

CONSERVATION COMPETING WITH FARMING AS  
AN ALTERNATE LAND USE

I HAVE SOME DIFFICULTY WITH THE ABOVE TITLE WHICH REVOLVES ROUND THE DEFINITION OF THE WORD "CONSERVATION". TO MY MIND GOOD FARMING PRACTICE AND CONSERVATION BOTH RELATE TO THE SAME OBJECTIVES OF PROTECTING WATER CATCHMENTS AND PREVENTING LAND DEGRADATION AS WELL AS CONSERVE OUR NATURAL AND DEVELOPED RESOURCES, AND NOT WASTE THEM.

I AM SURE THAT MOST FARMERS ARE GOOD CONSERVATIONISTS AND SHARE THE CONCERNS OF CONSERVATIONISTS EVERYWHERE, BUT FARMERS GENERALLY TAKE A WIDER PERSPECTIVE AND A MORE PRAGMATIC VIEW THAN THE THEORY AND DOGMA EXPRESSED BY MANY CONSERVATIONIST ACTIVISTS.

THERE IS A TYPE OF CONSERVATIONIST, WHO GENERALLY DOES NOT LIVE IN OR NEAR THE VAST AREAS OF LAND THAT HE OR SHE WANTS PRESERVED IN A PRISTINE STATE, THAT SEEMS TO BE UNAWARE OF THE IMMENSITY OF THE FORCES OF NATURE AND THE EXTREMELY HARSH CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH THE ECOSYSTEM OF THIS COUNTRY EVOLVED.

CYCLICAL WAVES OF SMOKE AND FLOOD WATERS MAY HAVE CAUSED LITTLE CONCERN IN PRIMITIVE TIMES, BUT ARE THE STUFF OF NATIONAL DISASTER IN A GROWING CIVILIZED SOCIETY.

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT GOOD LAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES CAN MITIGATE AGAINST THE ILL EFFECTS OF FIRE, FLOOD AND SOIL EROSION.

THERE ARE WELL KNOWN CONSERVATION GROUPS COMPETING AGAINST FARMING AND GRAZING ON CROWN LAND, AND ARE ALSO BRINGING GREAT PRESSURE TO BEAR ON OTHER SECTIONS OF PRIMARY INDUSTRY. SO MUCH SO, THAT GOVERNMENTS HAVE RUN SCARED WITH THE RESULT THAT VALUABLE EMPLOYMENT AND INDUSTRY POTENTIAL IS STALLED IN VICTORIA.

IF COMMON SENSE DOES NOT PREVAIL, AND AS A RESULT OF HIGH PRESSURE PROPAGANDA, THE RADICAL CONSERVATIONISTS CONTINUE TO HAVE THEIR WAYS UPHELD BY POLITICIANS, IT WILL NOT BE LONG BEFORE THERE WILL BE ADDED PRESSURE TO FURTHER IMPINGE, IN A NUMBER OF WAYS, UPON THE AUTONOMY OF ALL FARMERS.

LAND DEGRADATION APPEARS CURRENTLY TO BE THE FLAVOUR OF THE SEASON, AND IT IS UNDOUBTEDLY A MATTER OF GREAT NATIONAL CONCERN.

WHAT DISAPPOINTS ME IS THAT THE SUBJECT IS BEING TREATED BY WRITERS AND COMMENTATORS AS A NEW AWARENESS AND A MATTER THAT IS ONLY NOW ABOUT TO BE TACKLED AND CONTROLLED WHILE SCANT RECOGNITION IS GIVEN TO THE CONSIDERABLE SUCCESS THAT HAS ALREADY BEEN ACHIEVED.

MORE OFTEN VERBAL AND WRITTEN COMMENT MAKES UNQUALIFIED CRITICISM OF PAST LAND MANAGEMENT, AND MAKES LITTLE DETAILED REFERENCE TO THE ALMOST UNCONTROLLABLE PLAGUE OF RABBITS WHICH CAUSED THE MOST TERRIBLE DAMAGE FOR MANY YEARS TO BOTH PRIVATELY OWNED, AND CROWN LAND ALIKE, OVER ALMOST ALL OF THE SOUTHERN HALF OF THE NATION.

