

# Deferring to nature's ways and open space

## Tract in Washington State gives owners common land

By Verna Randall

Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Friday Harbor, Washington

Wouldn't it be a fine idea to develop and manage land according to its demands, not ours. By this criterion, a marsh that is an important station along migratory routes becomes a bird sanctuary, a deep wood with tall trees and filtered light becomes a wildlife refuge, a high meadow rich in wildflowers is a preserve for flora.

This sounds like park and recreation planning or nature conservancy. How often does it apply to residential development, when each parcel of land sold will add to the profit margin of the development?

Three Meadows, on San Juan Island in the State of Washington, was so conceived by Manning W. Cox and his wife, Jeanne. It is 210 acres — the preserves mentioned above, the meadows of its name, some ponds and pasture, as well as a large, cedar-pole barn and some heavy equipment. These are common lands and common property.

There are also 30 tracts of 5 acres each owned privately. Together they are Three Meadows Corporation, for each owner of private land owns also 1/30th of the common lands, and is thereby responsible for their management and development, while at the same time he is free to enjoy them. "Private" and "common"; "freedom" and "responsibility" — the concept is worth considering.

### Geologist's foresight

It became the guiding principle for developing Three Meadows because the land had some unique areas that called for special treatment, but there were other motivations as well.

Mr. Cox is a geologist acutely aware that natural resources have their limits. There is enough water on San Juan Island to sustain one family on 2 acres of land. For Mr. Cox it is simple logic that high-density areas, such as the town of Friday Harbor nearby, must be counterbalanced by low-density areas, such as Three Meadows.

Mr. Cox also penned this preamble to the corporation documents: "Foreseeing a time when large, open-space preserves would be the perquisites of the very rich or would be enclosed in public parks, Three Meadows Ranch was established in 1971 to give the ordinary man a place to build a home and to raise a family in country surroundings permanently set aside from development."

Whether or not there would be buyers who likely depend on how they viewed their investment.

If they reckoned it was 5 acres of private land, they would be paying approximately \$3,600 an acre — a substantial amount for inland property even on San Juan Island. If they added in their share of common land, they would be investing approximately \$1,500 an acre. If, however, they reckoned it as 5 acres of private land plus 210 acres of common, it would be a bargain, at less than \$85 an acre.



By Albert Hamilton

### Looking across a spread of common land shared by 30 homeowners on San Juan Island

Fortunately for the Coxes, there were enough people who took the long view, although if Mr. Cox were penning his preamble today, it is not likely he would refer to them as "ordinary" men and women. He says the property owners are atypical — biologists, zoologists, geologists, psychologists, physicians, and teachers — and all are individualists.

Perhaps they are people who are used to doing things by committee and do not fear the consequences. Certainly they are people who share a common reverence for the land and the desire to preserve some open spaces for the future.

They meet annually as members of the corporation to plan and manage, to pass regulations, and to make assessments if any are required. In lieu of the latter there have been work sessions to improve the pastures and maintain the roads.

### Test of concept ahead

The regulations have been kept to a minimum and are evolving only as needed to preserve the original intent. They do not permit the commercial use of private or common land; they limit each owned tract to a single building site; they prohibit the cutting of trees larger than 12 inches in diameter without permission of the corporation.

Managing Three Meadows is a learning experience, for the commons concept is new to everyone there.

It functions well, but the test will come as more and more families build their homes and make personal demands on the common land.

For instance, there is pasturage for some stock. Will it be necessary to limit the number of animals per family? The question was raised at the annual meeting this year. The decision was to postpone restrictions until, if ever, they were unavoidable. Then it would be majority rule and the members would defer.

Three Meadows seems in essence to be a rural, democratic community. This is not to be confused with "commune," where there is common ownership of everything and a common effort for the common weal. A community is thought of here as a group of people living in the same locality under the same governing body, bound together by some common interests, possessions, and participation.

In Three Meadows each landowner remains private and autonomous as to his means and manner of living, but he shares the management and use of lands and property held in common.