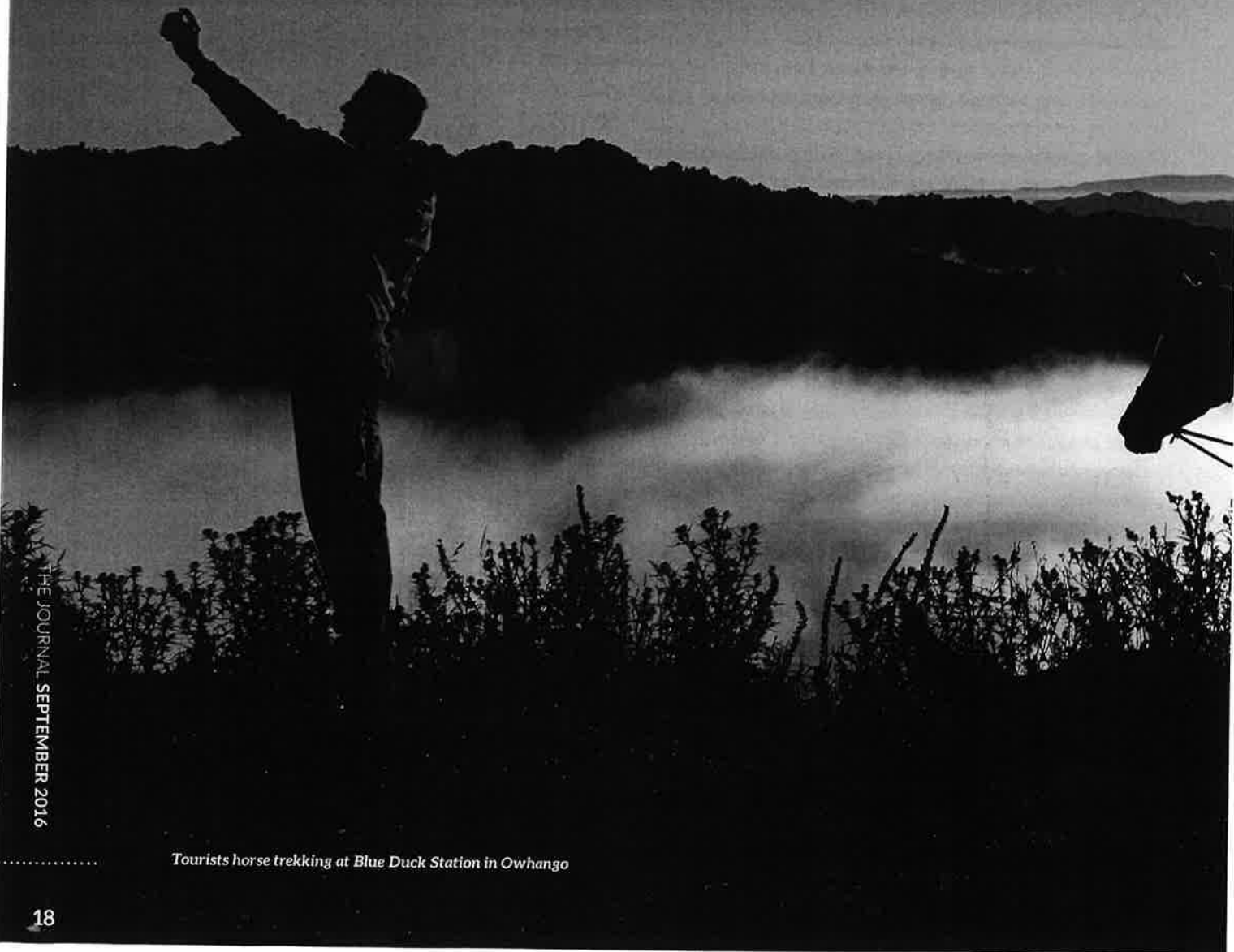


DAN STEELE

AGRITOURISM – A FARMER'S FRIEND OR FOE?

Agritourism is an opportunity that is coming to New Zealand landowners like a freight train. As a destination we are becoming more accessible and popular, with more than three million international visitors per annum and 10% year-on-year growth.



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Tourists horse trekking at Blue Duck Station in Owhango

Win-win for farming

Agritourism can be a win-win for New Zealand farming, bringing in more income from the same assets while promoting what the land has been traditionally producing. This can be either an individual farmer's produce, if they are selling direct, or having a brand, or New Zealand produce as a whole.


In 2016, after 150 years of hard work by New Zealand farmers, we are struggling to get adequate returns for much of what we grow from the land, mostly our main products of lamb, wool, beef and dairy. Some specialised products are doing very well such as wine, kiwifruit and manuka honey. Part of the reason for this in the law of the economic theory of supply and demand is that we have concentrated on becoming very good at supplying while assuming what we are growing will be needed or wanted.

