

High Country cattlemen vow to fight on

High country

- ◆ Protests to continue
- ◆ Ban decision for political gain

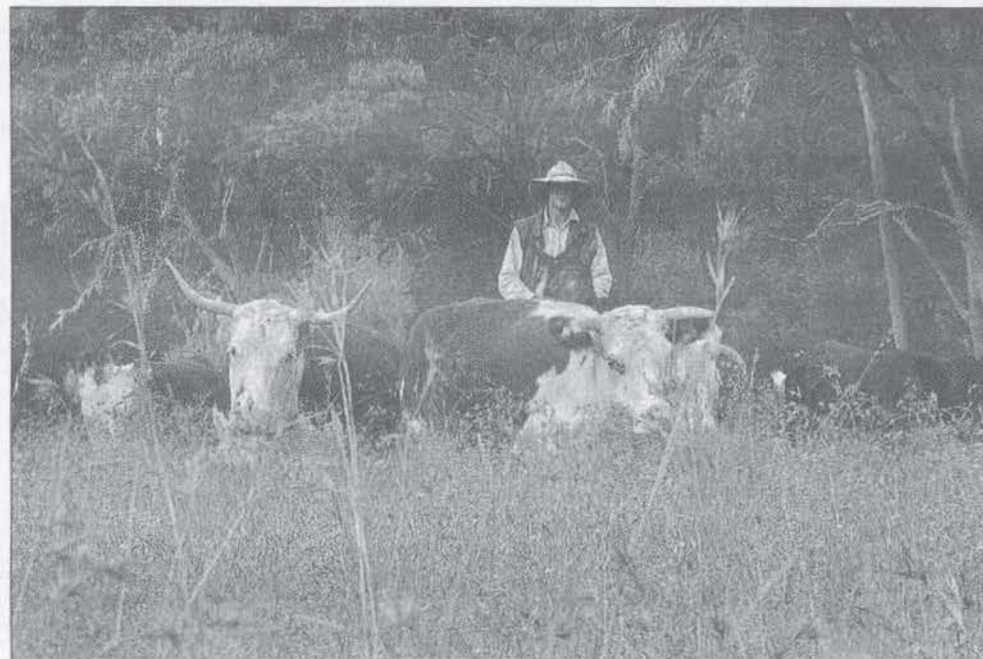
AFTER a long journey from different parts of the High Country, symbolic mobs of cattle joined up at Wonnangatta Station last January to protest the banning of grazing in the Alpine National Park and subsequent loss of the cattlemen's heritage and culture.

Wonnangatta Station was freehold until resumed by the Cain Labor Government in 1988, when grazing was banned.

Since then, the once open and trim natural flats have become choked with long grass and weeds and are a serious fire hazard. Wonnangatta Station has become a symbol of what was and now is for the mountain cattlemen.

Last year the State Government banned cattle from grazing within the Alpine National Park, in what many believe to be a cynical grab for green votes at the next State election to be held in November. There is genuine fear in the High Country that the banning of cattle from the Alpine Park and not allowing cattle back onto some state forest runs because of fire damage from two years ago is "the thin end of the wedge".

The cattlemen said they carried out the drive to protect their culture and skills and are likely to do the same every year until grazing is returned.



■ A stockman struggles to drive protest cattle through dense grasses on Wonnangatta Station last January.
Picture: ROLAND WEBB

They pointed out that all the higher sensitive grazing land was removed from grazing years ago, and agreed this was an appropriate action. But the high country pastures in question make up less than 15 per cent of the alpine park and this is mostly below the tree line.

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria president Doug Treasure said the

government had totally ignored the ramifications of removing grazing, with the environmental disaster in the Wonnangatta Valley as it is today the absolute proof.

"The government chose to listen to the conservation movement in 1988 and closed Wonnangatta. It listened to it again last year and closed the Alpine Park to grazing. Both decisions were wrong for the land and

were for pure political gain. The government's decision suits its political agenda because it's all about city votes," Mr Treasure said.

"I think these protest cattle drives and heritage rides will continue until we get our leases back. That is the best solution for the land and the only way we can keep up our skills and culture to pass on to our children."

Mr Treasure said Environment Minister Thwaites seemed to think that just because some cattlemen had accepted transitional assistance, they now agreed with the decision not to renew the grazing licences.

"He seems to think that cattlemen have just shrugged their shoulders and moved on. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mountain cattlemen are still livid."

Mr Treasure said the protest ride had drawn attention to the extent to which grass had become a fire hazard and how weeds were infesting the park.

"It is not the cattle that are causing damage; it's the lack of management that is causing the damage.

"Rather than fussing about the minor impact of cattle, the government should be devoting attention to the management of the park which, in the absence of cattle grazing, has just become very much harder."

The return of Alpine National Park licences, together with a proper management plan would, Mr Treasure said, be a good first step in improving the management of the park.