The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
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January 2008

Alpine Grazing Heritage Trail - Bogong High Plains

Wallace's Hut built in 1889

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G'day. Welcome to the Alpine Grazing Heritage Trail. This guide will help you see the Bogong High Plains through the eyes of the mountain cattlemen.

Other supporting documents about the 2005 campaign, science and a description of the huts on the tour can be downloaded from our website www.mcav.com.au.

We want you to see for yourself and make up your own mind. See the evidence on the ground and make up your own mind about whether cattle have caused any damage to the alpine area.

This tour of the Bogong High Plains can be completed in a day.

It is a self guided tour map of the iconic locations of alpine grazing on the Bogong High Plains. Please refer to the map on the last page.

The guide is for vehicle-based touring but can include some short walks or mountain bike rides.

This guide will introduce you to:-

- History, heritage and the environment
- Mountain cattlemen's huts
- Areas that have been grazed recently, compared with areas where grazing was phased out 15 years ago.
- The examples of "fragile plant communities", including mossbeds on land which has been grazed and ungrazed.

Fire on the High Plains

It is important to have some understanding about bushfires and what happened in January 2003. There is a short discussion at the end of this guide. We suggest you read this to have a better appreciation of the Bogong High Plains' environment.

The Tour

Start at Falls Creek and drive 5.2 kms to stop No. 1 at the turn off to Watchbed Creek

Turnoff to Watchbed Creek

The turn off to Watchbed Creek is of significance because it is up here that the licences were cancelled in 1991.

You can:

- Drive up the Watchbed Creek track for about a kilometre before you will be stopped by a gate. Park on the side of the road at the gate

or

- Park on the corner of the Watchbed Creek track and Bogong High Plains road and walk the kilometre up to the gate.

It would be handy to have a mountain bike here to ride out onto the northern Bogong High Plains.

Just before the gate you will pass hundreds of dead trees. These were killed in the 2003 fires. Some of them would be hundreds of years old. The trees will probably regenerate from the bolls under the ground but the burnt branches you can see will remain skeletons until they rot and fall away. With proper management including seasonal cattle grazing, the trees along this track would still be alive. There used to be fires in this area following lightning strikes but they would not have caused immense damage.

Walk past the gate and about 50 metres past the gate you will see the Watchbed creek down to the left. If you walk down there you will see where mossbeds have been totally destroyed. Jack Hicks and Harry Ryder say that the absence of cattle grazing allowed the fire to be carried deep into the mossbeds that once ran along the Watchbed Creek. You will be able to make out where the mossbeds existed prior to the fires.

Watchbed Creek were mossbeds were burnt out in 2003

Walk or ride a further 500 metres out onto the open plains. These have not been grazed since 1991. It has been claimed that grazing was removed because of so-called scientific evidence but this was never accepted by the cattlemen. On the CD, you will hear Jack Hicks and Harry Ryder talk about this area. It was burnt extensively in the 2003 fires. When this area was phased out of grazing, Jack expected that eventually a major fire would cause extensive damage just as it did in 2003. Harry Ryder also says the fire burnt more intensely in this area, where grazing had been removed, compared to the southern part of the plains which had been grazed up to the 2003 fires.

In the future, in the absence of any fires or grazing, the herbage will build up to the point that there will be another major damaging fire and this will most likely be caused by lightning. Once you get a big fuel load it will simply not be possible to extinguish naturally occurring fires.

Back in the car. Drive 1.4 km to stop No. 2 - Langfords Gap

It is worthwhile stopping at stop No. 2 - Langford Gap to gain a perspective of what damage has been caused to the Bogong High Plains. This stop highlights the man made disturbance to the Bogong High Plains.

Sign at Langfords Gap

From here you can see the quarry from which rock for the Rocky Valley Storage wall was taken.

- You can also see the aqueduct that runs around the back of the Plains which takes water off the Plain and into the Rocky Valley Storage. From time to time, any new growth of trees along the aqueduct is poisoned.
- You can also see the road upon which you have been travelling which is itself a form of man-made disturbance. There is an intention to bitumen this road and this will create more disturbance and faster flowing run-off.
- You will also have spent some time driving along the shore of the Rocky Valley Dam which would have drowned hectares of the Bogong High Plains environment.

In looking at any supposed damage caused by cattle you need to bear in mind the man-made alterations spread out before you.

Picture: Langford Gap. Note the extensive works to take water off the plains

and into the Rocky Valley Storage.