FARMERS PUT A HIGH VALUE ON THE LAND THEY OWN AND CONTROL, AND AS A GENERAL RULE, HAVE VERY MUCH REDUCED SOIL EROSION PROBLEMS BY GOOD HUSBANDRY OF LIVESTOCK OVER THE PAST DECADES.

ON THE HILLY GRAZING FARM LAND WHERE I COME FROM, WHICH OFTEN EXPERIENCES VERY DRY YEARS, AND OCCASIONALLY YEARS MAY HAVE A SUCCESSION OF FLOODING RAINS, I WELL REMEMBER WHEN ALMOST EVERY DRAINAGE LINE ON THE NORTHERN SLOPES WAS DEVELOPING OPEN GULLY EROSION, AND MANY UNDERGROUND WASHOUTS WERE DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING ON THE SOUTHERN SLOPES.

TODAY AFTER FIFTY YEARS OF CONTINUOUS, BUT JUDICIOUS, STOCK MANAGEMENT AND RELIEF FROM RABBIT PRESSURE, THERE CERTAINLY DOES STILL REMAIN SOME BAD EXAMPLES OF EROSION, BUT MOST GULLIES HAVE STABILIZED AND MOST OF THE MINOR WASHAWAYS HAVE DISAPPEARED UNDER PASTURE.

IN THOSE DAYS OF MY YOUTH, I CAN RECALL DUST STORMS WHICH WERE AT TIMES SETTLED BY SHOWERS OF RAIN, THAT MADE RED MUD IN A DISTRICT WHICH IS A VERY LONG WAY DOWN WIND, AND

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAINS FROM RED SOIL COUNTRY.

THERE HAS BEEN NO CONTINUED EXPERIENCE OF THAT FOR MANY YEARS, SO EVIDENTLY THE REDUCTION OF AT LEAST SOME ASPECTS OF SOIL DEGRADATION MUST BE REDUCED OVER A WIDE AREA.

I HAVE NO HESITATION IN PROPOSING THAT GRAZING BY WELL MANAGED LIVESTOCK CAN BE THE MOST VALUABLE TOOL IN THE ARMOURY AGAINST LAND AND ENVIRONMENT DEGRADATION.

I HAVE OBSERVED FOR MANY YEARS THE RESULTS OF WELL MANAGED GRAZING ON CLEARED FARMLAND, AND THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VERY DISTINCT INCREASE IN THE ROOT STOCK OF GROUND COVER.

I HAVE ALSO HAD MANY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE OF GRAZING CATTLE EACH YEAR ON UNDEVELOPED CROWN LAND IN EASTERN VICTORIA. MUCH OF THE MOUNTAIN COUNTRY HAS LITTLE TO ATTRACT CATTLE, BUT WHERE THEY DO FIND FORAGE IN THE VALLEYS, THE GRASS UNDERSTORY OF FORESTS, OPEN SNOWGUM WOODLAND, OR SNOW PLAIN, THEY GIVE A VERY EFFECTIVE TRIMMING TO THE GROUND COVER VEGETATION IN A MUCH LESS HARSH WAY THAN REPEATED FUEL REDUCTION BURNING MIGHT DO.

ESTABLISHING WILD FIRE REDUCTION BREAKS BY GRAZING FOR SOME MONTHS EACH YEAR NOT ONLY HAS THE OBVIOUS BENEFIT OF FUEL REDUCTION, BUT IMPROVES THE WELFARE OF WILDLIFE BY ENSURING THE AVAILABILITY OF MORE FRESH AND EARLY REGROWTH FOR THE NATIVE ANIMALS THAT SURVIVE THE WINTER PERIODS.

FERTILE PATCHES ARE PROVIDED FOR LESSER FORMS OF LIFE WHICH MAKE UP THE FOOD-CHAIN FOR OTHER CREATURES.

