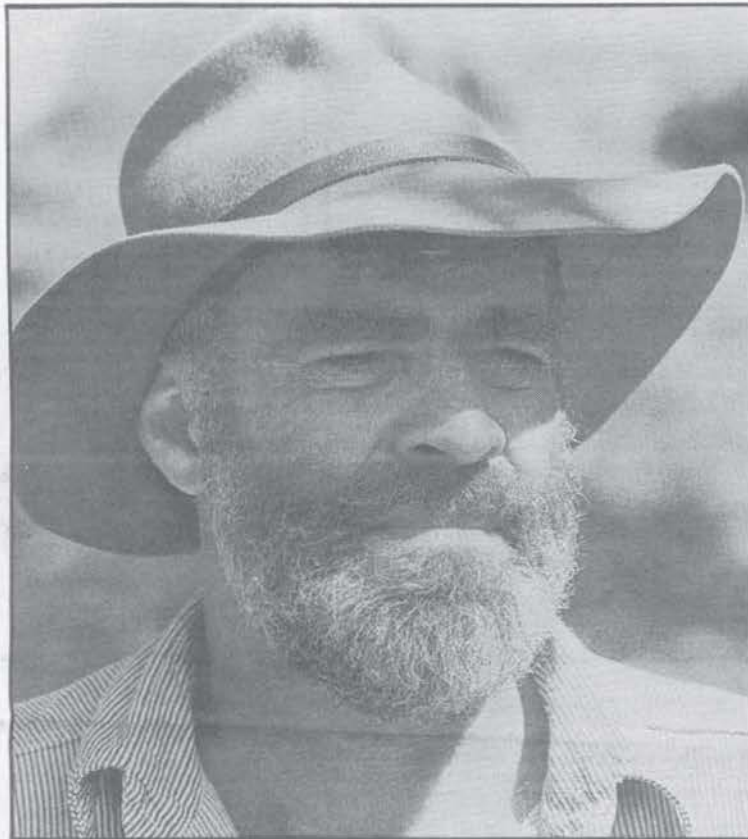


The battle for



Graham Stoney: "We represent a little bit of most Australians' heritage."

The serenity of Victoria's Bogong high plains will be shattered today by what promises to be the largest rally of mountain cattlemen and their supporters, protesting about the plight of 11 families whose grazing leases will be terminated next year in the name of conservation. But the fight goes deeper than land rights and management preferences. As reporter PAUL DALEY and photographer TOM HUTCHISON found, it is a battle of cultures.

IN A ritual dating thousands of years, Aboriginal men set fire to the Bogong Ranges to smoke out their delicacy, the Bogong moth, from basalt cracks in the high plains.

They left the fires burning and returned months later to hunt kangaroos and fowl which fed on the new growth.

Soon after the arrival of the white man and his cattle, the Aborigines were forced out. The fire regime died with the tribes when the cattlemen became the kings of the high country.

When they started grazing their stock on the snow grass of the high plains, Victoria's cattlemen created an image which they still argue is integral to an Australian ethos.

But in a twist of fate, the descendants of those first white settlers are faced with the same extinction as the tribes they replaced. The invaders this time wear backpacks and walking boots, drive Range Rovers and carry skis.

Next year, 11 of 100 families — some who have used the high plains for six generations — will have their grazing leases terminated.

Their livelihood is being transformed into a national park.

Conservation groups say the cattlemen arrogantly perceive the public high country as theirs and their hooved beasts desecrate flora and fauna.

The cattlemen counter by saying the ecological balance of the mountains now depends on grazing and that in closing the leases the government is bowing to pressure from the politically powerful conservation movement.

They believe Australians should support them because they are among the few remaining links with what they perceive as our heritage.

Ian Roper, a fifth-generation grazier from Tawonga at the foot of Mount Bogong, is not what city folk expect of a cattleman: balding and paunchy, dressed in khaki workwear and towelling beach hat, he could easily be mistaken as a council or brewery worker in Melbourne.

But Roper only knows his beloved high country. He is the type of person who is saddened when he sees a tree-fern in a hotel courtyard.

The run on Mount Nelse he will lose next year is a world away from Victoria Street, Richmond, or Swanston Street. It's not easy to find any of his 150 cattle, but there are other signs of human intervention.

At eye level across the rocky snow grass plains, the pseudo alpine village of Falls Creek, with its garish chalets and lodges, is clearly visible. The machined ski runs slice down the

mountain from the summit and bulldozers and tractors can be heard preparing the slopes for the coming season.

Even on Nelse, there are wooden posts about every 50 metres to guide cross-country skiers.

This is the kind of industry the Spring Street mandarins have in mind for the alps.

"The greensies don't like stepping in cowshit when they walk up here," Roper said. "They are unreasonable people — they want us out, but there's plenty of room up here for everyone."

"Lots of people vote on conservation issues, but when you get down to it, the trouble-makers are a minority."