Picture: The quarry at Langfords Gap. Cattle grazing could not cause this amount of damage in 1000 years.

Picture: Poisoned tree growth along the aqueduct around the back of the Bogong High Plains and "out of sight".

Back in the car. Drive 3.4 km to stop No. 3 - The turn off to Wallace's Hut

From Stop number 3 there are three things to look at: A cattle exclusion plot, Wallace's Hut and mossbeds.

Cattle Exclusion Plot.

The cattle exclusion plot is on the right-hand side of the road, down a slope about 150 metres. It is worthwhile walking down here, observing the foliage as you do so and comparing this with foliage in the cattle exclusion plot.

The 2003 fire burnt right into the mossbeds and virtually destroyed them. You can readily see evidence of this today. The fire was able to burn right into this exclusion plot because of the higher fuel loads in the plot. Fire which burns down into mossbeds virtually sterilises the soil and will cause considerable erosion after rain.

Wallace's Hut and mossbeds

You should walk the 750 metres to view this hut which was built in 1889.

Turnoff to Wallace's Hut

Before you do so however there is another mossbed worth visiting. The directions to this mossbed are:

- Stand at the corner of the Bogong High Plains Road and the Wallace's Hut track and face the track to Wallace's Hut.
- Turn to an angle of 45 degrees to the left of the track.
- Walk about 75 metres to the mossbed.

This mossbed has been growing here, probably for centuries. There are some impacts on the mossbed but it is quite easy to see that it remains in a healthy condition despite the extensive grazing in the area for 170 years,

Mossbeds near the Wallace's Hut turnoff

During discussions with the Government about alpine grazing, this mossbed was often visited and used as an example to warrant the removal of alpine grazing. It is typical of the mossbeds on the Bogong High Plains.

Harry Ryder also notes that very few mossbeds in the grazed area of the Bogong High Plains were extensively burnt or damaged in the 2003 fires. On the other hand, in the area over by Watchbed Creek, which has not been grazed for 15 years, there was extensive fire damage and in some cases mossbeds were totally destroyed.

Harry Ryder argues that although the moss beds in grazed areas may have had some minor disturbance where cattle went to the edge for a drink, this minor impact has proven to be far more preferable than the complete loss of the mossbeds that occurred in the Watchbed Creek and Marum Point area.

The mysticism about mossbeds

Read in the "additional material" below about the mysticism of the mossbeds. This issue is fundamental to the alpine grazing issue.

Wallace's Hut

The cattlemen's huts were important for the cattlemen to shelter on the High Plains but they have also been critical in saving lives of people up to the current day, who have been caught out on the plains in bad weather.

During the 2003 fires there was some likelihood that Wallace's Hut and other cattlemens' huts would be burnt. Cattlemen, CFA volunteers and locals from Falls Creek came out on to the Plains with specific intention of securing their huts and Wallace's Hut from fire.

Wallace's Hut is the oldest hut on the Bogong High Plains and the Wallaces were amongst the first cattlemen on the plains. It is the best-known and most iconic of all the mountain cattlemens huts.

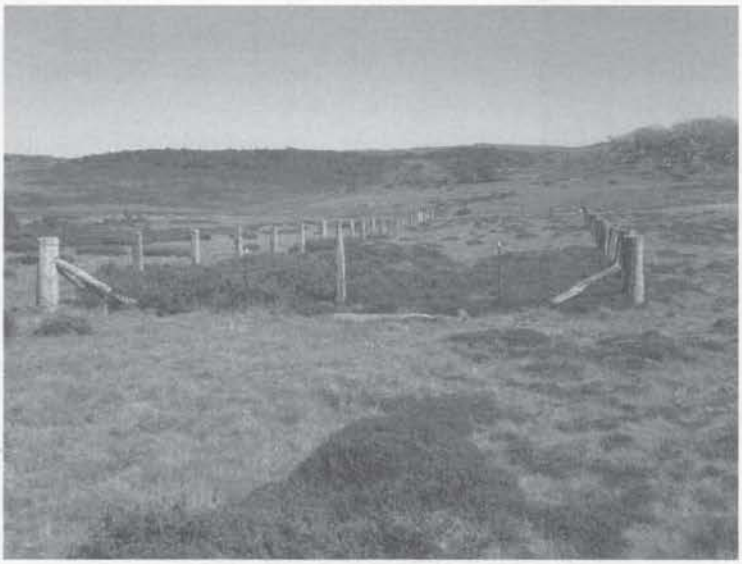
Take a picnic down to the hut and let the spirit of the hut wash over you.