THE PRACTICE OF REMOVING CATTLE FOR THE GREATER PART OF THE YEAR ENSURES THAT THERE IS NOT SUFFICIENTLY SUSTAINED PRESSURE ON ANY PLANT SPECIES TO CAUSE CHANGE IN THE PLANT LIFE COMPOSITIONS AND IN FACT THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREATER DIVERSITY OF SPECIES IS PROMOTED.

MY YEARS OF 'HANDS ON' EXPERIENCE AND A VISIT TO NORTH AMERICA FOR SEVERAL MONTHS LAST YEAR LED ME TO PONDER THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AUSTRALIA AND OTHER CONTINENTS AROUND THE WORLD AND CONTEMPLATE THAT PERHAPS A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTING REASON FOR THIS COUNTRY BEING SO GREATLY ERODED IS THAT IT HAS NEVER HAD THE VAST GRAZING HERDS THAT WERE FOUND IN OTHER COUNTRIES.

I WOULD LIKE TO CHECK REACTION FROM YOU TO THIS HYPOTHESIS THAT I HAVE CALLED THE MISSING LINK? WHICH RELATES TO HARD HOOVED ANIMALS AND THE AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENT.

MANY PEOPLE HAVE STRAINED CREDIBILITY BY CLAIMING THAT SO-CALLED SOFT FOOTED ANIMALS HAVE LESS ADVERSE EFFECTS UPON SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION VALUES THAN DO HARD HOOVED ANIMALS.

6.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO SUPPORT THIS THEORY AFTER OBSERVING THE EXTENSIVE AREAS OF BARE AND DISTURBED GROUND SCARIFIED BY LYRE BIRDS BENEATH THE SCRUBBY UNDER-STORY OF FORESTS IN THE EASTERN RANGES AND THE BURROWING AND SOIL SUBSIDENCE FOLLOWING COUNTLESS YEARS OF WOMBAT EXCAVATION.

HALF A CENTURY AGO THERE WAS VAST DEVASTATION BY SOFT FOOTED RABBITS THAT COMPLETELY DENUDED THE LAND, DESTABILIZED RIVER BANKS, AND RINGBARKED MILLIONS OF TREE SEEDLINGS.

THE INCONCLUSIVE RHETORIC THAT HAS BEEN CIRCULATED AND HAS GAINED SOME CURRENCY WITH PEOPLE WHO DO NOT UNDERSTAND GRAZING ANIMALS HAS LED THEM TO BELIEVE THAT SO CALLED HARD HOOVED ANIMALS ARE DETRIMENTAL TO THE AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENT.

AUSTRALIA APPEARS TO HAVE HAD BY FAR THE GREATEST SOIL EROSION RATE OF ANY MAJOR LAND MASS ON THE PLANET EARTH, AND IT IS THE ONLY COUNTRY WHICH HAS NOT HAD VAST HERDS OF GRAZING UNGULATES. HISTORY INDICATES THAT IN OTHER COUNTRIES GREAT HERDS OF THESE HOOVED ANIMALS GENERALLY MOVED IN A MIGRATORY FASHION AS THEY FOLLOWED SEASONAL PASTURE GROWTH AND HAD THEIR HERDING INSTINCTS DEVELOPED BY PREDATORS.

AS THEY MOVED ACROSS THE LAND, THEIR HOOF AND TOOTH ACTION REDUCED MUCH OF THE REMAINING PREVIOUS SEASONS BRITTLE AND COMBUSTIBLE DEAD GRASS TO COMPOSTING LITTER,

AND CONVERTED NEW GROWTH TO FERTILIZER. UNFORTUNATELY HUMAN INTERVENTION WITH ANIMAL MANAGEMENT HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY GOOD HUSBANDRY PRACTICES IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE WORLD, AND THIS HAS CREATED THE MISPLACED BELIEF THAT HOOVED ANIMALS ARE ALL BAD FOR CONSERVATION VALUES.

