



Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria

PO Box 5083, Burnley, 3121
www.mcav.com.au
barker@vicnet.net.au
Reg. No. A2117

Phone 03 9429 8455
Fax 03 9427 9324
ABN 2534 2519 237
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The case for renewal of alpine grazing licences in 2005

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Introduction

The Mountain Cattlemen Association of Victoria (MCAV) has recommended to the alpine grazing taskforce that cattle grazing be continued in conjunction with a positive cattle and environment management plan which assures the conservation of natural values and biodiversity and enhances the cultural traditions. The plan was initially partly developed with Parks Victoria.

The MCAV, rural groups, and supporters are fired up on this issue which they see as a litmus test of the Government's concern and interest in rural Victoria.

Importantly, this issue also has strong relevance to urban residents and voters who have shown strong empathy for the cattlemen and want to see this tradition continue.

1 Core legislated promise

Alpine grazing is a core legislated promise and supporters are extremely disappointed to see it raised again. The Environment Minister, the Hon. John Thwaites has said: "*Alpine grazing is a licensed activity and will continue as a licensed activity.*" (Hansard, 6.11.2003 Page 1616) A decision against the mountain cattlemen will resound throughout rural Victoria and disturb many of the thousands of supporters. These supporters - urban and rural - generally do not write letters or submissions but they do vote.

2 The cattlemen provide critically important cultural links from the past to the future

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the community places high value on its cultural links to the past. If we don't have a connection to the past, we think the page we are on is the whole story and fail to comprehend that the current page is but one of many in the book - past and future. These links to the past are critical because they provide navigation points to the future. It is time to recognise the past, embrace its iconic images and give our community breadth of vision. When we find that one of the icons of past is still alive and flourishing, like the traditional practices of the mountain cattlemen, we should support them as we would a national treasure.

3 Local knowledge and experience

The experience of cattlemen has been drawn upon many times in rescues and fire fighting. During the 2003 bushfires the cattlemen's knowledge of the bush and fire behaviour was constantly used and appreciated by the control bodies. The value of the local knowledge of mountain cattlemen in resolving emergencies is irreplaceable and has assisted in saving many lives.

High country cattle grazing is part of the total community livelihood in the alpine and surrounding areas. It is a vital part of the economy which sustains communities and puts players on football fields, contributors in CWA meetings and volunteers on fire trucks.

4 Alpine grazing would support a nomination for World Heritage listing

The inclusion of the traditions of the mountain cattlemen would enhance a World Heritage nomination. They would assist in ensuring a nomination covers the World Heritage mission statement in relation to encouraging participation of the local population in the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage.

5 If you view the whole policy mosaic, including community, economic, social, heritage and historic issues, the cattlemen win hands-down.

The Government has a policy that requires decisions to be balanced with environmental, social and economic considerations. This government articulates this policy as triple bottom line but most previous governments have had a similar view.

Alpine grazing is strongly supported by the Bracks Government's triple bottom line policy. This clearly stated policy requires recognition and accommodation of economic and social outcomes as well as environmental outcomes and overrides all government policy and actions.



The MCAV has always argued that social and economic issues, and not just environmental issues, should be taken into account in considering the future of alpine grazing. The Bracks Government has been very clear in requiring an adherence to its triple bottom line approach including economic, social and environmental objectives.

A review of the social and cultural issues, in accordance with Government policy, could well result in this matter being viewed as *“How can grazing be facilitated within the conservation of natural values”*

rather than the expected *“How can we utilise the aftermath of the fires to get rid of cattle grazing”*.

On the environment issue alone the score might be MCAV: 2, VNPA: 1, but at full time, when we add in the community, economic, social, heritage and historic issues, the final score will be MCAV:7, VNPA:1. When the full mosaic of the policy is considered, the cattlemen come out way in front.

6 The beating up of the alpine grazing issues takes attention and money away from the real issues

The major environmental issues facing Victoria are salinity, pollution, greenhouse gasses, water, genetic modification of crops, and the brown issues of the city. Then there are the social issues like toxic dumps, wind power and whether grass will ever grow in Telstra Dome. In comparison, alpine grazing is infinitesimally small. The only reason alpine grazing is an issue is because the hierarchy of the VNPA has decided that it should be an issue. We should never lose sight of the real environmental issues and the votes available to whichever political party tackles them with sound and creative policies.

