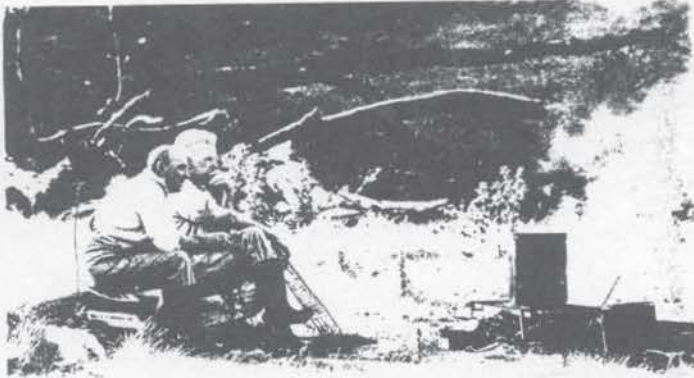


# CATTLEMEN SPEAK UP



The film "The Man From Snowy River" has captivated thousands of Australians over the last few months. When its less than brilliant plot line and cantankerous Yankee actors have been long forgotten, moviegoers will still recall the breathtaking mountain scenery and magnificent horsemanship of the film's true stars, the mountain cattlemen "extras".

Yet how many of those watching would realise that Australia is bit by bit losing part of its heritage - and the cattlemen are gradually seeing their livelihood slip away - as they are (in the language of the bureaucrats) "phased out" of their Alpine grazing runs. How many would realise that "Up by Kosciusko's side, where the hills are twice as steep and twice as rough", the scrub is twelve feet high and just waiting for a summer lightning strike or a careless match to erupt into holocaust? For this is the situation up there now that grazing is banned in the Kosciusko National Park. How many would realise that Mount Stirling, site of much of the filming, faces desecration by an "Alpine Ski Village" which will not only deprive local cattlemen of summer pasture, but close off yet another mountain to all but the affluent few?

The material on these two pages is addressed to those who have any feelings at all for the bush and its heritage. In large part it is addressed to people in the conservation movement, many of whom have been and still are critical of grazing in the High Country. To them we can only repeat the words of veteran cattlemen Tom and Jack Purcell: "Come up and have a look for yourselves." To those already aware of the true situation, we say "How about giving the cattlemen a bit of backing!"

This, then, is the story from the cattlemen's point of view. We hope it generates a lot of debate. Thoughtful conservationists in the city have every reason to get together with cattlemen-conservationists in the bush to help care for Victoria's mountain areas.

Paul Osmond

## Alpine Grazing Heritage

Cattle have grazed Victoria's high country since the middle of last century. Cattlemen held huge leases around Feather-top, Hotham and Buffalo, the Bogong and Dargo High Plains through to Buller-Hovitt country in the west. They pioneered the area, and often helped other early settlers and travellers by acting as guides and by providing horses for transport of people and supplies. Cattlemen's huts continue to play an important role for the safety and convenience of bushwalkers and ski-tourers.

The rhythm of life changed little in over a century - taking the cattle up in early summer to get full advantage of the lush spring growth, bringing them down again in the autumn before the winter snows set in. The annual muster would be an occasion for cattlemen to get together, have a yarn and give each other a hand with the "cut-out", separating each owner's mob from the rest.

Grazing the high country means cattlemen can conserve fodder on their home paddocks. Said Merrifig cattlemen Jack Purcell: "We wouldn't be able to graze half the numbers we do if we couldn't go up to the high country."

When the cattle are brought down, many of their calves (born on the mountains) are sold at special autumn sales. Weaner calves from these sales are eagerly sought by farmers all over Victoria.

Government controls on alpine grazing have been progressively implemented since the 1940s. Some leases, particularly in the higher areas of the North East, were cut out altogether while cattle numbers on other runs were severely restricted. In the conflict over usage of alpine land, the cattlemen usually lost out.

Certainly overgrazing caused some damage in the old days - cattlemen themselves are the first to tell you this. Nowadays the number of cattle and the size of runs are determined by local graziers together with the Forestry Commission, and with advice from the Soil Conservation Authority. "If we consider a run's been overgrazed, we reduce the number," said Jack Purcell, "or if we consider it can take a few more cattle, we agree to it."

