

THE MOUNTAIN CATTLEMENS PERSPECTIVE OF CATTLE GRAZING  
IN THE ALPINE AREA.

I WOULD LIKE TO INTRODUCE MYSELF. MY NAME IS JACK HICKS, I AM MARRIED AND HAVE 3 CHILDREN AGED 6, 4 AND 3. THEY ARE ALREADY BEING TAUGHT ABOUT MOUNTAIN GRAZING AND COME UP TO THE PLAINS WITH US. OUR SIX YEAR OLD ALREADY ASSISTS US WITH OUR STOCK WORK. I AM A MEMBER OF THE M.C.A.V. NORTH EAST BRANCH. MY FATHER, BILL HICKS, WAS A WELL-KNOWN MOUNTAIN CATTLEMAN, AND OUR FAMILY HAVE GRAZED CATTLE HERE FOR SIXTY YEARS. OUR LICENCE AREA COVERS APPROXIMATELY 12,000 HECTARES, AND WE RUN 240 CATTLE ON IT.

MOUNTAIN CATTLEMEN HAVE BEEN GRAZING THEIR CATTLE ON THE BOGONG HIGH PLAINS SINCE THE MID 1800'S, THE TRADITIONS AND SKILLS HAVE BEEN PASSED DOWN THROUGH THE FAMILIES, AND ARE STILL USED TODAY.

THE EXTENT OF THE LICENCE AREA ON THE BOGONG HIGH PLAINS IS APPROXIMATELY 266 SQUARE KILOMETRES, OR ROUGHLY 26,600 HECTARES. AND IF YOU WORK IN ACRES IT IS 66,500.

FOR THE LAST FIFTY YEARS, GRAZING HERE HAS BEEN CONTROLLED AND MANAGED BY SUCCESSIVE DEPARTMENTS OF CONSERVATION UNDER VARIOUS NAMES. THE MANAGEMENT OF THE COUNTRY INVOLVES DETERMINING THE DATES WHEN THE CATTLE MAY ENTER THE PLAINS, AND THE DATE BY WHICH THEY MUST BE GONE, THE NUMBER OF CATTLE ABLE TO BE GRAZED, AND THE AREAS WHICH ARE AVAILABLE FOR GRAZING. WE WORK IN WITH THE DEPARTMENT TO DETERMINE ALL THESE FACTORS.

THIS YEAR MY FAMILY TOOK 240 HEAD OF CATTLE TO OUR RUN ON THE PLAINS. WE LEFT OUR HOME PROPERTY AT DEDERANG IN THE KIEWA VALLEY ON 10TH DECEMBER 1993, AND WALKED OUR CATTLE THROUGH THE KIEWA VALLEY PAST MOUNT BEAUTY AND ALONG THE BIG HILL AND MT. FAINTER CATTLE TRACK UNTIL THEY FINALLY ARRIVED ON THE PLAINS AROUND THE 15TH OF DECEMBER, JUST BEFORE CHRISTMAS. WE WILL LEAVE

OUR CATTLE HERE UNTIL STRAIGHT AFTER EASTER, WHEN THE REVERSE PROCESS TAKES PLACE, AND WE TAKE OUR CATTLE BACK TO OUR HOME PROPERTY.

DURING THE TIME THE CATTLE ARE ON THE PLAINS, WE INSPECT THEM REGULARLY. WE COME UP EVERY FOURTEEN DAYS, AND RIDE AROUND INSPECTING ALL OUR CATTLE.

I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE IT CLEAR THAT OUR HIGH PLAINS LICENCE AREA IS ONLY USED FOR OUR BREEDING CATTLE, IT IS NOT USED AS A FATTENING PADDOCK.

OUR MAIN OBJECTIVE IN OUR 14 DAY INSPECTIONS IS TO CHECK ON THE HEALTH OF OUR CATTLE, AND TO MAKE SURE THAT THEY REMAIN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE ON OUR LICENCED AREA. ONE OF THE TECHNIQUES DESIGNED TO CONTROL THE CATTLE IS BY 'SALTING' THEM. ALPINE PASTURES AND STREAMS ARE DEFICIENT IN SALT AND THIS MEANS THE CATTLE LOOK FORWARD TO IT. WE CARRY OUR SALT - 100 KILOS EACH TIME, ON OUR PACK HORSES, AND CHOOSE A ROCKY OUTCROP TO DEPOSIT THE SALT SO THAT IT WILL NOT HAVE ANY DETRIMENTAL EFFECT ON THE GRASSLAND. WE HAVE THREE PREDETERMINED SALT CAMPS, AND ALWAYS RETURN TO THESE AREAS. WE THEN CALL THE CATTLE UP, AND WITHIN AN HOUR 85/90% OF THE CATTLE HAVE GATHERED AT THE SALT CAMP. WITHIN THREE HOURS EVERY SCRAP OF SALT HAS BEEN EATEN BY THE CATTLE.