7 Cain and Kirner Labor Government supported alpine grazing

The former Cain and Kirner Labor governments supported grazing in the Alpine National Park so long as it was properly controlled and managed. Legislation brought in to Parliament by that Labor government created 7 year grazing licences within the Park, and deliberately made these licences renewable. In order to give protection to the conservation values of the Alpine National Park licence conditions took into account the need for strong management practices. When the licence document was reviewed and renewed for a second 7 year term in 1998 it was found that the document was strong enough to continue to protect conservation values, and only minor changes were required to the original licences.

8 Minister Sherryl Garbutt's support for alpine grazing

Over recent years, the Hon. Sherryl Garbutt MP, former Minister for Environment and Conservation consistently stated that the Government would not be taking any precipitous action to remove the mountain cattlemen. The Minister said,

"This government consults as part of its decision making. The government has said time and again, and I have explained it many times, that it will not be changing leases without consultation, without agreement and without the alpine cattlemen volunteering." 18.9.2001 Page 306

"We have a very clear policy on this issue. We want the environment protected. I said in this house just a few week ago ... that there would be no changes to those licences and that we would not be taking them back or changing them without the agreement of the alpine cattle graziers." 31.10.2001 Page 1261

"The amendment guarantees the existing rights of licensees who hold grazing licences under the Forests Act and under the Land Act in the area that is about to be included in the Alpine National Park. The amendment allows existing licences to continue in force without change to the number of cattle, the area, the nature of the licence, its renewal process or anything else. These provisions save the rights and entitlements and terms and conditions of licensees and will be inserted in the acts to give licensees that guaranteed protection." Second Reading Speech, National Parks (Amendment) Bill, 1.6.2000 Page 2120

9 Alpine grazing is a heritage icon

Alpine grazing has existed for more than 150 years and has worked under all political parties and all governments. One small group of lobbyists should not be able to dictate the removal of part of the history and heritage of Australia. Indeed the challenge for the green lobbyists is to recognise this history and heritage and support well managed and properly controlled grazing, as a means retaining this important part of our past.

10 Scientific research quantifies community support for alpine grazing

A University research survey¹ conducted in 1996 found strong support within the community for retaining managed grazing within the Alpine National Park. The abstract stated, *"These results provide support for the Victorian Government's current management policies for grazing on the Bogong High Plains."*

This survey showed that over 90% of respondents had heard of the mountain cattlemen, and 71% were willing to contribute financially in order to retain the presence of mountain cattlemen on the Bogong High Plains.

11 Demonstrations of community support for alpine grazing

The strength for retaining the mountain cattlemen's pioneering heritage has increased. Heritage values are recognised and appreciated within the Victorian and Australian community.

¹ A research project titled *"Analysing conflict between cultural heritage and nature conservation in the Australian Alps: a CVM approach"* by M. Lockwood, P. Tracey and N. Klomp of the Johnstone Centre of Parks, Recreation and Heritage, Charles Sturt University Albury

- The Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony featured the music from the film “*The Man from Snowy River*”, and featured horsemen, and whip-cracking. Most of the whip-crackers were either mountain cattlemen or family members of mountain cattlemen.
- “*The Man from Snowy River*” was one of the most widely seen and most popular Australian films of all time.
- The Centenary of Federation Parade through the streets of Melbourne in May 2001 was a great success for MCAV. The Association was asked to provide 205 mounted stockmen in a re-enactment of the original parade in 1901. The Parade in 2001 was lengthy and featured floats and entries from all sections of the community. The loudest cheers and the most enthusiastic support from the 300,000 crowd was for the mountain cattlemen.
- The recent “*arena spectacular*”, “*The Man from Snowy River*” attests to the continued popularity of High Country magic.

The mountain cattlemen’s appeal to the urban community has lost none of its strength over the past decades. In fact, interest and support for the mountain cattlemen is growing. Each year thousands of people attend the MCAV *Get Together* to support the mountain cattlemen.