Roper, 52, concedes the cattlemen are unaware about hardship in the cities and don't care too much about things unless they are directly affected.

"But that's different... we're being forced off the high country by city people. We don't interfere with what city people do — we don't say how they should live."

Dr Terry O'Brien, a reader in Botany at Monash University, says there is no logical reason to sympathise with the cattlemen.

"They tell you they are an important part of our heritage, but this isn't necessarily true because of our increasing ethnic population."

"They will have to change their lifestyles. We can't have a proper conservation area which can be lucrative to tourism and have it grazed at the same time. If the best interests of the majority are at stake, the cattlemen must go."

"At the moment, it is an emotive argument. Cattlemen benefit themselves from using the high plains, but there is no overall economic benefit to the community."

Conservation Minister Kay Setches says only five per cent of grazing land in the high country will be closed.

In fact, only 125,750 hectares of the total alpine area's 1,368,000 ha is presently grazed and during the past 10 years the number of cattle has fallen from 40,000 to 10,000.

Although they have become a pressure group via the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria, most of the 2000 members and associates are equipped to muster, not fight bureaucracy.

MCAV chief executive officer Graeme Stoney, 48, is a well-chosen public face — Scotch College educated and articulate, Stoney meets the Man from Snowy River image city folk need to see. He has an extra in the movie.

The traditional uniform of moleskins, R. M. Williams and stetson fits perfectly. Because they don't dress like that on the high plains, he'd probably look more at home shopping in Toorak Road than mustering cattle.

Stoney believes 80 per cent of Victorians sup-



Jack Maddison... elder statesman of the high plains graziers.

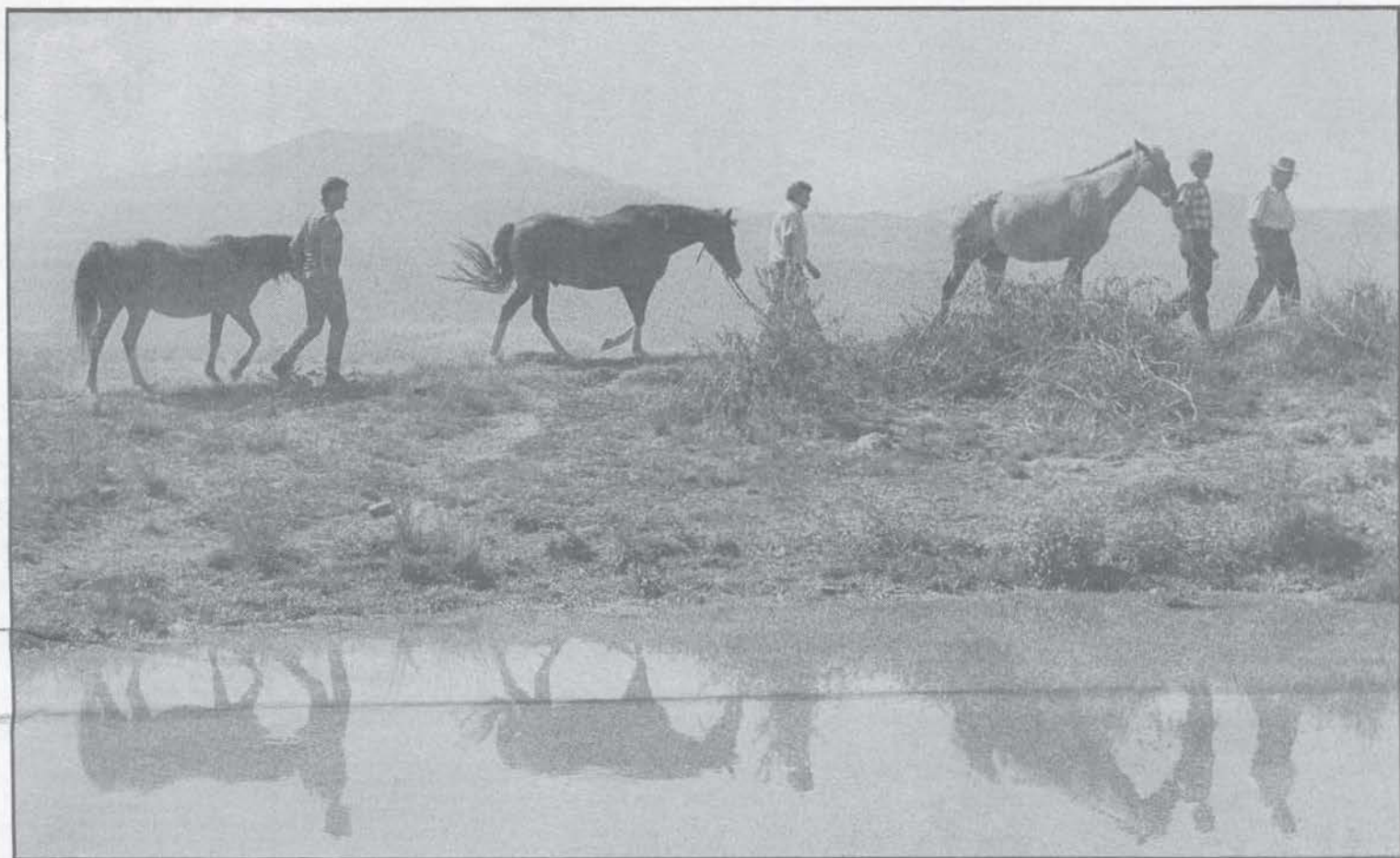


Ian Cooper with cattle grazing on the high plains.

