



"Tim Barker"
<barker@vicnet.net.au>

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Please respond to
<barker@vicnet.net.au>

To "pol graeme stoney"
<graeme.stoney@parliament.vic.gov.au>

cc

bcc

Subject Paper by Peter Attiwill

Graeme, this is the paper by Peter Attiwill:

Grazing, science, fire and management in the High Country of Victoria
by Peter Attiwill

23/11/2004

Grazing, science and management

There has been an impressive amount of research on the effects of grazing on the composition of plant communities in the High Country. This research provides a sound framework on which to manage grazing in a sustainable way.

Much of the research is based on comparisons between fenced and grazed plots on land that has not burned since 1939. There is now (as a result of barring of the land by fire) increasing evidence of thousands of years of occupation of the High Plains by Aborigines, and it is safe to assume that fire has been a natural feature of the ecology of the High Plains, as it has been for most of Australia. The undisturbed state of the vegetation of the High Plains, protected from fire, is therefore most unlikely to be a natural state and therefore not an entirely appropriate reference.

It is now critical that Parks Victoria clearly define goals for management of biodiversity. A critical goal for future management is the definition of appropriate burning regimes. The question should not be one of grazing or no grazing. The critical question is: what are our goals for management of ecological diversity and of fire?

The critics of alpine grazing use science to support the basic tenet that grazing is incompatible with use of the land as a national park, as encapsulated in the slogan 'National Park or Cow Paddock?'. The slogan is totally misleading. A cow paddock, once abandoned, will never return to the ecosystem that was destroyed to create it.

In contrast, there is no evidence that cattle grazing in the High Country has eliminated rare and threatened species, nor has species composition or diversity been irrevocably altered. Indeed, 170 years of controlled cattle-grazing has left by far the greater part of the High Country in excellent condition. Clearly, at the long-term and landscape levels, cattle grazing over some part of the High Country can be accommodated within management plans to achieve specific goals without an irreversible deterioration in biodiversity.

There is no doubt that the opponents of grazing use science to achieve their end of stopping grazing completely (just as the opponents of timber harvesting in native forests will continue to pursue their aim until there is no harvesting in native forests). That is, there is no point of compromise, despite the fact that both the intensity and extent of cattle grazing has reduced dramatically over the years.

Fire and management

The alpine fires of 2003 were the greatest ecological disaster to strike Victoria within recorded history. Some 1 million hectares of national park and state forests - public land, OUR land - were burned at high intensity. At least some ecosystems in the High Country will take 1000 years or more to recover. Sediment loads increased up to 150 times above normal, and Environment Minister Thwaites stated that rivers and water catchments across the north of Victoria face a 'serious threat'. It is a curious fact that, while the predominantly city-based push to end grazing in the High Country continues unabated, the unimaginable disaster of the 2003 fires has disappeared from our civic radar screen as though it had never occurred. However, the Stretton Group has pursued the issue doggedly, and is now seeking a court ruling to identify government agencies responsible for the size and severity of the fires.

The Stretton Group has received enormous support from country Victoria; the alpine fires should never have happened, and once started, they should have been controlled rather than burning for 2 months. It is unfortunate that our meeting in the north-east coincides with the inaugural Stretton Oration by Phil Cheney (CSIRO, Canberra): 'The Green Inferno: The Politics of Bushfires and Conservation'.

Successive governments have declared increasing areas of national parks without providing adequate levels of investment and resources to manage them. Most critically, fuel loads have been allowed to build up to the point where unplanned, or feral fires become devastating. Prescribed burning, together with ecological burning to meet biodiversity goals as well as to reduce fuel loads, have fallen well short (perhaps an understatement - appallingly short?) of departmental goals over the past decade (as recognized in the Auditor General's report), and worse still, departmental goals fall well short of what is needed.

No wonder country Victoria is worried. Will it take a threat to Melbourne's forested water catchments to make city people wake up and be worried too?

Grazing, fire and management

The current problems of fire management have been recognized Australia-wide (the Esplin Report in Victoria, the Auditor General's Report in WA [October 2004], and most probably in the report of the Coronial Inquiry in the ACT, yet to be concluded). But even the most organized fire-fighting capability will be puny in the face of excessive fuel loads. Developing fire-fighting capability without proper management of our resources is not the answer.

It is clear that the government does not have the people on the ground to do the job. Only by decentralizing and using the experience, skills and knowledge of mountain cattlemen and landowners will ecological and fuel-management burning be established on a successful basis. The grazing or no-grazing decision should not be made in isolation from the overarching problems of management of national parks, and especially the management of fire.

Grazing and people

The basis for a decision is not science alone. There is no fundamental or self-evident reason why an activity must be banned from National Parks other than a majority opinion that it should be banned. In the end, environmental

campaigns rest on the notion that another person's concept of outdoor enjoyment would interfere with the campaigners' idea of the correct outdoor experience. We note here that a study at Charles Sturt University of community attitudes to alpine grazing found that public opinion is far more interested in 'heritage' as defined by the activities of people than in the protection of plants.

The Federal Government supports both the continuation of grazing and the national heritage significance of the mountain cattlemen. Furthermore, the Federal Government is funding in a major way, through the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, research on interactions between grazing and fire in the High Country of Victoria. Both of these issues were clearly defined by the Federal Government before the recent election.

Thus in terms both of protecting and managing our alpine areas, and of continuing the proud heritage of the mountain cattlemen that has become so much a symbol of the Australian spirit, cattle grazing in the High Country of Victoria should continue on a restricted, planned and managed basis.

The way in which this can happen in a planned and scientific way is presented in the Alpine Grazing Management Plan of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV).

The Alpine Grazing Management Plan

The Alpine Grazing Management Plan of the MCAV sets out a collaborative and consultative approach to grazing, retaining the present seven-year licence terms. Some of the key points are:

- Parks Victoria and MCAV will form a Joint Management Committee, thereby ending a situation that is increasingly adversarial;
- The first 7 years will be used as an objective assessment of the effects of cattle grazing, using the experience of cattlemen as well as scientific data. Research by the Bushfire CRC, funded by the Federal Government, will provide major inputs to this assessment (for example, there is at present no unequivocal resolution to the 'grazing reduces blazing' argument);
- Cattlemen will play a major role in land management - weed control, control of feral animals, monitoring of activities;
- Cattlemen will be involved in controlled fires aimed at fuel reduction, and in management and suppression of wildfires;
- Cattlemen will be involved in quantitative assessment of herbage mass, and in managing sustainable grazing through (for example) rotational, targeted and strategic grazing;
- Outputs from research and observation will be shared and openly reviewed, again putting an end to the sort of senseless, acrimonious and adversarial debate that so often surrounds environmental issues.

Conclusion

Cattle-grazing in the Alpine National Park now covers less than 15% of the area. Let us now stop quibbling and taking the high moral ground offered by this or that bit of science. The record stands for itself - the quality of the ecosystems of the High Country has not been destroyed by grazing over the past 150 years, and the cattlemen are hallowed within the image and folklore of Australia.

MCAV is a proud organization. Its members have managed much of the High Country in a sustainable way for generations with success - it would not be in their interests (nor in their philosophy) to do otherwise! MCAV has prepared a conservative and collaborative management plan, and its

endorsement will be greeted with approval especially by country Victoria,
now gradually recovering after years of hardship, drought and fire.

Peter Attiwill
23 November, 2004

Cheers Tim Barker