

Conservationists and cattlemen

move to save high plains

By J. BALFOUR BROWN

High plains cattlemen and conservationists agreed to set aside past differences at a meeting at Mansfield (Vic.) last Wednesday to meet the new threat of "trail bikes, beach buggies and bulldozers."

They were told that "a few irresponsible types" on bikes or in four-wheel-drive vehicles were capable of causing more damage in the high country in a few hours than hundreds of cattle in a decade.

But there was no real clash of interest between the cattleman and the traditional hiker, fisherman or naturalist.

The meeting, described as historic, brought together for the first time members of the Mountain District Cattlemen's Association of Victoria, the Victorian National Parks Association, and speakers or observers from the Forest Commission Department of Agriculture, and several shire councils bordering the mountain grazing areas.

"The purpose of this meeting is to see if we can live together," said veteran Dargo cattleman, Mr S. J. Treasure, who is president of the Mountain District Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

"We hear much about conservation but there is need for conservation of productivity also. No nation can survive on leisure, sport and scenery unless at someone else's expense. We need the stimulation that these things can give in good measure but if allowed to run at random only decay will result."

Mr Treasure said that about 24,000 cattle owned by members of the MDCAV grazed the high plains from four to six months of the year. About half as many again were probably grazed by non-members of the association. These cattle were mostly breeders and supplied the markets at Mansfield, Omeo, Myrtle-

ford, Bragalong, Bairnsdale, Heyfield, Stratford, Gelantipy, Ensay and Swift's Creek.

Mr Don Richardson, Coburg, a member of the Cattlemen's Association, said that practical decisions were needed in an unbiased way in the mountains. Cattlemen had changed and were changing with the times. Many were very concerned with pollution and the environment.

Some of the claims put forward by certain conservation groups were ethereal and unproven.

"Cattle and forests and cattle and recreation have much in common," he said. "Grazing acts as a catalyst and we often feel we do a very useful, unpaid job of fire prevention and making the area accessible to others."

Mr J. Ros Garnet (Victorian National Parks Assn.) said his organisation did not want to emphasise the difference of opinion that had existed between cattlemen and conservationists.

"Do not be misled by the statements of some people," he said. "As an organisation we have merely asked the Government to take adequate steps to maintain the highlands and to avoid anything that would destroy the ecological balance that exists now."

"Restraint and control may be desirable and necessary on occasions but

we are not unduly critical of cattle grazing which performs several useful purposes. It would be silly to say that all cattle must be excluded. We are not opposed to grazing provided it is done with wisdom and care."

Mr Garnet said it would be in the best interests of both cattlemen and conservationists to have a viable alpine area, administered by the National Parks service, created as quickly as possible.

Trail bikes, beach buggies and four wheel drive vehicles were causing damage now that might be irreparable.

Mr Garnet said that cattle might have to be restricted to below 4000 feet and a cattleman, Mr E. Stoney, Mansfield, said that if this was the case then "we might as well give the game away."

Mr Garnet said he had only used this figure because it was the one supplied by the Soil Conservation Authority and he believed it was not inflexible.

Mr W. R. Mann (Victorian National Parks Assn.) said that traditional bushwalkers had enjoyed excellent relations with cattlemen. The suggestion for a national park went back to 1949 and even earlier and every delay was ominous.

"Acquisitive eyes are on it and we should join in common cause here," he said. "There are suggestions to drop resort buildings by helicopters and several others of a similar nature."

"It is no longer safe from commercial exploitation and it is vulnerable to political moves, particularly moves inspired by overseas interests. We know about resort plans but large scale mining should not be overlooked."

Mr Lyle McCready, Dandongdale cattleman, said: "We cattlemen love the country and we raise good cattle in near to natural conditions. We have been blamed for a lot of problems but people forget that it is in our interests to conserve feed and water. In areas where the rattle have been excluded the wild cats and crossbred dingoes are on the increase and there is an impenetrable mass of blackberries and vermin-infested undergrowth."