12 Mountain cattlemen are enshrined in tourism

Tourism operators, Shire Councils and tourism associations in the eastern highlands draw on the history and images of mountain cattlemen in attracting tourists. The following is one example among many:

Inspirational mountains

Everyday in the Alpine High Country, visitors and locals alike are inspired by the beauty of its mountains. The State's highest peaks, like the monolithic Mount Bogong and the spectacular Mount Feathertop can be seen from almost every corner or straight in the region. Within its fold are the historic Mt Buffalo National Park and a vast part of Victoria's biggest Park, the Alpine National Park.



Historic mountain cattlemen's huts, many of which are heritage listed are dotted through the Park. Names like Wallace, Cope and Dibbins remind walkers of the cattlemen who once drove herds across the High Plains in search of greener fields; in fact, a small number of cattle still graze on the high country pastures today.

http://www.thealpinehighcountry.info/Stories/nat_parks.htm

The continuing interest in, and utilisation of, the high country imagery was recently highlighted by the opening of the Cattleman’s Café at Mount Buller by the Minister for the Environment, the Hon. John Thwaites and the Drover’s Dream Chairlift, by the Minister for Planning, the Hon. Mary Delahunty on 12 June 2004. The Planning Minister arrived on horseback resplendent in a Driza-bone coat and put on a cattleman’s hat after dismounting!

A current advertisement for Qantas highlights the continuing recognition of the mountain cattlemen’s brand.

13 Grazing in Kakadu National Park

Where else in Australia are domestic livestock grazed in national parks? Kakadu National Park. The management plan states: “A small herd of domesticated buffalo will be maintained by the Gagudju Association within the park. Through extensive consultation with traditional owners, and obtaining expert and public comment, the feral animal management strategy will address the issue of whether and where additional domesticated herds may be established. All domesticated herds will be subject to continuing environmental and exotic disease monitoring.”

14 The land was good enough, with alpine grazing, to be proclaimed as a national park

The high plains have been grazed, at various times by sheep, horses and cattle for 170 years. Only cattle are grazed now and at record low stocking rates. After all this grazing, the area has been regarded as being in sufficiently good condition to be proclaimed as a national park.

15 Mossbeds



The opponents of alpine grazing have sought to elevate the status of mossbeds to be like the old growth forests that struck such a chord in the community during the anti-logging debate. After mythologising the mossbeds the opponents then seek to portray the cattle as trampling and trashing this newly established temple. This is spin and hype, not environmental science.

Picture President Simon Turner with cattle

In fact the mossbeds form an extremely small part of the Alpine area. In any event they are flourishing after 170 years of alpine grazing. There are many mossbeds on private land, below the snowline, which are also flourishing and they are in paddocks grazed by cattle, for the whole year.

16 The presence of cattlemen provide a strong force to monitor pest plants and animals, adverse human behaviour and fire fuel conditions

Cattlemen are on a constant look out for fresh outbreaks of weeds. Cattlemen are “on the spot” and able to immediately control new outbreaks and prevent them from becoming major infestations. They have also assisted in the control of pest animals. The cattlemen also provide assistance in the monitoring and prevention of adverse human behaviour. They also provide information through their links with fire control agencies on fire fuel conditions.

17 Cattle reduce the fuel for fires

Respected bush fire experts consider that the Esplin report was incorrect in relation to the impact of cattle grazing on fire fuel. The simplicity of this issue is that cattle reduce the amount of fuel available for fire and therefore must have an impact in the reduction in the intensity of fire.

18 Cost of managing alpine grazing

Our opponents keep on saying that the State is collecting an income of \$30,000 from the licenses, but it is costing at least \$500,000 a year to manage. The cattlemen have never asked Parks Victoria to spend this sort of money. In any event, some cattlemen state that their only contact with Parks

Victoria about alpine grazing is two letters a year stating an entry and exit date. The MCAV's plan proposes some self-regulation which would substantially reduce the costs.

19 The main opponent of the cattlemen, the VNPA has consistently supported alpine grazing.

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s the VNPA consistently supported alpine grazing. The VNPA's newsletters and journal contain consistently supportive statements about alpine grazing and regarded other developments, such as ski resorts, as much more damaging activities. The cattlemen's opponents talk about 60 years of scientific research which has allegedly shown that cattle grazing on the high plains is having an adverse impact. If there has been 60 years of scientific research in incriminating cattle grazing, this research has been around since the mid 1940s. It is only in the last 25 years that the VNPA has turned against alpine grazing. This means that for 35 years the VNPA supported alpine grazing while it was fully aware of this scientific research.

