



The cattlemen of the High Plains ride

THE CATTLEMEN of the southern High Plains, many of whom belong to families that have grazed cattle on the lush Alpine Summer pastures for the past 140 years believe they are under threat.

Some have been handed eviction notices but are refusing to go.

And to drive home their message, they staged a big rally at one of the High Country runs recently. In scenes that resembled a Light Horse cavalry charge, the mountain beef producers won for themselves some pretty extensive media coverage on both TV and in the daily newspapers.

Our photograph is a reproduction of one that appeared in Melbourne's Age newspaper. The event was stage-managed to perfection. It should have been . . . many of the horsemen had first hand experience with the making of *The Man from Snowy River I and II* and enlisted the help of the director of these world ranked motion pictures.

The reason for the rally was simple.

The Victorian government wants to exclude cattle from five per cent of the lease country. The Minister responsible, Kaye Setches, says there are reallo-

cation areas but Mountain Cattlemen's Association president, David Treasure, says this reallocation is rough scrub land where "a dog could't bark."

The government, backed by conservationists, says it wants to protect Alpine plant life; the cattlemen say that under their management, the mountains have never looked better.

The cattlemen say they have always been willing to share their mountains, the whole country, with anyone who likes to go there. They believe that multiple use is the way to go. But if the cattle go, the whole lot will go up in smoke.

The conservation movement, on the other hand, says the mountain cattlemen have known for at least eight years that cattle would be withdrawn from small areas in 1991.

Mountain cattleman, Graeme Stoney, Minto Park, Mansfield, said the rally was the most exciting day ever held on the Bogong High Plains or anywhere else in Victoria above 5000ft.

"It's probably the most important show we've had to put on and it's a damn shame we have to put on shows like this but it seems to be the only way we can get our message across."

Mrs Setches, speaking on national TV, said the cattlemen seemed to be running a "fairly emotive campaign and seemed to think that "life is like a movie, campaigning mainly for the benefit of the media.

"I think they (the cattlemen) have gone a little bit over the top, this time," she said.

"Their heritage is not threatened. Ninety five per cent of the area will be available. We're only wanting to relieve them of five per cent."

But David Treasure says the issue is not just about grazing cattle on the high country.

"This issue is about the high country. This issue is about whether there remains a high country for everyone to enjoy."

The rally was staged on the leasehold of the Kelly family who are one of the first to receive eviction notices from the government.

"If we don't win this one, they'll just keep on taking and taking more and more land," Mr Treasure said.

Mrs Setches says the government has asked the mountain cattlemen to join it on a working party so "we can arrive at

a solution that's agreeable to all" but so far, she says they have refused to cooperate.

David Treasure responds by saying: "We want to co-operate if possible but to co-operate in these evictions is to sign our own death warrants."

The debate over whether the cattle should remain on the High Country has been running for many years with the Mountain Cattlemen's Association gaining some public support.

But the strong conservation lobby too has its supporters.

Recent letters in *The Age* newspaper typify the support for and against the continuance of the High Country Summer grazing . . .

Mountain cattlemen pay for their privilege

From Marita E Mason, Lavington, NSW.

Until the Victorian government can employ enough people with adequate resources and money to manage the High Country and Dr R.J. Williams shows where the changes to the alpine



their message home - "We won't go!"

and sub-Alpine ecosystems have occurred after 150 years of cattle grazing then they should not recommend the closure of the High Country to the mountain cattlemen.

The National Park at Kosciusko is a blatant reminder of what happens to the High Country that is closed to cattle and those mountain graziers who aided in its management.

The build up of grass and undergrowth is fuel for wildfires, blackberries are out of control and the number of feral animals on the increased because the NSW government can not afford unlimited resources and manpower to manage a large land area which has no monetary return.

Today a small area of the Victorian alps is used to grazed cattle during the summer months.

The cattle reduce the build up of grass and the mountain cattlemen manage the area by providing shelters for all to use, maintain tracks so the area is accessible to all and their presence provides extra surveillance of their High Country protecting it from misuse, noxious weeds, feral animals and wildfire.

Already half of the area originally grazed is now National Park.

The Mountain cattlemen now graze

18,000 head of cattle, it used to be 40,000 and they don't get it for free.

They pay for the privilege, put hours of hard work into the maintenance and surveillance of the High Country and then volunteer to rescue the lost, ferry injured and fight bushfires using their own resources, vehicles and horses.

So for private use of public land the mountain cattlemen don't get it on a platter. They are part of our culture, their bush skills and knowledge of the High Country unique and after 150 years of grazing cattle they have not changed the alpine and sub-alpine ecosystem.

Cattle do damage the Alps

From J. Ensor for the Victorian National Parks Association.

The debate about the use of public land in Victoria's high country by cattle graziers raises an interesting issue about 'privileged use'.

The catch cry of Alpine graziers is that they are being evicted from the High Country.

This is nonsense.

The State government is completing a

10 years program to phase out a number of sensitive areas (5 per cent) of the Alps for grazing.

The eight license holders affected by the phase out all run free hold properties in lowland areas surrounding the Alps. Of the 386,000 hectares suitable for grazing in the Alps, 369,000 will still remain available to graziers in the future.

It is clear that the State government has demonstrated a genuine wish to work with these graziers to offering a long 10 year phase out period.

An alternative High Country grazing licenses in less sensitive areas.

What has been agreed to, after extensive scientific evaluation under both Liberal and Labor governments, is that cattle so cause damage to the Alpine environment.

The Victorian National Parks Association recently commissioned a detailed review of over 40 years research on the effects of grazing on the alpine environment.

The conclusion of all the research reveals that grazing leads to the deterioration of moss beds, soil erosion, loss of plant species and diversity and

changes in vegetation structure.

There is simply no question grazing has led to the deterioration of the fragile alpine environment.

Victoria's first priorities going into the next decade, must be the conservation of species and the prevention of land degradation. Unfortunately, in our alpine areas, the reality is that both of these problems are exacerbated by grazing.

It is vital for us to remember that THIS is the real issue at stake and to ensure that we rely on the best scientific information in making land management decisions.

We should not unthinkingly accept land degradation as a cultural tradition we wish to perpetuate.

If so, the evidence points to a further certain loss of our natural heritage.

It is certain that the debate over land use on the High Country of Victoria and other 'sensitive areas' where cattle are grazed will continue.

At stake are the traditions of the High Country, employment and a supply of quality calves that are bought by feedlots and restockers throughout the Eastern States.