

The last breeding cows for the season are brought down from the mountains on a property near Falls Creek, Victoria.

High Country cattle homeland at risk

Australia's most romantic — and many say best — beef breeding area, the High Country of southern NSW and the Victorian Alps, is under threat by a planned massive national park extension. Sue Neales looks at the problems faced by the men who, even in other farmers' eyes, live out the "Man From Snowy River" legend.

The door could be slammed shut on an unforgettable piece of Australia's cattle history when the future of Victoria's Alpine region is decided next month.

At stake is the livelihood of 120 mountain families who have run cattle on the high country for more than 100 years.

Their futures are under threat from the Victorian Government and the conservation movement who plan to create a vast Alpine National Park stretching from Mansfield in the west

and Walhalla in the south to join up with Kosciusko National Park in the east.

This park, according to the latest recommendations of the Victorian Land Conservation Council, is designed to cater for a "broad spectrum of public recreation activities without prejudicing long term conservation and protection of the area's special natural features".

And unfortunately the district's unique breed of mountain men and the summer-grazing cattle don't qualify as

either "special natural features" or as a "desirable public activity".

If the conservation movement has its way there will be no cattlemen left in Australia's high country by 1991.

Already Crown Land stock grazing has been banned on the NSW side of the mountains and inside Kosciusko National Park.

And despite the fierce five-year battle fought by the Mountain District Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MDCAV), it looks like the State

overnment's June decision could follow the same path.

But all is not yet lost for this unique breed of cattlemen — men who epitomise the tough, independent, loner image of the early Australian pioneers. And when this image is combined with what city people see as a Banjo Patterson way of life — days spent on top of the mountains subduing wild horses to muster up mobs of equally tough and wild cattle — these mountain men acquire the aura of living legends.

The cattlemen are just discovering a previously untapped, and potentially powerful, source of enormous support — the romantic, Outback-adoring Great Australian Public.

A spate of films and telemovies like "The Man from Snowy River" and "High Country" is adding to the mountain cattlemen's romantic appeal. The subsequent groundswell of public backing this has brought for the cattlemen's cause is making them realise that the cine camera may be one of their most potent weapons.

A survey of 25,000 tourists to the Alpine area by the Victorian Sawmillers Association in 1977 confirmed this public support for the cattlemen.

A massive 77pc of tourists recommended that the level of grazing activity should remain the same while 73pc also said that grazing did not affect their enjoyment of the area. Only 11pc believed that cattle should be banned completely, while 13pc actually considered cattle grazing improved their enjoyment of the area.

But the mountain men also know that to win their case against the conservationists they will need more than just public support.

That is why the MDCAV has thrown its weight behind research looking at the ecology of the high country and the effect cattle have on plant growth.

"Certainly we are going along with the legendary image because that public support is too good to waste," says MDCAV president Jim Commins. "But we have always called for continued unbiased research and really it is these results which are going to carry most weight with Government."

The conservationists want the cattlemen's licences to graze the high country revoked because of the damage they allege cattle cause to the natural ecology. They claim cattle erode the landscape, cause a drop in water quality, a loss of wildflowers and shrubs, and turn mossbeds and springs to bogs.

Australian Conservation Foundation chief Dr Geoff Mosley is quite open in his opposition to the cattlemen.

"We are not against grazing just because of its damaging effects on the

area's vegetation, but also because British breed cattle aesthetically just do not belong in an Australian National Park," Mosley says.

"We are looking to the future when this whole Alpine region might become a World Heritage Area — but at the moment the state of the vegetation and the presence of commercial activities like grazing and logging rule the area ineligible."

More than 20,000 cattle, mostly Hereford and Hereford-cross, graze 1.25 million hectares of high country runs over summer and autumn. The cows, usually with three-month-old calves at foot, are taken up in November and mustered again in late March so the calves can be sold at the famed Mountain Calf weaner sales.

The use of the mountain runs is essential to the survival of these Victorian High Country families. Most also own properties in the district's valleys but rely on the spring and summer pastures of the mountain runs to stretch their home property feed through the winter when the severe cold prevents all new pasture growth.