20 The community accepts cattle grazing in the context of a national park

This issue is not about science and the impacts of cattle - it is about what is acceptable in a national park. Several Government surveys indicate that the general public are happy to see cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park. These surveys include:

- Yann Campbell Hoare and Wheeler, "Market analysis of Victoria's public land", report for the Department of Conservation and Environment, June 1990.
- Alpine Area Visitor Survey, Easter 1989, Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, Alexandra Region.
- Gippsland Hinterland Region Consumer Perceptions, Destination Australia Marketing and Consultancy Pty Ltd. Report for Department of Conservation, Forest and Lands, 1989

21 Today's compromise is the starting point for tomorrow's campaigns by the ecological lobby groups

There is talk of a compromise but history shows that any such decision is used by the ecological lobby groups as the starting point for their next campaign. The ink is hardly dry on agreements before the ecological lobby groups are off on the next campaign. For the ecological lobby groups, a win today is the starting point for tomorrow's campaign.

The incremental nature of ecological lobby groups' policies is highlighted in these statements from the VNPA's own publication, Parkwatch. In June 1978, the VNPA stated, "*The VNPA is not opposed to cattle grazing within the Alpine National Park save in a relatively few locations including wilderness zones.*" (VNPA, Parkwatch, June 1978) However, by the 1990s the VNPA was stating - "*Degrading activities such as grazing,... are totally incompatible with Park philosophy.*" (VNPA, Parkwatch, December 1990) What changed in the meantime? The cattle grazed the same areas. The same cattlemen families were involved. The only thing to change was the attitude of a small number of people in the ecological lobby groups.

22 Ecological lobby groups are beginning to lose favour in the community because they are picking the wrong issues

A Readers Digest survey recently found that three of the five least trusted charities are ecological lobby groups - Greenpeace, Australian Conservation Foundation and The Wilderness Society. The survey was of 1500 Readers Digest readers and the results were weighted to represent the general population. The article, in the June 2004 issue noted, "These organisations started with a great deal

of compassion, and at some point they became political, aligning with issues with which you may not agree,' suggests Tim Fenech, a senior lecturer in marketing at Griffith University."

23 Some of the licences are now held by new entrants to farming

Some opponents argue that cattle grazing licences are based upon "hereditary privilege" and that it is almost "impossible for an outsider to get a licence". On the one hand, cattlemen are criticised because some licences are held by businessmen but on the other hand are criticised because it is impossible for other people to obtain a licence. The fact is that new entrants are able to obtain licences and with the high cost of freehold land, it is probably only people with other successful business interests who have sufficient money to buy these properties. The cattlemen welcome new entrants to alpine grazing. The cross-fertilisation of farming and financing ideas that flows from new neighbours is always viewed as a positive.

24 A few cattle are trucked to licence areas rather than walked in the traditional manner

Whether cattle are trucked or driven to licence areas, seems to be immaterial to the question of whether alpine grazing has any adverse impacts on the environment and whether it is an appropriate continuing activity. In any event, we estimate that just 5% of cattle grazed in the Alpine National Park are trucked to the runs. Additionally, in some cases Council by-laws have made it difficult to walk cattle to the licensed areas.



Picture: John Duncan-Firth

25 Win-win outcome

In today's politics we hear all about "win-win decisions." A decision to support the cattlemen would, uniquely, be a win-win-win-win decision. The wins would be:

The Government will **win**. The Association, its members and many supporters of the mountain cattlemen will applaud this decision. Many people will think more highly of the Government if, for just once, it stands up to the unacceptable demands of the now strident ecological lobby groups

Rural people will **win**. Many rural groups will see this as recognition that the Government is concerned about their issues.

Melbourne communities will **win**. There will be satisfaction in simply knowing that a tradition and history are still alive - the mountain cattlemen are still taking cattle up to the high plains. Just as

conservationists have argued that you don't have to go to wilderness areas to derive some satisfaction from knowing they exist, so too do people like to know the mountain cattlemens' tradition continues.

Whole country communities would **win**. The cattlemen have a critically important role in their local communities. They are part of the fabric of the local community and give substance to the romance of taking cattle onto high plains during summer.

Economic activity, such as tourism, latched onto the cattlemen branding would **win**.

