

Cattle men fight for forest grazing rights



STOCKMEN find no sign of cattle after five hours of searching the forest

CAROLINE FORD reports on the threat to cattle agisted in the Barmah Forest because of conservationists' claims that the ecology is being damaged. Pictures by ANDREW De La RUE

THE spectacular Barmah Forest cattle muster - a tradition which goes back to the 1840s - could come to an end if conservationists get their way.

The Victorian Bird Observers Club claims grazing cattle have a detrimental effect on the delicate ecology of the forest, and that some bird species will have their numbers seriously depleted and may face extinction.

The scenic 28,500ha Barmah Forest, known as "the jewel of the Murray", is on the Murray River in Victoria on the NSW border. It has one of Australia's largest pure stands of river red gum (24,800-ha), more than 200 species of birds, and up to 22 types of mammals.

The forest is controlled and managed by the Victorian Forests Commission to maintain it as a complete ecological entity.

A report issued by the commission says grazing provides a minor but significant contribution to beef production in the region. It also reduces the fire hazard in the dense forest, and contributes to healthy regeneration.

But, the report says, cattle do upset the bird life and the land. And this is what has raised the long arm of the conservationists.

The forest and surrounding region came under review by the Land Conservation Council about 18 months ago, and the long-awaited report by agisting local farmers is due to be published next month, when further proposals will be accepted.

One of the proposals submitted to the council by the bird observers' club was that grazing should be zoned.

The submission said: "Grazing of stock is having a



SUCCESS at last, and the cattle are rounded up and herded across the Barmah lakes

damaging effect in many of the wetlands... Stock limit the regeneration of trees and shrubs, eat emergent vegetation in the shallows by trampling and pugging of the surface.

"...when some of the shallower wetlands are dry, stock are allowed to graze the lake bed. When the lake fills, there is no vegetation to provide food for insect life while the aquatic vegetation is re-establishing, and so the whole biological balance of the lake is disturbed."

The submission said grazing cattle ate grasses and seedlings around permanent water, and this deprived waterbirds of food and shelter. In addition, the cattle contributed to the rapid erosion of the river banks, where they trampled native vegetation.

Trampling by cattle could result in discomfort to forest users, a delayed access, and often considerable expense in restoration and maintenance of roads and earthworks.

Also, congregating cattle reduced soil aeration, conse-

quently slowing tree growth. But cattle on the shoreline had opened up sections of dense reedbeds, which increased habitat diversity and access for waterbirds.

According to a local farmer and leader of this week's muster, Mr Rod Power, one of the proposals submitted to the Land Conservation Council review was to exclude cattle from about a quarter of the forest which was mainly swamp land.

At the muster this week, there was general consternation among the 30 agisters.

Finding cattle in the Barmah Forest is like trying to find a set of car keys in Melbourne's Yarra River. The musterers rode on horseback through the dense forest searching for about 400 "cunning as meat-axes" Hereford, Angus and Friesian cattle.

This Man-from-Snowy-River stuff is not just in Michael Edgley movies. The

"will get so rough that nobody will be able to use it."

The cattle did a bit of damage, but they did a lot of good, too. When many of the birds were mating in the swamp land, it was winter and very wet, and the cattle could not get through.

The commission had experimented with small fenced-off plots as cattle-free havens for nesting birds, but so much rubbish grew inside it had to abandon them.

Apart from pressure by environmentalists, the agisters are plagued by losing stock in the vast forest (up to 25 per cent each year), shooters killing their stock (25 last year), and rising agistment fees.

Mr Power said only residents of Nathalia Shire were allowed to agist cattle in the forest, and fewer and fewer were.

The number of cattle agisted in the forest had dropped drastically in the past few years. The drought had caused at least 50 per cent of the shire's beef numbers to drop, and it would take several years to get them back.

'Dogs barking, shouts, an occasional cooee'

He said when mustering the farmers got at least half of the cattle from that region, which was rich in feed value - "the prime area for grazing".

Another aspect the council was taking into account was a claim by Aborigines of sacred sites in the forest.

only noise invading the welcome pollution-free silence was the enthusiastic barking of cattle dogs, instructions shouted by riders, crashing bush as horses pursued small herds of stock, and, of course, the occasional 'cooee'.

Mr Power said regulations and conditions in the forest