

Picture window could soon be closed

Pictures: ANDREW DE LA RUE



Horsemen at the summit of Mount Howitt, 50 kilometres east of Mansfield: Alpine adventure tour operators say their future is threatened.

By DAVID ELIAS,
travel editor

The big view sweeps full circle across the rooftop of Australia. As far as the eye can see, there are mountains and valleys, a panorama without equal, which seems to leave nothing out.

All the big mountains are there: Buller, Stirling, Buffalo, Bogong, Feathertop, Hotham, Kosciusko, Wellington and Baw Baw. So are the the Bogong and Dargo high plains. And all of that is just the backdrop to a closer picture of immense beauty.

The foreground shows more high peaks on both sides of the Great Divide, the Viking, the Razor, Mount Speculation, Mount

Bugary, the Crosscut Saw, the Bluff, Mount Eadley Stoney and Mount Lovick. Then there are more snowy plains and the great valleys from which springs much of Victoria's river system.

This is the view from the summit of the 1742-metre Mount Howitt, probably the most remote and inaccessible place in Victoria. It takes at least two days to walk in and out or, on horseback, six or seven days over tracks that are incredibly steep and rough, and certainly not for the faint-hearted.

Yet it is featured in tourist brochures that circulate widely overseas as one of Australia's great outdoors adventures. And there lies the genesis of a furore

that is about to break over an industry that is growing daily in economic importance.

The argument is over how much of the environment should be compromised to cater for the millions of overseas tourists who want to visit Australia.

The Victorian Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands intends to close off the Mount Howitt-King Billy Saddle bridle track in the Wonnangata-Moroka National Park, but the plan slipped out unintentionally. When it renewed the permits of Alpine horse trail operators, many of whom advertise Alpine rides in overseas travel brochures, the department imposed

conditions that forbade the riding of horses along the trail.

This was premature, and the condition was lifted as soon as 'The Age' sought clarification from the department. This week, a mountain cattleman and tour operator, Mr Graeme Stoney, was telephoned by a senior officer in the department, saying that the condition did not apply to himself or the other operator who regularly uses the track, Mr Jack Lovick. It applied only to new operators, the officer said.

This has done nothing to allay the operators' fears. Mr Stoney said he believed it was only a matter of time before the ban applied to all riders.

Continued: PAGE 4



Mr Graeme Stoney: "It was always a bridle path."

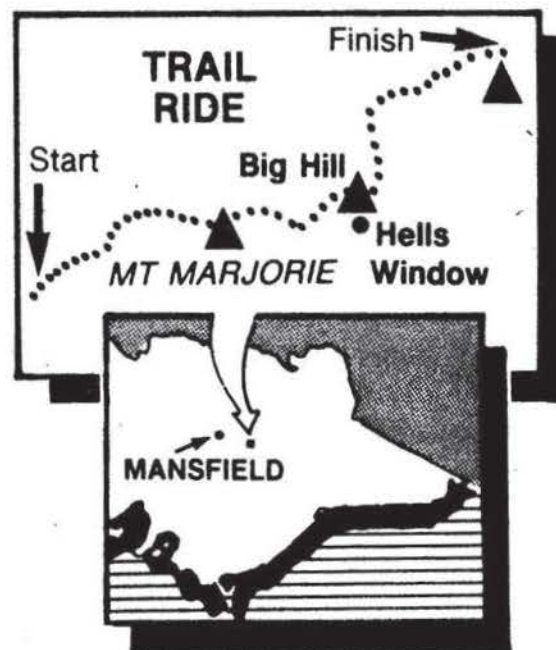
Picture window could soon be closed

Mr Stoney, a member of the Alpine Adventure Tour Operators Association, said: "None of us feel confident any longer. On the one hand, the Victorian Tourism Commission tells us that we have got to be more professional, that we have to fix our schedules two years in advance, advertise them widely and make sure we stick to our programs. On the other hand, the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands can close us down without notice."

A spokesman denied that there was such a ban. He did, however, confirm that bushwalkers had complained about the activities of horse riders in the area. They had complained of erosion on the track and of often being unable to use camping facilities because they were occupied by horse parties.

So once again the long-standing animosity between bushwalker and rider has surfaced. The Howitt-King Billy Track has been renamed and appears on maps as part of the Alpine Walking Track between Walhalla and Kosciusko. To the mountain cattlemen, this only

FROM PAGE ONE



adds insult to injury. Mr Stoney said the track was opened up by the cattlemen more than 100 years ago. "It was always a bridle path, but now it seems we will be stopped from using it because it is a walking track."

This week I rode with him over the track to judge the extent of erosion caused by horses. Along the steepest sections, hooves had worn down narrow tracks to the rocks. But there was rarely more than one worn track and all the horses stuck to them, preferring to tread over territory that had already been worn rather than break new ground. The damage appeared minimal, considering that horses have been crossing the area for many years.

Mr Stoney said he believed the damage could be kept to a minimum if the department would assign a small team to carry out maintenance and divert water from the trail. The cost would be justified by the dollars the trail could earn for Australia.

Mr Stoney said the Alpine adventure tour operators were as anxious as anyone to maintain the environment of the Alps. They wanted good planning and management and a limit to the number of commercial operators in the region.