Future generations will **win**. The link to the past will provide part of the signposts to the future.



Picture Cattlemen at the launch of the Alpine National Park

26 The Australian Government supports alpine grazing

During the Federal election there were various statements about the support of the Federal Coalition for alpine grazing.

After the election, the Australian Minister for the Environment and Heritage sent the following letter to Mr Ian Maxfield, Chairman of the Alpine Grazing Task Force (19.11.04)

"I am writing to you to reinforce the Australian Government's position on the matter of the future of grazing in the Victorian Alps. During the recent federal election campaign there was discussion and debate in the media about the Government's position. I consider that it would be useful for the Taskforce to be clear on where the Australian Government stands.

The new national heritage legislation that commenced on 1 January 2004 sets out criteria for the recognition of outstanding national heritage significance. The criteria include the recognition of an area's special association with a particular community and a special association with the life of a group of persons of importance to Australia's cultural history. I believe that the story of the mountain cattlemen, their huts, their mountain tracks, their celebrations, their folklore all embody these elements of national heritage.

The Australian Government supports the continuation of alpine grazing as the embodiment of a key element of our outstanding national heritage. The important role of the new national heritage system was emphasised in the Government's environment election policy.

I trust my comments have clarified the Australian Government's position on this important issue"

27 No interest in anti-grazing protests

In October 2004, anti-grazing interests held a protest at Federation Square. The most obvious point about this protest, is the lack of interest.



28 National Parks Advisory Council Annual Report highlights the obsessive nature of opposition to grazing

The National Parks Advisory Council's 2004 Annual Report discussed alpine grazing. There are two points to be made.

The first is the obsessive nature of opponents to alpine grazing. The Report states, "*Council considers grazing in the Alpine National Park is the single most crucial issue currently needing to be addressed in our national parks.*" Other material produced by Parks Victoria (State of the Parks) clearly shows that there is a range of much more important issues such as weeds, fragmentation of parks and feral animals.

The 2004 Report is by the membership which has been discredited by the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission. This has been acknowledged by the Bracks Government and the membership is being changed.

29 Cattle do not encourage growth of shrubs

Scientists have claimed that cattle actually increase the likelihood of fires in alpine areas. The claim is that cattle cause bare ground and this is colonised by shrubs. The shrubs are more flammable than grass and therefore cattle do not "reduce blazing".



Picture: Well grassed areas between shrubs on Mt Fainter

The reality seems to be that any tracks left by cattle, walkers or vehicles are colonised by grass. This is clearly evident in the photograph below on some tracks on Mt Fainter. This on the area often presented by the VNPA in a picture of a maze of cattle tracks. In fact, on the ground, these "tracks" are well grassed.

Bare ground has been colonised by grass, not shrubs as claimed by scientists.

30 Trial plots on Pretty Valley are irrelevant because they ignore fire

Much has been made of trial plots in Pretty Valley. Cattle have been excluded from one plot for decades. It now appears that this trial is irrelevant because it is comparing the management of land in the absence of fire. After the 2003 fires, abundant evidence was found on burnt land of the use of fire by aborigines prior to white settlement. Fire has clearly been a factor in the high plains landscape and any trial that excludes burning has little or no relevance.

31 Conclusion

The implementation of the strong and positive cattle and environment management plan would support the continuation of alpine grazing and ensure the enhancement of conservation values

The cattleman had been concerned for sometime about the absence of a positive and proactive management plan upon which grazing in the alpine area can be based. The MCAV did commence work with Parks Victoria on a Memorandum of Cooperation and a draft document was prepared. However the 2003 fires intervened and no further work was done on this Memorandum. The Association had hoped that this Memorandum would provide the basis for a sensible management plan.

The proposed management plan acknowledges the scientific framework surrounding alpine grazing, utilises the cattleman's knowledge of animal husbandry, fully embraces the need to protect the conservation values of the area and presents the cattlemens' activities in a positive manner that adds to the so-called triple bottom line of the government.

Appendix 1 - Grazing, science, fire and management in the High Country of Victoria

by Peter Attiwill

Grazing, science and management

There has been an impressive amount of research on the effects of grazing on the composition of plant communities in the High Country. This research provides a sound framework on which to manage grazing in a sustainable way.