Back in the car. Drive 1.6 km to stop No. 4 - Maisie Fawcett's Pretty Valley exclusion plots.

Maisie Fawcett's Pretty Valley plots are about 100 metres to the right-hand side of the road. If you get to the turn off to Cope Hut you will have gone too far. From the Cope Hut track corner, they are 300 metres back up the road. You can just make out the fence from the Cope Hut corner.

Walk over to Maisie Fawcett's plots. On the fenced area there is a sign that reads "*These plots were established in 1947 by Miss Maisie Fawcett and Professor Turner from Melbourne University's botany school to monitor long-term trends in the vegetation. Please walk outside the plots as trampling damages the vegetation.*" These plots have been important in the debate about the impact of alpine grazing but we suggest you compare the vegetation in each of these plots and see if you can see much difference in the vegetation. Remember that cattle have been excluded from the fenced area but obviously not from the unfenced area.

A problem with these plots is that hares could still get into the plots and graze on their preferred herbage.



Maisie Fawcett's Pretty Valley exclusion plots.

Also, no fire has entered this plot since cattle have been excluded. Prior to the plot's construction, and even before cattle grazing, the area would have been lightly burnt by aborigines and from lightening strikes. During the period of cattle grazing the area would also have been lightly burnt by cattlemen at the end of the season. So, fire has had an important impact on the flora but since the exclusion of cattle, fire has not occurred in this test site.

Jack notes that the flora in the enclosed plot would remain all summer. The floral display would last longer in the enclosed plot. The enclosed plot always looked different but whether this was good or bad was open to conjecture. In Jack's opinion this was not good because it became choked up and the dominant species took over. Out on the open plains, everything had an equal chance to flower and drop a seed. Nothing was choked out. Outside the enclosed plot has a better appearance. Jack used to come here every week and each time, on the open plain some new plant was having its turn to flower. Inside the plot was becoming dominated by relatively few species.

In the 2003 fires, the plot itself would have burnt but Jack and Harry say it was saved by the grazing of cattle in the surrounding area that had trimmed the grass and removed fire fuel. Interestingly therefore, the existence of cattle saved the experimental plot which was, partly, instrumental in having cattle grazing removed.

The 2003 fires uncovered extensive evidence of aboriginal fires on the high plains. We know the fires across the plains were lit by lightening, aboriginals and by early cattlemen. It would seem most unlikely that any area would have escaped light burning for a period of 60 years. This means a major impact on flora has not been taken into account in this experiment.

The area has also been extensively trampled by visitors. Please be careful not to do the same.

Back in the car. Drive 0.3 kms to stop No. 5 - Turn off to Cope Hut

The next stop is the turn off to Cope Hut which is 400 metres along this track. Cope hut is not really part of this tour but many visitors to the Bogong High Plains walk out to this hut.

Turnoff to Cope Hut

Back in the car. Drive 2.1 km to stop No. 6 - Mt Cope track car park

The next stop is the Mt Cope track car park. We suggest you stop here and walk up the track to the peak of Mt Cope. From here you will get an excellent view across the Bogong High Plains. You will see from here that the Plains are in excellent condition and show no adverse impacts of 170 years of seasonal cattle grazing. Down to the west you will see Ryder's huts.

Back in the Car. Drive 5.5 km to stop No, 7 - Site of Faithfull's Yards

On the way to the site of Faithfull's yards you will cross the aqueduct, and pass the Raspberry Hill carpark.

Last stop is at the site of Faithfull's yards (which were removed in January 2008) on an area marked on the map as Buckety Plain. This is an important site. Walk past the yards and down into the valley (about 200 metres) and you will see a mossbed that has been subject to relatively intense cattle activity over the last 170 years. You will see that it is in excellent condition.

Picture: The group who prepared this Guide at Buckety Plain. L to R. Simon Turner, Chris Commins, Jim Brown, Annie Barker, Jack Hicks and Harry Ryder.

This is the central point of the Faithful's cattle operation. This is a quiet and central spot and it is here they built the yards and their huts. The Faithfulls have been using this area for generations. There is also a holding paddock where they kept their cattle for periods of up to two weeks. This area would have to be one of the

most heavily grazed on the Bogong High Plains and it is worth walking across it to see for yourself the absence of any long-lasting impact. Importantly, there are healthy mossbeds in the lower levels of these paddocks.

What all this means

Essentially, this guide shows that the decision to ban cattle grazing from the Bogong High Plains was wrong. No damage has occurred and, without cattle, the area is in more danger from wildfire.