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ADMISSION
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the High Country



The Maddisons, from front Jack and three sons Leon, John and Brian, with Mt Bogong looming behind them.

port his cause and that conservationists are a vocal minority who are either ignorant or extremely selfish. If the conservationists win this battle, he says, it will give them a toe-hold to close off more and more alpine grazing land.

"We represent a little bit of most Australians' heritage," he said. "People don't want to lose that."

"The cattlemen are unique, they remind people of the past. Everyone has had a relative that looked exactly like our blokes."

He described world heritage as a "political con-job".

"It's kicked around by both political parties. If an area is classified, then the greens will pressure the government to tighten it up even more."

Stoney said the cattlemen are the most practically versed about ecological balance in the high country and believe in sensible and achievable conservation — "Not some pie-in-the-sky thing which, because of human settlement, is now unobtainable."

"The issue now is effective management not just the eviction of a few families."

"The management of the high country has changed and it will never return to what it was in the beginning. First it was managed by fire, then grazing. Now in the parts that are no longer grazed, it has become something different again."

Jack Maddison's grandfather put the first cattle track on Mount Bogong in January 1882. About 30 years later, Jack, then aged seven, joined his first high plains muster.

As the oldest member of the oldest surviving high plains graziers, next year's lease cancellation will not directly affect him. But he worries for his three sons (Leo, Brian and John) and grandchildren.

"They've taken so much away already. His boys have to work other jobs now. Between them, his sons run only 150 head during summer."

"Ends don't meet now — I don't know what

will happen next year," he said. "My grandchildren probably won't be cattlemen."

His son John explained that when their lease is broken, their cattle will have to graze on their freehold all year.

This will make things twice as hard because the pastures won't get a chance to recover.

"The cattle are only up there for three months of the year and you've got to look bloody hard to find 'em. The greens don't like seeing cattle when they walk, but there's no such thing as a bush walker."

"They use our cattle tracks and our huts up there."

"If the greens want damage in the alpine they should look at the ski runs... but most of the greens ski and that's socially acceptable."

There are few hoof tracks on the Maddison's run. The snow grass has been grazed but is still centimetres long. One of the greatest pests is the European blackberry bush which chokes native grasses and ferns.

The bushes are spread by excrement of species unnatural to the high plains: foxes, rabbits and humans.

Cattle feed predominantly on the native snow grass, but prefer the sweeter couch grass which the SEC planted along their gravel roads about 15 years ago during its failed attempt to redirect the Mitta Mitta River south through the Bogong Ranges.

The project was abandoned because of massive soil erosion, but today the ugly trenches and dams remind the cattlemen of what can happen when the unwitting interfere with their land.

Those hoping to see whip-cracking, sun-scorched men on horseback would probably be disappointed. They muster only twice a year: in December, and again in March to return stock to valley freeholds.

Although the Land Conservation Council recommended the then Liberal state government to start phasing out high plains leases in 1979, the cattlemen whose leases expire next



The gnarled snow gum trunks on Mt Neise.

year say they have not been officially notified.

The government says alternative grazing areas will be allocated, but the graziers say they have not been informed where the runs will be.

James Ensor, alpine project officer with the Victorian National Parks Association, said the closure of the leases is supported on conservation grounds by both major political parties and the graziers can do little to reverse the decision.

"It's very hard to see what they are trying to achieve through their protests, when the decision has been based on years of studies and has bi-partisan political support."

"It is important to stress that the high country is public land — although they have been there for a long time, the cattlemen do not own it. I can understand their concern... it's easy for me to sit in Melbourne and tell them why they have to leave, but the decision is based on

undeniable environmental evidence."

Ensor said grazing in the high plains causes a dramatic increase in the amount of bare ground, large-scale erosion, loss of plant species, damage to sphagnum bogs (a variety of moss important for water retention) and changes in plant community structure.

"Scientific evidence clearly shows that that grazing is not conducive with conservation."

"The alps have evolved over millions of years without cattle and horses. In terms of evolution cattle have only been there for a short time."

Cattlemen like the Maddisons and Ian Roper may defy the government's ruling and send their cattle to the high plains next summer.

"I don't know what we're going to do, things could get ugly next year," Roper said. "It's hard to give up something you've always had."