting thousands of trees. On the reserves on Mt Rangitoto alone more than 20,000 trees — mainly kahikatea and totora — have been replanted to help heal early development scars.

On the question of covenanting, Arthur Cowan believes that the value of the land can be increased in monetary terms if a covenant is placed upon it — a persuasive argument to many farmers.

"The bush will be seen as an asset. If it's not in the immediate future, it will be a much greater asset as time goes on," he believes.

Now 68, he describes himself as "semi-retired. I can do things now that I wasn't able to do before. We are now hoping to acquire more reserves."

Among his other voluntary posts he is an executive member of the Otorohanga Zoological Society and on the advisory committee of the Pureora Forest Park. He is also an active member of Forest and Bird.

In January 1984 Arthur Cowan was awarded an MBE for work in the field of protective conservation in the Waikato and other areas.

He praises his family for their much needed support, especially since his efforts have not always been applauded by a conservative farming community.

"My two daughters and two sons are all very willing to support things when they come up. My son-in-law was a Wildlife Officer for seven years," he says.

When asked whether he sees himself taking the balanced view of conservation and development, he immediately answers that he is likely to argue for a balance. A few seconds reflection and he amends the statement:

"But ... I think the balance was struck 20 years ago. Today I'm more extreme because the balance is long gone. The argument now should be for preservation," he says, pointing out that land already cleared should be made more productive.

The Cowan home, surrounded by forest.

Photo: G. Hutching