The High Country leases are not just important to the 120 families directly involved. The entire district's economy revolves around the grazing and logging industries. Towns like Omeo, Benambra, Ensay and Gelantipy rely on the big annual mountain calf and cattle sales for their peak income flow.

But the cattlemen are not solely protesting about the economic impact the loss of the runs would cause.

They also believe it is unnecessary ecologically and claim that in many ways the cattle actually benefit the area.

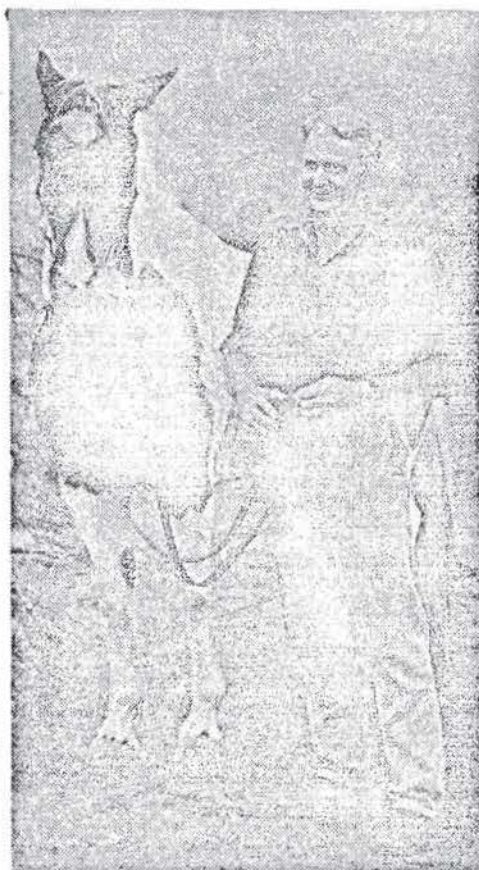
Originally their assertions were based purely on their 50-year experiences as practising high country cattlemen. But in the last year research by the University of Melbourne's agricultural faculty has started to back up their claims.

The findings of a three-year study by post-graduate student Harm Van Rees looking at the behaviour and grazing patterns of High Plains cattle has challenged some of conservationist's cattle-damage claims.

And it has provided some scientific suggestions on ways the cattle could have an even smaller impact on the mountain ecology.

Van Rees' research found that:

- grazing cattle generally avoided mossbeds as a feed source but often entered them for water supplies,
- the cattle prefer grassland and open heathland to scrub, bush or wetter plant environments,
- during most of the grazing season the cattle's diet was mainly snowgrass,



Mountain District Cattlemen's Association of Victoria president, Jim Commins.

alpine star bush and silver snow daisy plants which are common and unlikely to be overgrazed, and

- the grassland community of the High Plains appears to be in a stable condition.

However, Van Rees' research did conclude that "there can be little doubt that some areas of the High Plains are over-utilised by cattle".

Based on his findings Van Rees recommends:

- the building of small watering ponds below mossbeds to further ensure that cattle have no need to enter mossbed areas,
- the use of salt to entice cattle away from the few over-grazed areas,
- the placing of salt in permanent feeders to control stock movements, and
- the moving of stock down from the high country a month earlier (early March) because the fall in pasture digestibility and protein content encourages heavier grazing.

Van Rees' work surprised many committed conservationists and long-term High Country observers. But the cattlemen claim that everything about diet and behaviour of mountain run cattle is consistent with their observations and claims over the last 60 years.

"The conservationists' misplaced arguments are being considerably

weakened and their claims of cattle damage becoming less credible as more research is finished," says MDCAV president Commins. "But the big worry now is that the complete results won't be available quick enough to change the Government's mind."

The cattlemen have a tough job in front of them convincing Victoria's Cain Labor Government. One of its 1982 election promises was a commitment to a 600,000 hectare Alpine National Park, while another guaranteed that commercial activities like grazing, logging and mining would be excluded from the park.