IF WE FIND A SICK BEAST, OR A COW WITH CALVING DIFFICULTIES WE WILL TAKE IT TO OUR YARDS NEARBY, AND IF IT CANNOT BE TREATED ON THE SPOT, WE WILL TAKE IT BACK TO OUR HOME PROPERTY. THIS IS NORMAL GOOD FARMING PRACTICE.

THE USE OF PACK HORSES NOT ONLY KEEPS THE OLD TRADITION ALIVE, IT IS ACTUALLY A PRACTICAL METHOD OF GETTING AROUND OUR LICENCE AREA, AND IS MORE SENSITIVE FROM A CONSERVATION POINT OF VIEW.

THERE ARE BENEFITS TO BE GAINED BY OPERATING A GRAZING

LICENCE UP HERE ON THE BOGONG PLAINS. IT ENABLES US TO REST OUR HOME PADDOCKS DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS. ALPINE GRAZING ALSO PRODUCES THE BEST AND MOST SOUGHT-AFTER BREEDING AND STORE CATTLE IN EASTERN AUSTRALIA. NATIVE PASTURE IS IMPORTANT HERE, IT GROWS BETTER CATTLE BECAUSE THEY ARE FORCED TO MOVE AROUND SIGNIFICANTLY MORE TO GRAZE THAN THEY WOULD DO IN A LUSH HOME PADDOCK. YOU WILL NOTICE HERE THAT THE CATTLE ARE WIDELY DISPERSED AND THE EXTRA EXERCISE THEY GET REDUCES POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES WITH CALVING LATER ON. THE CLEAN NATIVE PASTURE HERE ALSO MEANS THAT THE CATTLE FATTEN BETTER WHEN THEY ARE RETURNED TO THE HOME PADDOCK. IF WE DID NOT HAVE OUR ALPINE LEASES WE WOULD NEED TO PUT OUR PREGNANT COWS ONTO ROUGH PASTURE FOR THE LAST THREE MONTHS OF THEIR PREGNANCIES.

I BELIEVE THAT GRAZING ALSO HAS BENEFITS FOR THE LAND. WE STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT GRAZING REDUCES FIRE FREQUENCY AND INTENSITY - FIRE INTENSITY IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO FUEL LOADS - AND THIS REDUCTION OF FUEL LOAD IS A POSITIVE VALUE OF GRAZING, PARTICULARLY IN THE SNOWGUM WOODLANDS.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE IMPACT OF GRAZING ON FUEL LOADS CAN BE DEMONSTRATED BY THE SITUATION ON MT BUFFALO. GRAZING WAS BANNED FROM THAT AREA APPROXIMATELY 50 YEARS AGO, AND THERE HAVE BEEN 3 MAJOR FIRES THERE OVER THE PAST 15 YEARS. I AM A MEMBER OF OUR LOCAL COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY, AND HAVE ATTENDED ALL THREE. OUR LOCAL COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDS THE EFFECT OF GRAZING IN RELATION TO FIRE, AND I AM SURE WE WOULD BE SUPPORTED 100% LOCALLY, TO HAVE GRAZING RESTORED.

RECENT STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT GRAZING HAS A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE REDUCTION OF FUEL LOADS, AND THIS, COMBINED WITH PROPER FUEL REDUCTION BURNING AT APPROPRIATE TIMES, WOULD HAVE SUBSTANTIALLY LESSENED MUCH OF THE INTENSITY OF THE RECENT BUSHFIRES IN NEW SOUTH WALES, AND CERTAINLY WOULD HAVE REDUCED THE APPALLING COSTS TO PROPERTY OWNERS

AND THE PUBLIC SERVICES INVOLVED.

ALPINE GRAZING ALSO ENSURES A CONTINUOUS AND VISIBLE PRESENCE ON THE PLAINS, AND MOUNTAIN CATTLEMENS CONTRIBUTION TO SEARCH AND RESCUE IS WELL KNOWN AND DOCUMENTED.

IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT THE CULTURAL AND HERITAGE ASPECTS OF THE MOUNTAIN CATTLEMEN AND THEIR WAY OF LIFE ARE NOW BEING RECOGNISED BY A WIDER COMMUNITY. WE ARE VERY PROUD OF OUR PIONEERING LINKS AND OUR TRADITIONS. MOUNTAIN GRAZING AND MOUNTAIN CATTLEMEN ARE OF INTEREST TO TOURISTS, AND FILM MAKERS HAVE MADE MANY FILMS DEALING WITH OUR HISTORY AND WAY OF LIFE.

GRAZING DOES NOT IMPACT ON OTHER USERS OF THE ALPINE NATIONAL PARK, SUCH AS BUSHWALKING, SKIING, TRAIL RIDING, AND THE WATER YIELD FOR DAMS. WE BELIEVE THAT THERE IS ROOM FOR ALL OF US WITHIN THE ALPINE PARK.

SEVERAL SURVEYS TAKEN AT VARIOUS TIMES HAVE SHOWN THAT THE GENERAL PUBLIC DOES NOT BELIEVE THAT GRAZING CONFLICTS WITH OTHER USES. ROUGHLY TWO-THIRDS OF PEOPLE SURVEYED HAD NO PROBLEM WITH THE PRESENCE OF CATTLE ON THE PLAINS IN THE SUMMER, AND EXPRESSED THEIR VIEW THAT GRAZING SHOULD BE RETAINED.

THESE SURVEYS WERE UNDERTAKEN IN 1989 (3 SEPARATE SURVEYS), AND 1990 FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION FORESTS AND LANDS AS IT THEN WAS.

IN 1992 ANOTHER SURVEY, USING A METHOD OF CONTINGENT VALUATION WHICH I BELIEVE IS MUCH USED OVERSEAS, WAS CONDUCTED BY THE CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY IN ALBURY. THIS BEING THE MOST UP TO DATE, I WOULD LIKE TO TELL YOU THE RESULTS IN MORE DETAIL.

WHILE MOST OF THE PEOPLE SURVEYED CONSIDERED CONSERVATION ON THE BOGONG HIGH PLAINS AS IMPORTANT, 71% OF

RESPONDENTS INDICATED SUPPORT FOR CATTLE GRAZING THERE. THE REASONS CONSIDERED MOST IMPORTANT FOR RETAINING GRAZING WERE:

GRAZING MAY HELP IN THE REDUCTION OF FIRE;  
THE PRESENCE OF MOUNTAIN CATTLEMEN ON THE PLAINS;  
GRAZING AND NATURE WERE IN BALANCE;  
GRAZING PROVIDED JOBS;  
GRAZING WAS PART OF OUR HERITAGE;  
CATTLE WERE A FEATURE OF THE SCENERY;  
CATTLEMEN PLAYED A ROLE IN SEARCH AND RESCUE;  
AND  
WEEDS WOULD PROLIFERATE IF CATTLE WERE TAKEN OFF.

THESE WERE THE MAJOR REASONS GIVEN BY A RANDOM SAMPLE OF VICTORIANS FOR THEIR SUPPORT OF ALPINE GRAZING ON THE BOGONG HIGH PLAINS.

OUR SEVEN YEAR GRAZING LICENCES REFER TO THE NEED TO MAINTAIN CONSERVATION VALUES. THIS IS OK WITH US, AS WE KNOW THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVATION IN MAINTAINING THE COUNTRY THAT WE USE AND RESPECT. WE AGREE THAT IT IS IMPORTANT TO MAINTAIN PLANT DIVERSITY, PROTECT THE NATIVE BIRDS AND ANIMALS, AND AVOID EROSION. WE BELIEVE THAT ALL THESE ARE BEING ACHIEVED WITHIN THE CURRENT MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE. OUR SCIENTIFIC ADVICE IS THAT LONG TERM MEASUREMENTS SHOW A STABLE COMPOSITION IN THE SNOW GRASSLANDS OF THE HIGH PLAINS, AND THAT ALL SPECIES ARE STILL ABUNDANT.

LONG TERM MEASUREMENTS OF MOSSBEDS SHOW NO LONG-TERM CHANGE. IF THERE ARE SPECIFIC PROBLEMS WE WOULD WELCOME DISCUSSION ON WAYS SOLVING THEM. WE HEAR A GOOD DEAL ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF CATTLE TRAMPLING, BUT WE HAVE OBSERVED HUMAN MONITORS OF MOSS-BEDS WALKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS THROUGH THEM IN ORDER TO TAKE MEASUREMENTS AND SAMPLES. CATTLE RARELY ENTER THE MOSSBEDS TO DRINK - THE ONLY RESEARCH WE KNOW OF ON THIS SUBJECT, BY DR.