This guide focuses on the Bogong High Plains. More guides are now being prepared for Dargo High Plains and Omeo areas.

This is the end of the tour

Other additional information

Summary table of distances to travel from Falls Creek on the Bogong High Plains tour

This table of distances from Falls Creek will guide you to where to stop, and the distance between each of the recommended stops.

Falls Creek
5.2 kms
Watchbed Creek turnoff
1.4 kms
Langford Gap
3.4 kms
Wallace's Hut turnoff
1.6 kms
Maisie Fawcett's plots
0.3 kms
Cope Hut turnoff
2.1 kms
Mt Cope track carpark
5.5 kms
Faithfull's yards
17.8 kms
Intersection of Bogong High Plains road the Omeo Highway

Should you travel in the reverse direction and start at the Intersection of Bogong High Plains road the Omeo Highway the distances are:

Intersection of Bogong High Plains road the Omeo Highway
17.8 kms
Faithfull's yards
5.5 kms
Mt Cope track carpark
2.1 kms
Cope Hut turnoff
0.3 kms

Maisie Fawcett's plots
1.6 kms
Wallace's Hut turnoff
3.4 kms
Langford Gap
1.4 kms
Watchbed Creek turnoff
5.2 kms
Falls Creek

Further exploration by mountain bike

There are some good options for further exploration by mountain bike.

From Falls Creek, drive on the Pretty Vallay Road, past Mt McKay and towards Pretty Valley Pond.

- Before the Pretty Valley Pond, stop at the cattle yards near the corner of the Pretty Valley Road and Cope Saddle Track.
- You can ride out to the Tawonga Huts which were used by the Hicks family.

Alternatively or additionally you can ride south on the Cope Saddle Track to Ryder's Huts which you can see from the summit of Mt Cope.

Picture: The aqueduct track - flat and perfect for a bike ride.

Fundamentally about fire

It is important to have some understanding about bushfires and what happened in January 2003.

- There have been fires in the alpine area for centuries.
- They were lit by aborigines, lightning, and in the 1800's and early part of the 1900's lit by cattlemen as they left the plains in autumn.
- This all resulted in a mosaic of land burnt at different times.
- The mosaic meant that any fires, wild or lit by man, generally burnt out relatively quickly and did not become damaging holocausts.
- The grazing of cattle added to this mosaic of different levels of fuel for fires.
- The removal of grazing and man made fire from areas of the Plains resulted in a build up of fuel for fires.
- In 2003 the fires burnt fiercely in areas that had not been burnt by man made fire, or grazed for 15 or so years. In these areas, mossbeds were destroyed.

- In areas that were still grazed, the fire trickled around and generally did not cause extensive damage. You can still see the evidence of this.

During January 2003, the cattlemen were fire fighters and held various positions of command in their local brigades.

Some cattlemen were devastated emotionally and financially by the fires. This is especially distressing because cattlemen believe some of the fires could have been extinguished in the first few days. For those cattlemen in particular, it is now particularly galling to see the Government congratulate itself on rehabilitation efforts. The cattlemen say the fires should not have been allowed to develop to holocaust level in the first place.

There are several attitudes towards fire that need to be resolved within the community. The question has to be asked, What should be our attitude to fire?

- Should we seek to return to nature and let all fires burn? This would involve letting every fire burn and involve small burns that could, in effect, reduce the amount of fuel.
- Should we seek to replicate the regime of the indigenous populations that involved continual patch burning, probably for thousands of years? Those attracted to this notion should note that this was the regime replicated by cattlemen in the first 50 or so years of their cattle grazing.
- Should we continue the current regime of the Department of Sustainability and Environment attempting fuel reduction burns (which in recent years have been totally inadequate) and extinguishing fires that threaten assets? This regime might be acceptable, but would it continue to be so, in the absence of sufficient fuel reduction burning?

There are some who say, "*You could never have stopped a fire like that*" - referring to the worst blasts of fire on the "*blow-up*" days. Cattlemen think that if fuel reduction burning had been adequate, the fire attacked in the manner that has operated before, including the use of firebreaks, backburns and times of fire fighting, they would not have had to *face* such furious fire. Also, the fire would not have spotted so far and so frequently in front of itself.

The mysticism about mossbeds

There is a good degree of mysticism about mossbeds. We think the ecological lobby groups have made them the "old growth forests of the high plains." It is a classic ploy of the conservation campaigners to impart a quasi-spiritual aura over part of the natural environment and then characterise the opposing activity as trashing this newly venerated component. This has happened with mossbeds.