"In keeping the country open we have done some service. We are keen on the bush and on the animals, and we realise the urban community has a right to open space provided they are educated in how to use it."

Mr Athol Hodgson (Forests Commission): "The policy of the Forests Commission is multiple use management which means water, wood, wildlife, recreation and forage. Each one of those values is entitled to be considered. If cattlemen can show that their industry is viable and compatible with other forest values then their case will be heard. You cattlemen seem to be doing a good job at present of showing responsibility."



MR S. J. TREASURE: "Proceed with caution."



MR W. R. MANN: "Acquisitive eyes are on mountains."



MR BEN COOPER: "There should be room for all."



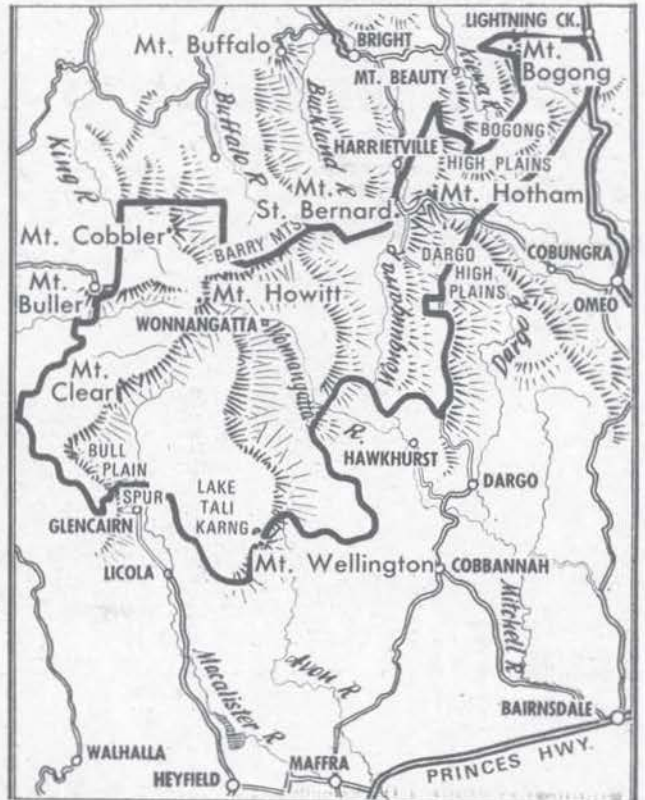
MR L. MCCREADY: "Cattlemen have done a service."



Mrs Freda Ryder, Ta-wonga, said the beef industry was the most viable in Australia at present and should be encouraged. Cattle and forestry were the only two industries in the alpine areas which were compatible with the wildlife which consisted almost entirely of shy creatures.

"Bulldozers had caused tremendous erosion in recent years. "All damage by machinery is apparently excusable," she said. "Up until about 1960 many walkers came by and we got on well with them. They used the cattlemen's huts and replaced the food in them. Now we have ski villages, night life in the chalets, and a tourist element that cares little for the peace of the mountains."

Mr R. Lawson (Victorian National Parks Assn.): "We should be on the same side. Time is running out for both the cattleman and the national parks movement. The government has already sold out most of the Northern Territory and this alpine area is very vulnerable to overseas interests with millions of dollars to spend."



Map shows the proposed Alpine National Park of approx. 1500 square miles in Victoria. At present it is nearly all crown land. Grazing leases come under the overall control of the Forests Commission and the Soil Conservation Authority.

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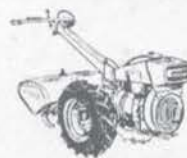
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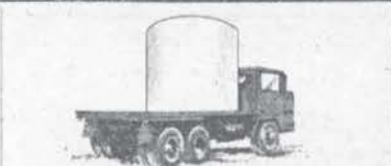
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Continued on Page 15



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