VAN REES, REFERS TO CATTLE ENTERING THE MOSSBEDS ONLY 5% OF THE TIME THEY ARE ON THE PLAINS. THIS SEEMS TO BE QUITE INSIGNIFICANT. IT SHOULD ALSO BE NOTED THAT BRUMBIES ENTER THE MOSS BEDS TO DRINK. CATTLE GENERALLY DO NOT, AS THEY ARE NATURALLY SUSPICIOUS OF WET AND BOGGY CONDITIONS. PROVISION OF ALTERNATIVE WATERING POINTS COULD BE AN ISSUE FOR DISCUSSION IN THE FUTURE.

WE DISPUTE THAT CATTLE CAUSE EROSION. EROSION PATCHES ATTRIBUTABLE TO CATTLE ARE EXTREMELY SMALL AND MINOR IN COMPARISON WITH EROSION ARISING FROM ROADS AND SKISLOPE GROOMING. THE SMALL BARE PATCHES YOU SEE BETWEEN TUSSOCKS ARE NOT A SOURCE OF REAL EROSION, AND OCCUR NATURALLY ACROSS THE PLAINS.

CATTLEMEN HAVE NOTICED OVER THE YEARS THAT THE HEATHLANDS ARE GRADUALLY EXTENDING INTO THE GRASSLANDS, BUT OUR OBSERVATIONS DO NOT IMPLICATE CATTLE IN THIS. WE BELIEVE THAT THESE CHANGES MIGHT BE ATTRIBUTED TO CHANGING WEATHER PATTERNS, AND POSSIBLY THE SLOW RECOVERY AFTER FIRE. RESEARCH INTO THE INCREASING HEATHLAND HAS BEEN NARROWLY BASED, AND IN SOME WAYS APPEARS DESIGNED TO SHOW CATTLE GRAZING IN A BAD LIGHT.

WE WELCOME EFFORTS TO DEVELOP LONG-TERM MONITORING OF THE CONDITION OF THE HIGH PLAINS, BUT CONSIDER THAT THE METHODS USED SHOULD BE MORE OBJECTIVE AND WOULD LIKE TO HAVE MORE INPUT IN THE WAY THIS MONITORING IS CONDUCTED. THE PRESENT SYSTEM USED BY THE DEPARTMENT HAS NOT BEEN SUBJECTED TO PUBLIC OR SCIENTIFIC SCRUTINY, AND ALLOWS DIFFERENT OBSERVERS TO PLACE THEIR OWN INTERPRETATIONS ON IT. THIS IS BECAUSE THE VISUAL RATINGS ARE NOT STANDARDISED, AND LEAVES THE FIELD OPEN TO PERSONAL BIAS AND LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF CATTLE GRAZING HABITS.

GRAZING OF CATTLE IN THE ALPINE AREA IS IMPORTANT TO MY FAMILY, AND TO ALL MOUNTAIN CATTLEMEN, AND WE BELIEVE IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT NATIONALLY. APART FROM THE TRADITIONAL VALUES, THERE HAS BEEN NO RESEARCH INTO THE

FLOW ON EFFECT OF OUR BREEDING STOCK AND THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS DOWN THE LINE.

WE BELIEVE THAT GRAZING CAN BE MAINTAINED WITHOUT IMPACT ON CONSERVATION VALUES AND OTHER USES. UNFORTUNATELY WE ARE RARELY CONSULTED ON MANAGEMENT ISSUES AND WOULD LIKE TO BE INVOLVED AT A MUCH EARLIER STAGE WHENEVER NEW DEVELOPMENTS OR PROBLEMS ARISE. WE ALSO FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT LAND MANAGERS WOULD BENEFIT FROM OUR WEALTH OF PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE AND OBSERVATION - WE MAY NOT HOLD UNIVERSITY DEGREES, BUT WE ARE VERY CLOSE TO THE LAND AND HAVE GENERATIONS OF EXPERIENCE WHICH WE CAN DRAW ON. WE WOULD GENUINELY LIKE TO SHARE THIS EXPERIENCE, AND TO SEE LAND MANAGERS ACTING ON OUR ADVICE.

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