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Battle on Victoria's high plains

By John Lahey

THE NIGHT is cold outside. Snow has begun to fall on the mountain tops, an hour's drive away. The fall is not heavy. But the topic animates the bar of the Golden Age Hotel in Omeo because everyone has been waiting for snow.

Decent, weathered men drink in front of a blazing fire. This is how all pubs should be, full of warmth and friendship. When two of the Connley brothers of Benambra walk in, the thought springs to mind that they could be nothing else but mountain cattlemen, dressed as they are in twisted, broad-brim hats and loose, warm coats. They look touchingly Australian. They also look like a couple of desperadoes. It would be fun to set them down in some trendy Melbourne bar. These two would amaze the greenies. What dashing men they are.

The Connleys can pull up a horse from a full gallop to a dead stop, or just about turn him on a dinner plate. They can tell north or south from looking at a tree, they can guide a horse with their left hand and snatch up an errant calf with the other. Ken Connley, 38, says they can tell the weather six months in advance by looking at the bush and at water.

But then, every mountain cattleman can do these things, or others. They are all great bushmen, specialists at both farming and surviving.

Anyway, it is a pity the greenies are not about at Omeo this night, because Graham Connley, 46, and Ken would like a good argument with them. They have never had one. The greenies, to them, are a mysterious, conniving, ill-informed and dangerous lot who are on the brink of obliterating the mountain way of life.

It is the greenies' influence that all mountain people see behind the State Government's plan to create a continuous national park in the alps stretching from Mansfield to the Upper Murray. Cattle would go, logging would go, everything would go.

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The mountain cattlemen — 120 families — who have been celebrated in poem and film and loved by all in the way we love Phar Lap, "The Loaded Dog" and Peter Lalor — are the most perplexed and frustrated of any of the people who will be affected. All of a sudden they are cast as the baddies.

Despite the vast areas that separate them, they are a close-knit group, but they lack the techniques to put their views to people in the city, where opinions matter.

THE GREENIES argue that cattle erode the alpine soil, damage the vegetation and endanger water catchments. To which the cattlemen say the opposite. This is a bit like the argument over uranium mining. One side says something is black, the other says it is white and each can flourish evidence.

Ken Connley says: "If cattle were going to bugger up the high country, they would have done it 150 years ago." It is almost 150 years, in fact, since the first cattlemen went to the Victorian alps, about the same time as Batman and Fawcner came to Melbourne. And in all that time, they have been following the same yearly cycle.

Every year, beginning about the middle of December, the cattlemen shift their Herefords from the paddocks on

the lower land to the pastures on the mountains and leave them there to graze through summer. About 20,000 go up each year in a droving exercise that has enchanted generations of city people, who can merely read about such romance and adventure.

Depending on where the cattlemen have their leases — near Mansfield, across the Dargo High Plains, across the Bogong High Plains and up to the headwaters of the Murray — each Hereford occupies an average of 90 hectares.

Jim Kelly, who comes from around Omeo, says the cattle know when it is time to move up. "As soon as things get dry down here they know that the area is green on the mountains," he says. "We've had our cattle just bugger off sometimes, and they don't stop. They go up the mountain to a place they know."

Ken Connley agrees: "In summer you get a couple of hot days and they know. They start walking the fences and breaking them down. They want to get back to the mountain."

Graeme Stoney, of Mansfield, says that this is not surprising; the cattle are obeying a habit bred into them over many generations. Sometimes their first trip to the mountain is in their mother's womb. They are born there.

And there they are left all summer, largely undisturbed. The cattlemen go up occasionally to leave piles of coarse salt lying around. Some use the salt as a form of management to keep the cattle within certain areas and some use it to entice them in when it is time to come down.

This happens about mid-April, and many are the tales of daring if snow is falling. Graeme Stoney remembers losing 30 head one night in the snow. Ken Connley speaks about icicles on his dogs. "They go 15 or 20 yards through a creek and the water turns to ice." Icicles hang from the cattle's horns.

John Hicks, 28, of Glen Creek, says: "You are riding down the spur some days and can't feel your hands and feet."

The cattle are sometimes spread over large areas, almost undetectable in the gullies and bush. It can take days and days to round them all up. But many men know their Herefords' habits and favorite spots, and they look here first, helped by dogs for which they would not accept thousands of dollars. They are special dogs — mountain dogs — bred for this task over many generations, like the cattle.

IT WAS THE gold prospectors and then the cattlemen who cut the first tracks through the alps and opened them up for everyone who followed: hydro-electricity workers, skiers, bushwalkers, motorcyclists, four-wheel drivers and two-day trippers.

Painstakingly, men carted lumps of galvanised iron up the mountains over the years, generally by pack horse, and built themselves huts, stocked with food and warmed by huge burning logs. The hut is the base camp in the muster. All the doors open inwards. That way, heavy snowfalls cannot trap the occupants.