Final ministerial recommendations go to the Victorian Cabinet in June. These are likely to be either a straight out endorsement of the LCC investigation (virtually ruling out all grazing in the proposed National Park except in the most western Cobberas-Tingaringy area by 1991) or a slightly less rigid recommendation allowing some grazing under stricter controls.

The fight for access to the High Country has all the ingredients needed for a classic farmers vs "greenies" war.

But that is certainly not the way the cattlemen want the confrontation to develop.

They know that in terms of political clout they could not hope to beat the conservationists if a all-out battle developed similar to the Save the Franklin campaign.

"This is why we are keen to make the Government realise the benefits that grazing cattle give the district and get them to make a decision on that basis," says the MDCAV's Commins. "We don't want to appear to be fighting either against the conservationists or solely out of self-interest."

Commins claims the cattle and the cattlemen offer six big benefits to the High Country:

- most importantly, the fire risk in this mountainous, rough terrain would be enormous without cattle to keep the grass down and clean up some of the scrub,
- consumers are getting better, cheaper meat because of producers' access to the Crown Land grazing,
- in times of drought, the Government is never called on to give drought subsidies to mountain cattlemen — a saving of some \$1 million in 1982,
- the industry is important in supporting the small towns of this huge district,
- as a gene pool reserve, the 20,000 strong, resilient mountain cows are essential to the Victorian cattle industry, and
- The cattlemen's huts and their own knowledge of the land has been vital in saving many bushwalkers and skiers' lives.

BUREAUCRACY

How many licences needed?

Conservation issues apart, bureaucratic barriers have been making life difficult for the mountain cattlemen for many years.

To graze a high country run, cattlemen must first have a yearly renewable licence issued by the Victorian State Government.

One licence covers one run. And the right to apply for a particular run is usually based on historical family precedence, although it is possible to put in a tender for an already occupied run.

But the old rumor that you can't lose money on a high country run is now just a myth. The number of unclaimed runs in some of the less favorable country is evidence of this.

Charges for the right to graze this High Plains Crown land have climbed alarmingly in the past five years.

The Cain Labor Government says the most recent price jumps are in line with its policy of charging rentals which reflect the true value of the land.

But the local cattlemen are convinced there is a more sinister motive.

They are sure that the Government wants to be rid of them at all costs. And if public support prevents the National Park driving the cattlemen off the High Country then they believe, the Government plans to do it by the quieter, but just as deadly, method of

charging unreasonable and unaffordable mountain rents.

The truth behind this price squeeze is clouded by the huge number of State Government departments involved in the management of the High Plains.

Licences are issued by the Lands Department, the Forests Commission, National Parks, the State Electricity Commission and the Soil Conservation Authority.

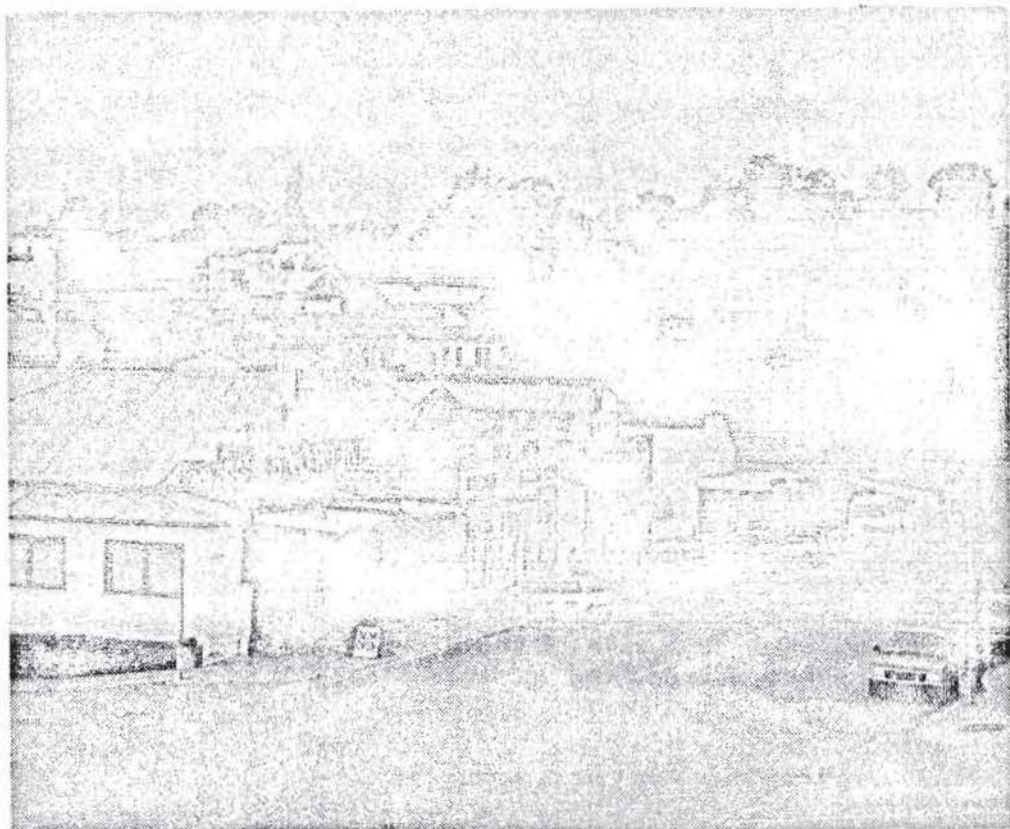
Each department has a different set of charges for the mountain runs — varying widely last season from \$1 a head to \$5 a head.