Much of the research is based on comparisons between fenced and grazed plots on land that has not burned since 1939. There is now (as a result of barring of the land by fire) increasing evidence of thousands of years of occupation of the High Plains by Aborigines, and it is safe to assume that fire has been a natural feature of the ecology of the High Plains, as it has been for most of Australia. The undisturbed state of the vegetation of the High Plains, protected from fire, is therefore most unlikely to be a natural state and therefore not an entirely appropriate reference.

It is now critical that Parks Victoria clearly define goals for management of biodiversity. A critical goal for future management is the definition of appropriate burning regimes. The question should not be one of grazing or no grazing. The critical question is: what are our goals for management of ecological diversity and of fire?

The critics of alpine grazing use science to support the basic tenet that grazing is incompatible with use of the land as a national park, as encapsulated in the slogan 'National Park or Cow Paddock?'. The slogan is totally misleading. A cow paddock, once abandoned, will never return to the ecosystem that was destroyed to create it.

In contrast, there is no evidence that cattle grazing in the High Country has eliminated rare and threatened species, nor has species composition or diversity been irrevocably altered. Indeed, 170 years of controlled cattle-grazing has left by far the greater part of the High Country in excellent condition. Clearly, at the long-term and landscape levels, cattle grazing over some part of the High Country can be accommodated within management plans to achieve specific goals without an irreversible deterioration in biodiversity.

There is no doubt that the opponents of grazing use science to achieve their end of stopping grazing completely (just as the opponents of timber harvesting in native forests will continue to pursue their aim until there is no harvesting in native forests). That is, there is no point of compromise, despite the fact that both the intensity and extent of cattle grazing has reduced dramatically over the years.

Fire and management

The alpine fires of 2003 were the greatest ecological disaster to strike Victoria within recorded history. Some 1 million hectares of national park and state forests – public land, OUR land – were burned at high intensity. At least some ecosystems in the High Country will take 1000 years or more to recover. Sediment loads increased up to 150 times above normal, and Environment Minister Thwaites stated that rivers and water catchments across the north of Victoria face a 'serious threat'. It is a curious fact that, while the predominantly city-based push to end grazing in the High Country continues unabated, the unimaginable disaster of the 2003 fires has disappeared from our civic radar screen as though it had never occurred. However, the Stretton Group has pursued the issue doggedly,

and is now seeking a court ruling to identify government agencies responsible for the size and severity of the fires.

The Stretton Group has received enormous support from country Victoria; the alpine fires should never have happened, and once started, they should have been controlled rather than burning for 2 months. It is unfortunate that our meeting in the north-east coincides with the inaugural Stretton Oration by Phil Cheney (CSIRO, Canberra): 'The Green Inferno: The Politics of Bushfires and Conservation'.

Successive governments have declared increasing areas of national parks without providing adequate levels of investment and resources to manage them. Most critically, fuel loads have been allowed to build up to the point where unplanned, or feral fires become devastating. Prescribed burning, together with ecological burning to meet biodiversity goals as well as to reduce fuel loads, have fallen well short (perhaps an understatement – appallingly short?) of departmental goals over the past decade (as recognized in the Auditor General's report), and worse still, departmental goals fall well short of what is needed.



No wonder country Victoria is worried. Will it take a threat to Melbourne's forested water catchments to make city people wake up and be worried too?

Picture John Duncan-Firth

Grazing, fire and management

The current problems of fire management have been recognized Australia-wide (the Esplin Report in Victoria, the Auditor General's Report in WA [October 2004], and most probably in the report of the Coronial Inquiry in the ACT, yet to be concluded). But even the most organized fire-fighting capability will be puny in the face of excessive fuel loads. Developing fire-fighting capability without proper management of our resources is not the answer.

It is clear that the government does not have the people on the ground to do the job. Only by decentralizing and using the experience, skills and knowledge of mountain cattlemen and landowners will ecological and fuel-management burning be established on a successful basis. The grazing or no-grazing decision should not be made in isolation from the overarching problems of management of national parks, and especially the management of fire.

Grazing and people

The basis for a decision is not science alone. There is no fundamental or self-evident reason why an activity must be banned from National Parks other than a majority opinion that it should be banned. In the end, environmental campaigns rest on the notion that another person's concept of outdoor enjoyment would interfere with the campaigners' idea of the correct outdoor experience. We note here that a study at Charles Sturt University of community attitudes to alpine grazing found that public opinion is far more interested in 'heritage' as defined by the activities of people than in the protection of plants.