Put simply, we have neglected to create sufficient demand for our products. The world is not short of food, with 40% of what farmers grow being wasted and 25% of the global population becoming obese. So we must now rethink what the world wants, tailor our production accordingly and create demand for our produce. Agritourism can have an important role to play here, helping to link our growing number of guests to our people, our land and produce. Fortunately the world is short of New Zealand.

What is agritourism?

Agritourism is where visitors stay, play or dine within a working farm or horticultural business. It is fast becoming a necessary diversifying option for many landowners in rural New Zealand. It has become harder to survive with low product returns, rising costs and fluctuating commodity prices. So many rural business people (farmers) now need to look at how other income streams can be brought in from their asset base. The reason that tourism is becoming the logical option for many farmers has been the very strong growth in international tourism numbers to New Zealand and the increase in the different ways for these guests, and our domestic tourist market, to experience the back country.

Some of these ways include our Great Walk network, New Zealand Cycle Trails and the Te Araroa Walkway from Cape Reinga to Bluff. All of these initiatives are gaining great momentum. With New Zealand also becoming more urbanised, many of our town cousins are travelling to the countryside to stay and play. These people are getting out into the 'back blocks'. However unless they want to tent, and eat noodles and nuts, they need some services in rural communities, mainly on farms, including accommodation, food, activities and observing everyday farming life.



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Tourists as NZ ambassadors

The opportunity for Kiwis is to use this international and domestic tourism growth as a smart marketing strategy for our primary produce. We need to ensure these visitors become customers of our produce while they are here enjoying our scenery. We can use agritourism to better connect travellers with our land and our people so that when they return home they continue to buy our products and become our ambassadors, telling our story on our behalf. Word of mouth is still the best form of advertising in the world and stories and experiences are always better told in the third person.

Environment and traceability

Our scenery, remote location, unique environment and a safe place to travel are our biggest drawcards for international guests. As is the case with increasing farm production and the larger environmental footprint trade-off, so it is with bringing more and more travellers through our remote and sometimes sensitive landscapes. Because we have an ecosystem with many endangered flora and fauna, putting more people into the back country is a strain on the environment. However, to quote David Attenborough, 'No-one will protect what they don't care about, and no-one will care about what they have never experienced.'

We need people out seeing and experiencing the New Zealand back country to fully appreciate and understand the issues and how we must manage these. We are world leaders in some types of conservation such as bringing species back from the brink of extinction, setting up sanctuaries for native flora and fauna, and the control of introduced pests. We should quickly become world leaders in farm environmental management and can use agritourism to showcase our work and help tell our stories.

Education and advocacy

There is a growing disconnect with many people and their food, with a lot of consumers not really understanding (connecting to the farmer or animal) what they are buying in the supermarket. Agritourism plays an important role in connecting people to the land and educating them about how their food is produced.

Re-enlivening rural communities

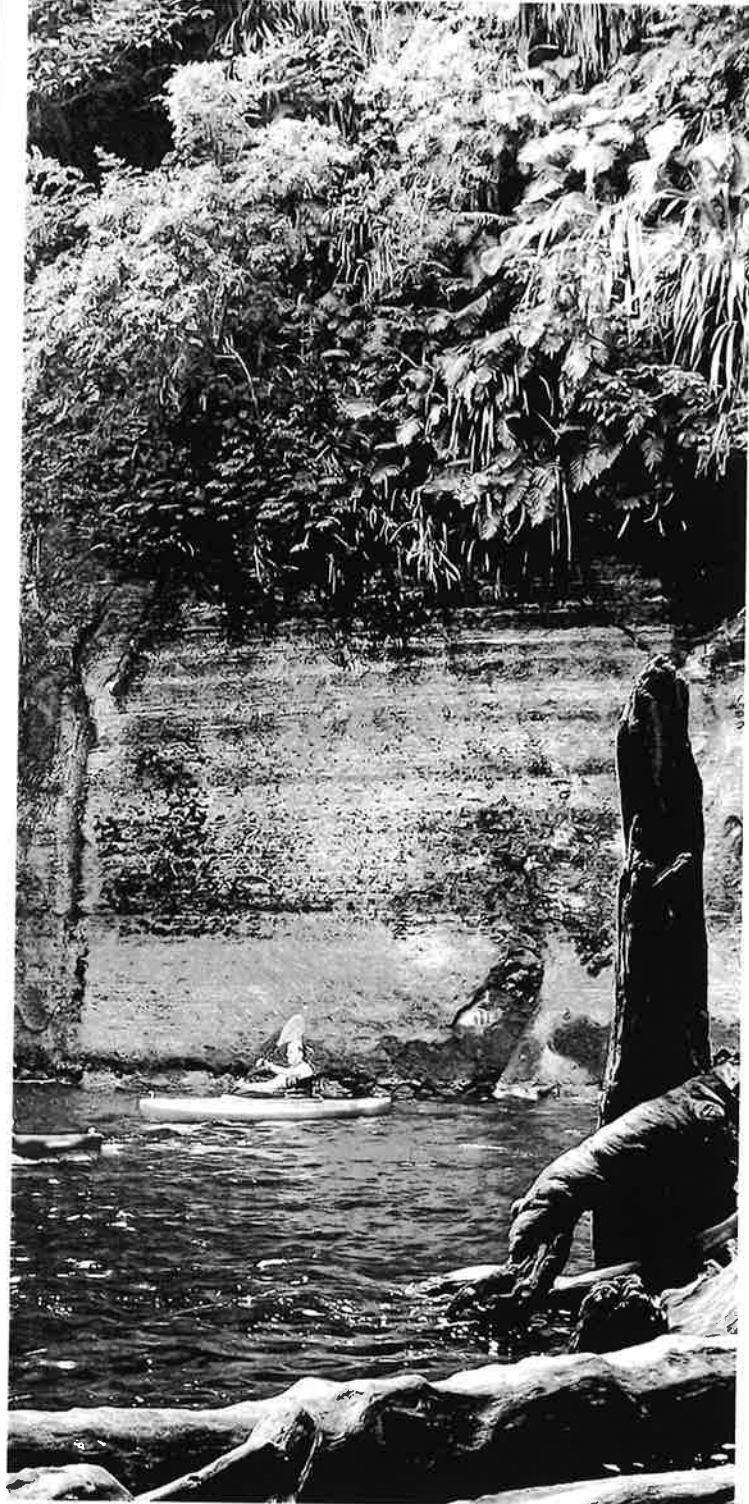
Tourism, and particularly agritourism or back country tourism, is one of the only bright lights helping to address rural de-population. This is a worldwide issue facing rural communities, where people are leaving the land for large urban centres and the countryside becomes more isolated and fragmented. Rural communities lose infrastructure such as schools, halls and sports clubs as