And these charges have jumped dramatically. In 1981 the Lands Department had a rental of \$1.25 a head — last year it had tripled to \$3.75 a head.

"These charges mightn't sound much by themselves, but you have got to remember that it costs a lot to get the cattle up to the runs, to keep them there, to muster them and to bring them back to the sales," says Mountain Cattlemen's Association president Jim Commins.

"I know a lot of cattlemen who wouldn't touch mountain grazing because of the hidden costs involved."

Commins' association has had some success in holding fees down to a 10pc rise this year after lengthy discussions



Omeo, in the foothills of the Victorian Alps, one of the many small towns which depend on High Country cattle for their existence.

ch State Lands Minister MacKenzie. But further rises are imminent pending the Government's decision on the whole High Plains question.

The matter of mountain run charges is also complicated by the influence of two different Government Ministers on the issue.

While mainly the domain of the Minister of Lands and Conservation, Rod MacKenzie, the debate over the mountain area has also involved Planning and Environment Minister, Evan Walker.

This confused bureaucratic tangle of government and State department responsibilities has reached the stage where no one can accurately discover how many licences were actually issued, the numbers of cattle permitted, the likely revenue and the area of grazing land approved.

However some bureaucratic improvements are in sight. Management of the High Country has now been rationalised under the one (new) government portfolio of Conservation, Forests and Lands headed by MacKenzie.

This department will be responsible for the setting of all grazing charges based on a land capacity formula. Statistics relating to high country grazing will now be easier to collect.

A spokesman for MacKenzie said the new formula and next year's charges would not be determined until the future of grazing in the High Plains was clear.

The charges would be similar to the rates cattlemen paid for private agistment land at similar stocking rates, provided these fees didn't prove exorbitant.

"The one consideration which would over-ride this Government principle is if the new rates really meant that the leaseholders couldn't survive," MacKenzie's spokesman said.