### LCC Recommendations

In 1960 the Soil Conservation Authority was given supervisory control over all grazing above the snowline (the 1219 metre contour). The current debate about the future of grazing centres around recommendations by the Land Conservation Council of Victoria (LCC).

In summary, the LCC's proposals involve reduction in cattle numbers, tighter restrictions on grazing licences, further control of grazing above the tree line and total withdrawal of stock from a number of areas. Some graziers have already been forced to give up runs around the Bogong High Plains, the Bluff, and elsewhere.

If an Alpine National Park (of the type envisaged by the LCC) was established, grazing within its boundaries would be banned completely and virtually all cattle would be banned from the Alps.

Opponents of alpine grazing say cattle are responsible for erosion and loss of plant species diversity in the mountains, and that "burning off" in autumn when the stock are being brought down encourages the growth of scrub. The cattlemen give their own reply to these points later on their main argument is that city-based researchers' "findings" are based on too little information and too short a period of investigation. The consultants' report on Mt Stirling provides a typical example of this.

Currently about 100 cattlemen and their families graze less than 20,000 head of cattle on the high country, on individual runs stretching from the region around Mt Uller in the west, to North-East Gippsland.

The cattlemen we spoke to - Jack Purcell and Graeme Stoney - are three out of eight or so graziers who run no more than 1500 head in what's known as Buller-Hovitt country in the mountains to the north-east of Mansfield. The area is pretty big - and the cattle numbers pretty small. Said Jack Purcell: "Our quota on the Razorback, which goes from the Pinnacle back to Mt Stirling, is 240 cattle. You can say that'd be 20 mile by 20 mile. They don't graze all of that, but that's the area."



### The Bluff - Closed To Cattle

Graeme Stoney's people have run cattle on the Bluff for over 40 years. Stoney's Bluff hut has been a welcome sight for weary bushwalkers for more than two decades. In Graeme's own words, the hut "was packed in by horse and put up the hard way. It took a whole summer".

Now the Bluff has been declared off-limits for cattle. We're very disappointed about losing the Bluff because we were told that we didn't lose it because of any damage, it's just that some areas had to be free of cattle and that was one of them", Graeme told us.

"We've always looked after that area particularly well, and it's in very good

shape - it's a beautiful area. It's going to have quite an impact, as losing it affects about a third of our cattle, and if you get down to too small an operation it doesn't pay, so it's put the whole operation in jeopardy. There's just no reason to bar the cattle off that particular area. What really got to us was that the soil conservation officers didn't really know much about it. They'd done most of the work from maps.

"On this farm there's been a lot of damage over 100 years, same as on all farms, because of clearing and lack of trees - because it has to be done. We follow the same principles out on the Bluff: you watch it very closely, you keep the cattle dispersed. I don't think we've stocked as many as we've been allowed to for about ten years. We've always been under our quota - one year we cut it in half. You just do it automatically like you run your own farm. So cattlemen are pretty conservation-minded. To my mind a conservationist is someone who genuinely looks after an area. You're doing it for future generations, you're just part of the whole chain of life, really.

"We get hundreds of visitors. A few of them make suggestions. We've got dams there under the springs to keep cattle out of the springs. A few people say the cattle are 'muddying up the dams for us', but the dams were put in for the cattle, not for people. People are the thing that should be controlled. It's unbelievable what's happening. At our hut out on the Bluff, at any given weekend during the summer, over a hundred people will go through. Over Easter I think we counted 500 going through, including a busload from Box Hill Baptist Church with three or four toddlers. The pressure on the environment of the Bluff hut clearing - you've got no idea. Yet while cattlemen are there, we can help and advise people, or just be around."

Last month I met some mountain cattlemen and for the first real time heard their side of the story.

I agreed with the banning of cattle from the mountains before I listened to them, and it made me realise how biased the information I have read is. It lacks one vital perspective - the cattlemen's side of the argument.

Read these pages with an open mind. You may not change your mind as I have but at least consider the other side of the argument. You may find that even though you are a committed conservationist your actions will prove adverse to the mountains if you support the stopping of the leases.

Karen Hosking



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