



*The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria Inc.*

AFFILIATED WITH  
THE VICTORIAN FARMING AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION

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PRESIDENT James A. Connors  
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Dear

Thank you for your enquiry. You are one of the many who are seeking information about cattle grazing.

I would suggest that to compare the pros and cons of National Park development on economic grounds in relation to cattle grazing would be not only virtually impossible to achieve through lack of substantial details, but also inappropriate because cattle grazing is only one small factor in the total likely to be affected.

There should be no conflict between cattle grazing and National Park management, in fact the two should be perfectly compatible.

The Land Conservation Council has recommended that grazing be continued within most of the area already proposed to National Park and there have been reassurances from a number of State Government Ministers to this effect, but despite the rhetoric the Government has not seen fit to write protection for grazing into National Park Legislation.

For many years there was an apparent ignorance of the effect of lightning in official circles, and graziers were blamed for most of the forest fires. The Royal Commission reports by Judge Stretton following the disastrous fires in 1939 are evidence of this.

The Department of Conservation Forests and Lands now spends millions of dollars annually on forest fire prevention and suppression and much of this is spent by using controlled fire to reduce the risk of devastating fire. (I do not have current figures, but the budget payments for 1982-83 for forest operations were \$10,209,313 and I would think that these figures would be exceedingly higher since then).

There are vast areas of natural wilderness, steep and rugged or inhospitable jungle where cattle seldom if ever venture, but wherever they can be induced to graze they will help to maintain a safe balance in a more gentle way than the interrelated environment protection activity known as fuel reduction burning. Cattle prefer to graze areas that have been burnt in the previous season and thus can very much prolong the benefit of the costly but necessary protective burning exercises undertaken by the departmental services, in a perfectly complementary way.

Any good farmer who owns livestock will see to it for a fire protection measure, that sufficient numbers of sheep or cattle are concentrated in the paddocks near his home and buildings to remove excess pasture growth before the onset of summer. The same fire-retardant effect is obtained in forested and alpine areas at no cost to the taxpayer. It is a point of fact that grazing is the only agency that provides a regular degree of protection every year in the mountains against damaging wildfire and subsequent erosion.

It is impossible to quantify and value in economic terms the worth of this free service, but in time of a drought summer fire crisis, it could be of infinitely more value to the natural environment and the community generally, than it is to the individual grazier or the cattle industry.

There has been a struggle for years between the theorists who dream of the impractical ideal of a fire-free environment and the pragmatic foresters



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who would use fire to retard and defeat outbreaks of wildfire. It deeply concerns mountain cattlemen and country people that the powerful lobby group that are against the use of fire and grazing as a management tool, may eventually prevent or seriously inhibit their use in National Parks and that is just one compelling reason why Alpine National Parks should not be over large or contiguous.

Limited areas of unspoiled natural and unique attractions may well be successfully promoted as National Parks and the Mountain Cattlemen's Association has no argument against that, so long as the management is sensible and it is maintained as safe from fire and subsequent soil erosion as is practically possible, and does not become an undisturbed harbour and breeding ground for noxious pests.

I have received a number of assertions that much information exists on the economics of National Parks and I would very much like to see it.

You may be interested to know that the Mountain Cattlemen's Association sought information from the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands on the projected costs of developing and running the Alpine National Parks. After receiving many evasive replies, we had to resort to action under the Freedom of Information Act to obtain the information. This culminated in a hearing of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal in August, 1985 where under cross-examination by the Tribunal Chairman, the Minister's representative, The Director of National Parks, Mr. Don Saunders was forced to admit that there had been, "little or no costing done". It was an extraordinary revelation to learn of the intention to commit a vast section of the State with its known and unknown resources to National Park, without any cost benefit analysis or social impact study!

I imagine that Departmental staff have been working overtime since then to find figures to justify the National Park plan, but it was incredible to learn that such a large scale plan for public land could proceed on no better economic basis than it seemed like a good idea.

There is much more that could be written and discussed, but this should be available by the end of this year in a book that is being written to promote a much better understanding of the mountain environment and mountain grazing.

Many people are unaware that a National Park is likely to be one of intensely controlled human activities akin to the daily experience of rules and frustrating regulation that many urban dwellers long to escape from. That is why most people when they carefully consider the subject, would prefer to enjoy their right to freedom of the mountains with the guidance of education and example under existing rules of law, rather than within the framework of extensive new and more restrictive regulations.

I enclose material that should raise other points of interest for you and it has been recommended to me that you read the Hansard Report of Parliament Proceedings in the Legislative Council on the 22nd and 24th April, 1986 which is available from the Government Printer. Our Journal, Voice of the Mountains is on sale and available from our Marketing Officer, Ross Brown P.O. Box 344, Morwell or phone: 051 34 5918.

Since protection of the land from devastating fire and erosion is of paramount importance, I do not see that there should be any conflict between mountain grazing and National Parks, and therefore the economic considerations should be compatible.

Yours faithfully,

*James A. Commins*  
JAMES A. COMMINS  
President.  
Encl.