During our presentation of the Alpine Grazing Taskforce, we were asked about the "role" of mossbeds. We said that mossbeds have no preordained "role" - they are just plants. Interesting plants, but just plants.

Another example of this undue reverence is:

"Yet these unprepossessing ecosystems play a key role not only the health of the mountains but in the downstream health of our rivers.

Located at the very top of the catchments and headwaters of north-eastern Victoria's major rivers, healthy alpine mossbeds retain and slowly release water, reducing erosion, and naturally filtering water.

Of course all this is well known to the Minister (John Thwaites) and his Department, and it was the fragile state of these bio filters that led ultimately to the decision to remove cattle from the Alps.

Seeing a mossbed close hand on a beautiful day in the Alps is inspirational ...." (News from the Alps, Australian Alps National Parks, No. 32 Summer-autumn 2006)

While you are on the Plains look around at the amount of land covered by moss. You will see it is very little. Mossbeds just don't cover enough of the whole alpine area to have any real impact on the downstream health of rivers. We estimate the bulk of the water flows into downstream rivers without passing through a mossbed.

Mossbeds only grow where the slope is so shallow that water moves only slowly. Mossbeds do not grow in faster flowing water. Apart from mossbeds which have been burnt out, there is not one mossbed that has been seriously damaged by cattle.

We are constantly told that mossbeds slowly release water. Mossbeds are like a sponge, and once they are full, do not slow the flow of water. The excess water just runs over the top. Imagine a small glass full of water. It does not matter how much water is poured into the already full glass, it immediately flows away.

If mossbeds are so important, why was the Langford aqueduct built to collect water and allow it to flow quickly around to the Rocky Valley Storage.

And finally ... cattle grazing will return to the Alpine National Park.

We care for the high country and are proud that it is the most pristine environment in the whole of Victoria.. The only noticeable impacts are from water harvesting and storage, ski fields and roads.

We can and have responded to scientific work about cattle in the Alpine National Park. The work that argues against us is mean spirited, designed to support a philosophical objection to cattle grazing in a national park and narrowly focussed. When the science is viewed on the perspective of the whole landscape, it does support us.

We can't forget alpine grazing, we can't dismiss alpine grazing and we can't turn our back on alpine grazing. We care for the high country and we can't just switch off this commitment and emotion. The very existence of the high country always reminds us that our legendary forefathers are expecting us to return. The high country is ingrained into our souls. Every time we look over our shoulders, it is there beckoning for our return.

Alpine grazing is important to:

- Keep the country open.
- Reduce the fuel for fires.
- Keep a 170-year-old tradition alive.

We have strong support:

- We have strong support in the local country community.
- We have strong support in the urban communities.

The people who oppose us are clearly in the minority. We derive great strength from the breadth and depth of our support and feel that we would be betraying a trust if we gave up.

We are too proud of our heritage to let it slip through our fingers. Our supporters are urging us to continue the fight and they are committing themselves to assisting in the campaign.

The tradition of alpine grazing is bigger than us here today, it is bigger than our whole Association and it is certainly bigger than the current Victorian Government. Whether it is under this for future Governments, alpine grazing will return to the grassy meadows in the Alpine National Park as part of a sustainable management system.

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria has strongly and recently confirmed its policy for the return of cattle grazing to the Alpine National Park. We intend to do this with all the vigour and persistence of the conservation groups that won the round of 2005.

When we do go back, we will implement management plans, exclusion areas and conservation measures to ensure that there is no criticism of our activities.

There are cattle grazing in the State forest adjacent to the Alpine National Park. But this is not the iconic summer grazing of the alpine meadows.

We are confident that the pendulum will swing in our favour again as the community progressively realises that we can cherish the earth simultaneously with the sustainable and sensitive utilisation of its resources.

We gain immense resolve from the evidence around the world of domestic animals grazing public land and high country in particular. Supporters are providing us with evidence of cattle being returned to areas of public land around the world after various periods of exclusion.