The Federal Government supports both the continuation of grazing and the national heritage significance of the mountain cattlemen. Furthermore, the Federal Government is funding in a major

way, through the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, research on interactions between grazing and fire in the High Country of Victoria. Both of these issues were clearly defined by the Federal Government before the recent election.

Thus in terms both of protecting and managing our alpine areas, and of continuing the proud heritage of the mountain cattlemen that has become so much a symbol of the Australian spirit, cattle grazing in the High Country of Victoria should continue on a restricted, planned and managed basis.

The way in which this can happen in a planned and scientific way is presented in the Alpine Grazing Management Plan of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV).

The Alpine Grazing Management Plan

The Alpine Grazing Management Plan of the MCAV sets out a collaborative and consultative approach to grazing, retaining the present seven-year licence terms. Some of the key points are:

- Parks Victoria and MCAV will form a Joint Management Committee, thereby ending a situation that is increasingly adversarial;
- The first 7 years will be used as an objective assessment of the effects of cattle grazing, using the experience of cattlemen as well as scientific data. Research by the Bushfire CRC, funded by the Federal Government, will provide major inputs to this assessment (for example, there is at present no unequivocal resolution to the 'grazing reduces blazing' argument);
- Cattlemen will play a major role in land management – weed control, control of feral animals, monitoring of activities;
- Cattlemen will be involved in controlled fires aimed at fuel reduction, and in management and suppression of wildfires;
- Cattlemen will be involved in quantitative assessment of herbage mass, and in managing sustainable grazing through (for example) rotational, targeted and strategic grazing;
- Outputs from research and observation will be shared and openly reviewed, again putting an end to the sort of senseless, acrimonious and adversarial debate that so often surrounds environmental issues.

Conclusion

Cattle-grazing in the Alpine National Park now covers less than 15% of the area. Let us now stop quibbling and taking the high moral ground offered by this or that bit of science. The record stands for itself – the quality of the ecosystems of the High Country has not been destroyed by grazing over the past 150 years, and the cattlemen are hallowed within the image and folklore of Australia.

MCAV is a proud organization. Its members have managed much of the High Country in a sustainable way for generations with success – it would not be in their interests (nor in their philosophy) to do otherwise! MCAV has prepared a conservative and collaborative management plan, and its endorsement will be greeted with approval especially by country Victoria, now gradually recovering after years of hardship, drought and fire.

Peter Attiwill
23 November, 2004

Appendix 2 - A further note on science and alpine grazing

At first glance, there appears to be a wide range of scientific evidence stacked against alpine grazing.

Some of the scientific papers presented as submissions to the Alpine Grazing Taskforce have a long list of references. The list is less impressive when the repetitive nature of the work and the authors is taken into account.

In 2000, an independent panel established by the former Department of Natural Resources and Environment heard evidence from one of more prolific contributors to the scientific literature. The Panel found that it needed to take a “guarded” view of his evidence. The Panel put it this way.

"Though we have accepted various parts of Dr. Williams' evidence as is set out above and further we accept that Dr. Williams has impressive qualifications and has written widely in the field, nevertheless, the Panel does take a guarded view of his evidence bearing in mind his expressed opinion that the presence of domestic livestock is inconsistent with the basic objectives of national park management." (T.58). (Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Independent Panel on Alpine Grazing Licences, Mr Tony Graham QC, Chairman, Mr Neville Walsh, Mr Jim McColl, 2000.)

A submission opposing alpine grazing might appear impressive, but it needs to be considered whether it has been written specifically to undermine grazing in Alpine areas. The same arguments could be put against any land use in high altitude areas such as skiing, lodge construction, roads and walking tracks.

One submission, prepared by the Australian Academy of Science used a report on the condition of the high mountain catchments of New South Wales and Victoria that was prepared in 1957 and said that the “*issues, in terms of ecology ... have not changed*”. The fact is that a lot has changed since those days and we are not even looking at the high mountain catchments of NSW. There have been significant changes in management, stocking rates and areas grazed. Furthermore, there has been a recognition of the need for environmental sustainability and the Mountain Cattlemen’s Association of Victoria is now proposing a cattle management plan. It is a nonsense to rely on a report written almost 50 years ago and to suggest it covers conditions today.