Goodness knows how many grateful people have stumbled on these huts over the years and dragged themselves inside for warmth and shelter. Graeme Stoney's latest visitors' book, put there last February, contains 300 names. Not all are of people who were lost, but some

are, and they make compelling reading.

And goodness knows how many other lives the cattlemen have saved in other ways, by going into the bush for days on end to track down and rescue a missing hiker. Nobody else possesses the alpine bushman's skill. He moves in a different world, and this is one of his arguments against an alpine park denuded of his presence.

Another argument — visible for all to see — is the way the alps insulated cattle against the drought. "They came down from the mountain looking magnificent," says Jack Lovick, 66, who first sat a mountain horse when he was three.

Nobody disputes how well the cattle looked. They have been snapped up since then by graziers all over the State — and in South Australia and Queensland — to breed up new herds.

You hear the statement regularly among the mountain men: "We never accepted a cent of drought compensation." Kevin Kelly says: "If Kosciusko (National Park) had been open in the drought, it would have saved the country millions. Kosciusko broke a lot of old men's hearts."

Kosciusko appals the mountain men. Since it has been locked up as a national park, they say, it has been useless; it is also a huge fire trap because nothing eats the grass now.

Graeme Stoney describes Kosciusko National Park as a shambles, where noxious weeds and rotting material have built up to the stage where people cannot get in. "Not even horse riding," he says. "Imagine that! It would be illegal for the Man from Snowy River to ride in his own country now. It's bureaucracy run wild:

rangers everywhere, signs, brick dunnies, designated camping spots and so on. A wasted natural resource."

The word "conservation" puzzles every cattleman. He is the conservationist, he says, not the greenie, who is seen as a selfish extremist wanting to lock the high country up for his exclusive use.

Graeme Stoney says: "Damage and pollution? Show it to us if you can and we'll fix it. Let's face it, of course we'd fix it. Because we want our children and our children's children to enjoy this heritage."

Their children's children . . .

THE TREASURE family know what that means. They are almost a dynasty on the Dargo High Plains . . . into their sixth generation there now . . . There are grandparents, parents and children running cattle with 27 earmarks. When a child turns six or seven, his (or her) father gives him a beast. A grandfather might add one. By the time the child is in his teens, he has bred up his own herd.

Jim Treasure, one of the patriarchs, is very proud this year. He has won the Dalgety award for Victoria's best commercial beef herd.

He brings out a photo of the culling paddock on Dargo. "That piece of ground is trampled on more than any other," he says, "and just look at it." It is a mass of wildflowers. The photo is the evidence of the mountain men's claim that cattle, by keeping the grass in check, actually encourage the flowers to grow.

Some conservation experts who have inspected the high country get short

shrif from the cattlemen. They seem uncertain whether to laugh or cry about the scientist who pointed to damaged grass and said: "See what the cattle do!" They say they told him he was in a parking area; the damage was done by tyres.

Jack Lovick, who takes 1600 people a year on riding trips in the alps, says he saw two visitors looking at bare ground once. One said: "Isn't it awful! Look what logging has done." The other replied: "It might be cattle." Jack Lovick told them they were looking at an area of shallow soil on rock. Trees didn't grow there; only kangaroo grass.

There is not a cattleman who says he disapproves of national parks, but they all want areas set aside as well for multiple use.

It must have been a magnificent site in the old days on Bogong, the ones remembered by Don Kneebone, 61, of Bobinawarra, near Porepunkah. He remembers mobs of up to 5000 cattle mustered into a valley. Then every man on the muster would ride the circuit of the mob and shake hands with every other man.

"The handshake was a matter of great trust," says Mr Kneebone. "If a man rode out of the valley with someone else's strays by mistake, the handshake meant that the owner would get them back, no matter what distance had to be travelled or how long it took. You'll notice that we shake hands a lot. If I haven't seen a fella for a week, I'll shake hands with him. It is a sign of honesty."

THE DIRECTOR of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Dr Geoff Mosley,

says cattle do damage the natural alpine vegetation and therefore the environment and all the values that come from it. But in addition, he says, the cattle's presence is an intrusion; cattle are not part of the natural scene.

This is one intrusion. Another is that they make such places as camping areas less enjoyable. "Nobody wants to take a drink in a stream and find cow shit," Dr Mosley said.

"One can see the area becoming part of a national park in three States," he says. "The Victorian park will join Kosciusko, and at the other side, in the Australian Capital Territory, a park will join the northern part of Kosciusko on the Cotter River. It will be 500 kilometres long."

Dr Mosley said he sympathised with the 16 municipalities which this week asked the Victorian Government to delay proclaiming the national park because it would cause unemployment. "But as the work ethic is reduced and leisure takes up more of our time, the need will be for people to go into service industries such as holidays, restaurants, guided tours and accommodation," he says.

"There will be scope for the sons and daughters of the cattlemen in this kind of enterprise related to the high country. It is not a question of their being pushed out."

Dr Mosley says the cattlemen's claim that their production would fall by an average of 40 per cent without access to the high country was incredible. "It is completely exaggerated, they are having delusions of grandeur," he says.