Tourists kayaking at Kaiwhakauka Falls on Blue Duck Station in Owhango

well as community spirit. Many of our rural towns are becoming ghost towns, with far more empty shops than full. Tourism is not only bringing people into these rural towns, but is also creating employment, which in turn creates community.

Agritourism can also create on-farm communities that make it very appealing for staff to belong to. On Blue Duck Station, for example, the team consists of New Zealanders and internationals. We have farmers, gardeners, guides, housekeepers, conservationists, a chef, a mechanic and more children for the local primary school. So there is a diversity of jobs and personalities that keeps things interesting for the team, fresh ideas coming, and makes it fun as well as educational for everyone.



Marketing

Farmers can sometimes be disconnected and not fully understand their end market and consumer. Having guests who are from New Zealand's consumer markets stay on the farm allows them to understand their wants and needs far better. This can help us to change our farms and systems to better meet the demands and expectations of our consumers. Farmers can set up to sell their products direct to the guests while they are with them. Selling a product to one person can benefit a farm or a business, but showcasing, telling and selling our story can have everlasting benefits for an entire industry. If we use tourism as a means and a reason to improve our environment this story, partly told through agritourism,

can help New Zealand's position as a producer of environmentally-friendly, healthy, natural and free-range products.

Land use

Agritourism can also make better use of farm assets. It allows value to be attributed to retired or regenerating areas, better utilises some farm vehicles and tracks, and essentially means that the land becomes a 100% effective production area.

Vision for the future

Agriculture and tourism are our two main industries and both require a lot of the same attributes of New Zealand to be successful. First and foremost is our good reputation. Agritourism is a vital link between these industries. We cannot be an agricultural exporting nation without tourism to directly connect people to our land, our stories and our products. We must also commit to the constant improvement of our environment so that our clean green image can be a trusted selling point. Today word of mouth can be conveyed through social media to the world instantly – this is a huge opportunity to market ourselves and tell our story. It is also a big risk with the potential for bad news stories travelling much faster than good ones, but this is the world we live in and the risks must be managed.

It would be great to see Beef+Lamb, DairyNZ and Hort NZ marketing our produce at the airports – as visitors come through arrivals there could be healthy, tasty food options. When they leave New Zealand it could be the last experience they have. Currently, the first and last impressions that international visitors have are of fast food stores.

We need to find the common ground between agriculture and tourism and build a strategy that helps link and improve both industries. Farmers own most of New Zealand and their customers are coming here for a look around and hoping for a great experience. We are on show and need to perform or accept that low and volatile prices are the new normal.

Healthy agriculture, for the people and the planet, is surely one of this country's biggest opportunities. The world is looking for answers to all sorts of problems from climate change to cancer. Many are realising that human health and environmental health are inextricably linked, so if we can position ourselves as the health food store of the world people will fall over themselves to get here and buy our healthy produce. Agritourism can and should be a very important link to the world and its people.

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