The cattlemen think the views of some ecologists suffer from selective observation. You will always find an adverse impact if you look hard enough. An objective assessment would involve looking across the whole landscape, assessing damage and alteration and determining the cause. This assessment would include roads, tracks and carparks. The full picture is rarely discussed when issues like the adverse impact of ski resorts has been resolved simply by removing these sites from the Park.

The alpine ecology is a fertile place for myths. The myth about mossbeds highlights the discrepancy between what is promoted as science, and what is actually happening on the ground.

Opponents to alpine grazing have launched a classic tactic of the ecological lobby groups. They mythologise a facet of the natural environment and then characterise any recreation or commercial activity as trashing this newly elevated aspect. This has been a highly successful component in the forest debate which has mythologised old growth forests. This is spin and hype, not environmental science. In fact the mossbeds form an extremely small part of the Alpine area.

In any event the mossbeds are flourishing after 170 years of alpine grazing. Cattle do have an impact where they cross a stream or visit it to drink. But, if 170 years of grazing impacted so adversely on sphagnum mossbeds, surely they would not be as abundant, as they now are.

There are many mossbeds on private land, below the snowline, which are also flourishing and they are in paddocks grazed by cattle, for the whole year.

Alpine grazing opponents give the impression that there must be hundreds of acres of sphagnum mossbeds scattered across the high plains.

The Research Section of a Latrobe University publication (page 7, August 2004) reported that, "*The Alps are an important water catchment, providing up to eighty percent of stream flow in the Murray-Murrumbidgee catchment in drought years, and all this water passes through bogs.*" (Our emphasis)

Mossbeds are quite common across the high country both in the grazed high country and in the other 85% of the Alpine National Park that is not grazed by cattle. However they have always been found in small patches adding to much less than 1 % of the total area. Simple observation shows that much of the rain that falls in the high country enters streams without being filtered through a mossbed.



Picture John Duncan-Firth

Alpine grazing opponents seem to think that mossbeds have a some sort of pre-ordained role in filtering and steadily releasing water to sustain lowland catchments. First, mossbeds are just plants. They have no role pre-ordained by some superior being. Sphagnum mossbeds colonise around springs discharging water where the flow rate is no more than a trickle and are usually found within the first twenty to thirty metres

downstream of the spring. Once the flow rate increases in the little streams the sphagnum will not establish and is never found along the beds of bigger streams. This is a very important point as it means that the majority of rainfall that falls in the mountains is never going to be filtered through any sphagnum moss. This would have been the case prior to European settlement.

Following the 2003 Alpine National Park bushfires, the mossbeds in the ungrazed areas fared immensely worse than those where cattle had kept the surrounding vegetation trimmed short, thus offering the only form of protection available. Mossbeds in the ungrazed areas that were inevitably surrounded by a dry thatch of dead material ensured that the fire was lead right into the heart of the mossbeds.

This example of mythologising the mossbeds highlights the manner in which a thin veneer of observation is massaged to support a philosophical belief that is held with a significant degree of obsession.

The aftermath of the 2003 fires also illustrates that conventional Government sponsored science is not the sole source of reasonable analysis. The so-called Stretton Group of highly qualified scientists has come up with alternative analysis, causes, impacts and solutions. One side is not 100% correct and the other side not 100% wrong. There is legitimate dispute and an intelligent response is to resolve these differences. Our inability to do this probably stems from the now obsolete belief that science,

being objective, is always correct. These days, science is just another input, it is not the supreme authority.

Nevertheless, the case presented by the cattlemen has been supported by scientists including Professor Peter Attiwill. It is noticeable that the work done by Harm Van Rees, Roger Oxley and Alan Wilson is never quoted by the opponents to alpine grazing because it does not support their views.

In many respects, the ecology of the high country is too complex to be explained by narrowly defined observation. It takes generations of experience to understand the various interactions and whether movements and changes are long and short term.

To have a valid opinion of the ecology of the high plains really requires the combined minds of scientists and cattlemen. While there is disagreement between the two, the only obvious conclusion is uncertainty, and the only obvious recommendation is a combination of minds.

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
1 December, 2004

MCAV
7 December, 2004
9429 8455