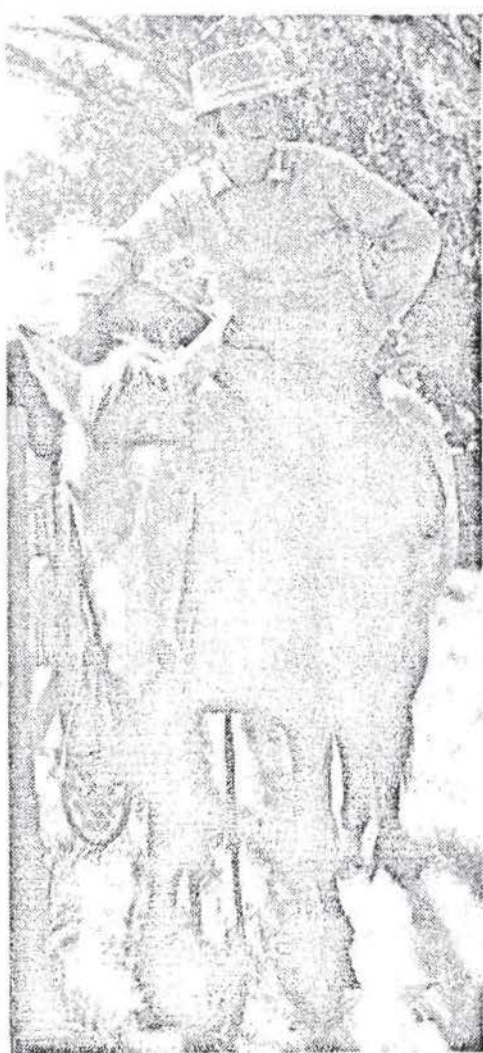
PEOPLE

High Plains offers few rewards

Running mountain cattle is a way of life for the Faithfull family. For more than 60 years the Faithfulls have held mountain run licences and agreements on the High Country plateau.

Their four current runs stretch from Mt Gopie, Pretty Valley and Wallace's Hut down along the Cobungra River towards Omeo — an area of some 10,000 hectares.

Cattlemen Richard and Peter Faith-



High Country cattleman Richard Faithfull: there should be enough room for everyone.

full are by no means the first of the family to use and love the High Country. Their father, uncles and grandfather before them all ran mountain cattle on the Tops, making the family name as synonymous with mountain grazing as are the Treasures, Fitzgeralds, Lovicks, Kellys, Westons and Blair men.

But the future of Richard and Peter's cattle enterprise is now under threat. Two of their top mountain runs fall within the proposed National Park in areas where grazing may be banned.

Without these summer grazing licences the Faithfull brothers claim it would be impossible to continue cattle production on the same scale at their Anglers Rest home farm, 40 km from Omeo.

Yet despite the big size of their runs, the Faithfulls are not talking about huge mobs of cattle. On their two top runs, each around 3000 ha, only 350 breeding cows are allowed. For this right the Faithfulls pay the State Government \$3.75 a head, a threefold increase on the grazing charges of 1981.

Allowing for some replacement heifers, the Faithfulls regularly sell 200

THE HIGH PLAINS

weaners at the Omeo mountain calf sales in March — cattle that are eagerly bid for because of their ability to thrive on lowland fattening country.

The loss of the runs would be devastating to Peter and Richard. They estimate that their breeding cow herd would have to be cut from 350 to 50 head without the high country summer feed to rely on.

This massive drop is borne out by the Mountain Cattlemen's Association figures which claim the district herd size and sale numbers would fall by more than 50pc without the mountain runs.

The loss of the Faithfull's licences would mean much more to Peter and Richard than just pure economics.

They love the High Country with its open snowgrass plains, thick undisturbed bush, sweeping views and independent way of life. Long nights in the cattlemen's huts, the annual calf muster, the final cow round-up and the district weaner sales are all as important to the Faithfulls as cold money in the pocket.

And its on this score — their love of the High Country — that Peter and Richard admit to feeling bitter when looking to the future.

"The cattlemen have always been careful about managing the mountain runs," says Peter. "And there's no doubt that the cattle themselves do more good than harm. Without the stock there would be a huge fire-hazard, and you have only got to look at the wildflowers this year to discount the greenies' claims."

There seems to be little love lost these days between the "greenies" and the cattlemen. Yet Richard says its not long since the cattlemen and bushwalkers had a good rapport — something the current fight has certainly destroyed.

"It's a crazy situation really," says Richard. "Here we are being accused of ruining the High Country, while all changes for the worst that we've seen in the last 20 years have come with the greenies and the bushwalkers dumping their rubbish, digging holes, leaving fires burning, and over-using tracks."

But the cattlemen are quite prepared to share their High Country with anyone who can appreciate its unique beauty.

"And that's just the point — there should be enough room for everyone up here," says Peter. "But until the government and conservation groups realise our equal rights we're all determined to keep on fighting."