

Love at First Sight

by Peter Winter, North Taranaki chairperson

On a knoll near State Highway 3A about two kilometres south of Leperton railway station stands a remnant of the forests which once clothed the area. It is beautiful, very conspicuous and the most noticeable natural feature between Waitara and Inglewood.

Along with many other Taranaki people I had been aware of this bush for most of my life and had looked for it on my journeys between Inglewood and Waitara. Once I stopped to photograph it to illustrate an article I was writing about patches of native bush in the countryside.

About a year ago a "for sale" sign appeared on the roadside and I had visions of the bush gone with tree-stumps, grass and cattle taking its place. Surprisingly, because the timber in the bush and the land beneath it were of considerable value, nothing happened and eventually the "for sale" notice was joined by another from a different agency.

Diffidently, not knowing what to expect, I invited members of the North Taranaki Branch executive to meet the land agents on site. The asking price was high, \$45,000, but not high in relation to the productive value of the 4.85 hectares of land plus the timber. I was well aware we could purchase much more forest than this in the hinterland for the same price if quantity were a criterion.

I need not have worried. It was love at first sight.

About this time we were notified of a legacy from the estate of Miss Dorothy Baker, a member of our branch. Although the legacy was left to the society, not specifically to North Taranaki branch, we believed with the goodwill of the national executive the purchase was possible.

We canvassed all our members and received 135 positive replies and one negative. At our next monthly meeting I was authorised to offer \$35,000 subject to our being able to arrange finance and the planning consent of North Taranaki District Council. The answer was "yes" provided we would accept responsibility for fencing the sub-division.

From that day forward offers to help with the fencing poured in, but eventually the owner himself volunteered to undertake the job.

Public interest was widespread. A policeman phoned from Opunake to say he had often wished he was wealthy enough to buy the bush, and a neighbouring resident said the same.

What is amazing is that the bush survived on what was always a small section, originally about 20 ha, which passed through the hands of many owners and lessees. After a part of the land was taken for the railway in 1873 the tree-covered portion made up 4.85 ha of a total 7.25 ha.

Several owners tried to drain the wet area near the road but there was insufficient fall and they did not succeed. This wet area en-



View of Te Wairoa from State Highway 3A showing hydrangeas at bush verge. Regenerating forest will eventually overcome the hydrangeas. Photo: Peter Winter

hances the section in the eyes of Forest and Bird members. There is a small stand of swamp maire growing there and once the land is protected from browsing animals it will probably spread.

Before European settlement the place name was Te Wairoa which probably referred to a wetland later modified by the siting of rail and road and by farming practices. Rumour has it local Maoris hid their greenstone taonga in the swamp prior to a raid by the Waikato tribes and it was never recovered.

The trees could surely tell more. Some would be hundreds of years old. There are huge, spreading puriri, kohekohe of dimensions seldom seen, large buttressed pukeatea and tall tawa. Since the trees are old they fruit heavily and provide a bounteous food store for berry-eating birds.

Botanist Maggie Bayfield, who was leader of the Protected Natural Areas survey of the Egmont Ecological Region (Bayfield and Benson 1986), says the remnant was not specified as a priority for protection in the report as only the best examples of each ecological unit were recommended.

"However, less than one percent of semi-coastal vegetation in the original landscape is currently protected. Kelly (1980) suggests 10 percent of the original area of each broad landscape class or habitat is reasonable in order to retain the original character of the countryside. Unfortunately there are very few remnants left and these are scattered and mostly in poor condition. As there is such an under-representation of semi-coastal vegetation protected, and so little remaining, any remnants have a very high priority for protection."

In describing the bush Maggie Bayfield's associate Marlene Benson states: "The canopy consists mainly of tawa with titoki, pu-

ketea, rewarewa and karaka. In the south-east corner the most common species are puriri and kohekohe. Kohekohe occurs plentifully in the sub-canopy and the common under-storey species are supplejack, occasional pigeonwood and mahoe.

"Although this area is suffering from having been grazed for many years it contains enough mature trees to provide a seed source for the future. It should therefore regenerate rapidly when fenced. The presence of swamp maire, although in small numbers only, adds to its value since this species is under-protected in Taranaki."

While enthusiasm for the purchase is widespread, small management problems are already surfacing. A plan for the future and some firm decisions will be needed. Both botanists recommend the bush should be allowed to recover in its own time in its own way. That is to say they recommend fencing, control of introduced animals and adventives but no planting, even of species which occur naturally.

"I think you will be surprised," says Maggie Bayfield.

Faith in the regenerative powers of the bush has also been expressed by Sarah DeRenzy, property officer for the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust, who inspected the property with special adviser, Ken Davidson. She echoed Maggie Bayfield's "I think you will be surprised" statement.

The Trust is providing for a conservation covenant and has helped with finance.

Whatever management plans are made, the bush will remain in perpetuity as a beautiful feature on a main road, a significant living memorial and historical record of the past, an educational facility, but above all a gesture that people believe it is worthwhile to spend time and money in preserving what is left of our native forest. 🌿