IN AUSTRALIA, WHERE GEOLOGISTS HAVE INFORMED US THAT IN PAST AGES MOUNTAIN RANGES WERE AS HIGH AS 25,000 FEET AND MORE ABOVE SEA LEVEL, THE LARGE LAND CREATURES OTHER THAN BIRDS WERE MARSUPIALS AND REPTILES. MOST GRAZING MARSUPIALS AVOID THE MORE ELEVATED AND SNOWY REGIONS, BUT IT APPEARS THAT AS THE MOUNTAINS ERODED THE ANNUAL SNOW MELT REDUCED, AND THE PLAINS BECAME MORE ARID, THESE ANIMALS DEVELOPED A UNIQUE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM WHICH BETTER EQUIPPED THEM TO WITHSTAND DROUGHT RATHER THAN THE DEPREDATIONS OF LARGE AND EFFICIENT LAND BASED PREDATORS.

FOR MILLIONS OF YEARS THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE, WHICH IS DERIVED FROM THE SAME BASIC FOUNDATIONS AS ARE TO BE FOUND THROUGHOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD, WAS AFFECTED BY A SUCCESSIVE ROUTINE OF FIRE, FLOOD, EROSION AND REGROWTH WHICH CONTINUED WITH RELENTLESS AND DEVASTATING EFFECT.

THE AVERAGE ELEVATION OF LAND IN AUSTRALIA IS PROBABLY LESS THAN 200 METRES ABOVE SEA LEVEL, WHILE ALL OTHER

MAJOR LAND MASSES WOULD HAVE AN AVERAGE ELEVATION OF PERHAPS 1,000 METRES OR MORE.

THERE IS VERY GREAT DIFFERENCE IN SOIL EROSION WHILE THE ONLY OTHER REALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE IS THAT AUSTRALIA HAS NOT HAD THE SAME BENEFICIAL HOOF AND TOOTH ACTION OF VAST HERDS AS THEY FOLLOWED THE SEASONS AND MADE THE ANNUAL REGROWTH OF GROUND COVER LESS FIRE PRONE AND CONSEQUENTLY LESS SUBJECT TO SOIL EROSION.

THERE IS AMPLE EVIDENCE TODAY THAT WELL MANAGED GRAZING ACTIVITY USES, AND AT THE SAME TIME STRENGTHENS, PLANT COMMUNITIES OF PASTORAL VALUE.

SO, IS IT NOT REASONABLE TO PROPOSE "THAT THE LACK OF HOOVED ANIMALS HAS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR ACCELERATED LAND DEGRADATION IN AUSTRALIA?"

TO CONCLUDE I WOULD LIKE TO REITERATE THAT GOOD FARMING IS GOOD CONSERVATION, AND WE HAVE A DUTY IN THIS CIVILIZED AGE TO PROTECT OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES AS WELL AS OUR LAND AND PROPERTY FROM THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF WILDFIRE.

ALTERNATIVE CONSERVATION PLANS THAT PROPOSE REVERTING TO PRE-CIVILIZATION TIMES OF NATURAL FIRE, FLOOD, EROSION, AND REGROWTH ARE A RECIPE FOR DISASTER.



IF WE ARE GOING TO MAKE A GOOD JOB OF SHAPING TOMORROWS FARM TODAY, WE HAD BETTER BE SURE THAT WE DO NOT BUILD ON FAULTY FOUNDATIONS.

I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE A BETTER FARM TOMORROW IF WE PRODUCE DEDICATED FARMERS AND STOCKMEN WHO ARE NOT OVERWHELMED BY A REGULATED PROCESS AND BUREAUOCRACY.

WITH THIS IN MIND, WE SHOULD STRIVE TO EQUIP OUR CHILDREN WITH THE BEST OF EDUCATION SO THAT THEY WILL BE BETTER ABLE TO COPE, AND IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE PROMOTE THOROUGH SCIENTIFIC STUDIES WHICH CAN BE USED TO CORRECT OR REFUTE UNPROVEN ASSUMPTIONS WHICH ARE SOMETIMES PRESENTED AS SCIENTIFIC FACT BY UNSCRUPULOUS PRESSURE GROUPS.

JAMES A. COMMINS

FEBRUARY, 1990