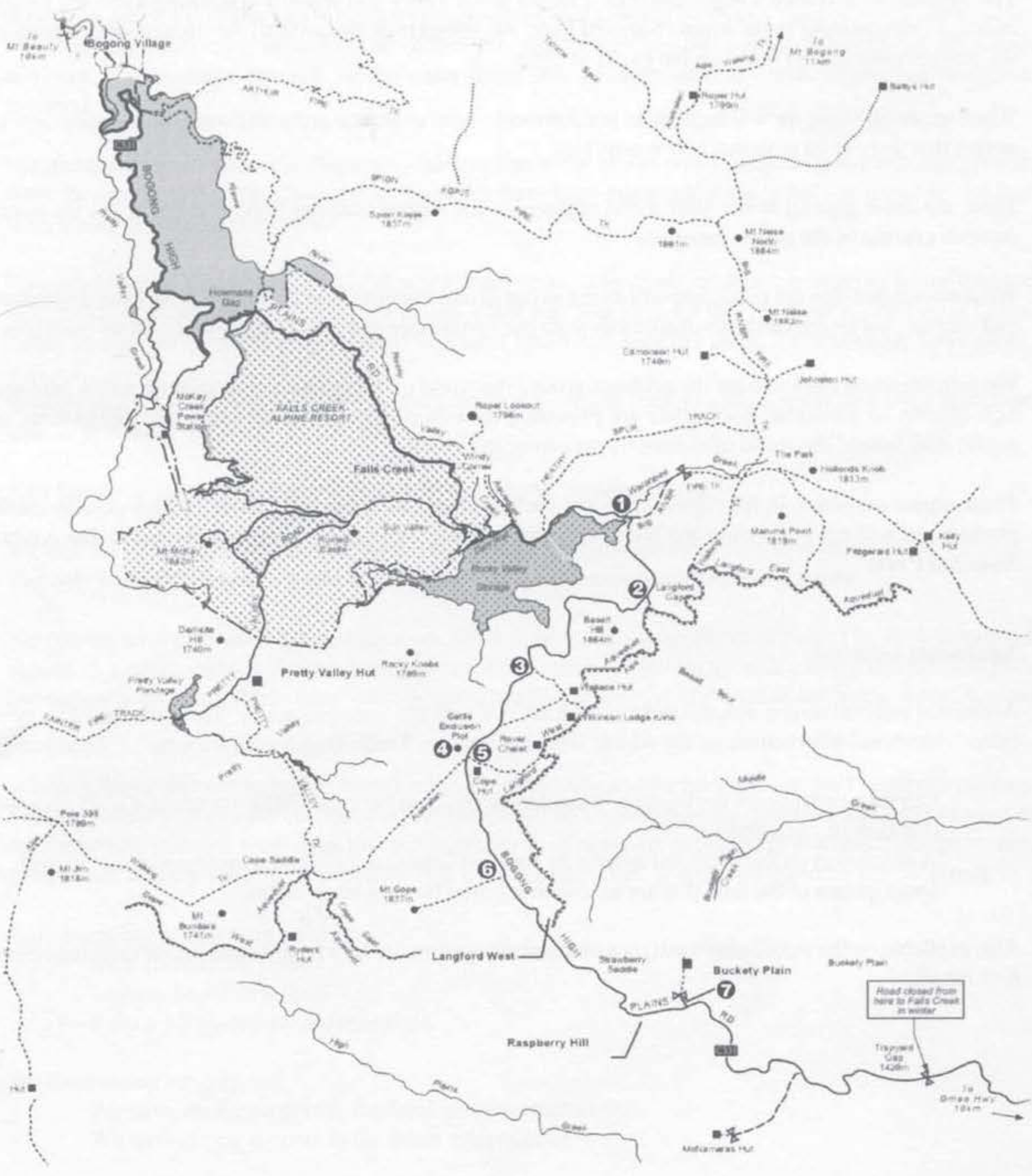
These alpine meadows in the Alpine National Park are the jewels and the genesis of high country cattle grazing and will always remain the home of alpine grazing. **Cattle grazing will return to the Alpine National Park.**

Additional material

Additional material can be downloaded from the MCAV web site (mcav.com.au). This includes a document titled "Additional information on the Alpine Grazing Heritage Trail - Bogong High Plains". This contains

- Our own paper about the licences in the Alpine National Park and the Government's 2005 decision that they be cancelled.
- A discussion on the botanical aspects by former Melbourne University Professor Peter Attiwill.
- Descriptions of the huts that are on this tour of the Bogong High Plains.

Also available on the website (as a pdf) is a discussion paper on fire by a forester and former chief fire officer Rod Incoll.


Bogong Village
FALLS CREEK ALPINE RESORT
Falls Creek
Pretty Valley Hut
Langford West
Buckety Plain
Raspberry Hill
Road closed from here to Falls Creek in winter
1
2
3
4
5
6
7