Bill Gammage: comments on 25 December 2012
"*The Links between Cattle Grazing and Fuel Reduction in the Grazing Zones of the High Country*". Mountain Cattleman's Association of Victoria, February 2010.
Copy with thanks from Graeme Stoney, December 2012.

The management of Australia's national parks is a disgrace. Trees and scrub overrun grass and open forest, fuel builds up, fires ravage, species become endangered and extinct, people die.

There are four options for managing fuel in alpine country:
1. Do nothing
2. Fire
3. Grazing
4. Combine 2 and 3.

1. Though I've not seen it tested, a common belief is that the public mostly favours doing nothing, because this preserves what is there - a "natural balance", a harmony of plants and animals (including birds, reptiles and insects) as intended by nature.

This offends on three broad grounds. First, even without people there is no such thing as a "natural balance". The term implies a static condition, as if plants and animals stand frozen in time, but all life moves in cycles, competing, collaborating, responding variably to season and circumstance. Second, for at least 50,000 years until 1788, Aborigines actively managed the land. In places they deliberately did nothing, but not forever, and in most places they did a lot – it was their life work. They shaped Australia into a kaleidoscope of plant patterns, and by controlling fuel they eliminated or greatly reduced killer fires. Wilderness came after, in country Europeans couldn't use. Third, it was never the purpose of national parks to protect a "natural balance", even if managers could say what that was. The avowed purpose of national parks is active, not passive: to protect species diversity, so passing to the future the gifts of the past. Clearly this is not happening. "Do nothing" is not a policy; it is a neglect of heritage and a dereliction of duty, endangering our plants and animals and impoverishing our future. We must intervene; we must manage.

2. To reduce fuel and to protect species, fire is the best option. The people of 1788 gave the future a great gift, which even today many newcomers can't imagine: with proper management, killer fires can be averted, the impact of lightning strikes much reduced, and patterns of plant distribution maintained so as to ensure a habitat for every plant and animal. This is a gift to prize.

Today it would be very difficult to reduce the high country to 1788 fuel levels, and then to introduce and maintain a habitat for every plant and animal. We haven't anywhere near the fire and species skills of 1788, nor are we prepared to commit the time and resources those people did. But we could do better. We could "burn and learn": commit to fuel reduction by regular preventive burns, thereby averting killer fires and giving at least some species under threat a chance to survive. In the high country some local expertise survives to assist this, and elsewhere very considerable Aboriginal expertise is at hand.

3. As its title states, the paper advocates cattle grazing to reduce fuel in the high country. This would come from grazing itself, and from the controlled fires cattlemen light to refresh grassland.

Cattle grazing is far superior to doing nothing, but far short of fire's capacity. No doubt marsupial grazing helped Aboriginal people maintain a mosaic of short grassy patches which were also fire breaks, and cattle too prefer young fresh grass which comes up after a well-timed fire.

But the people of 1788 did not rely on grazing. It was a welcome bonus rather than an essential tool. Except in desperate times kangaroos and cattle are selective feeders. They seek out the tastiest and most nutritious grasses. Over time this has the effect of promoting non-fodder grasses, and scrub. It is important to note that even in cattle times in the mountains, scrub was recapturing grassland that Aboriginal fire had made. This occurred too in low country now farming areas, where decades of stock grazing failed to prevent scrub and trees regenerating on less favoured hills and the like, while the most nutritious grasses were locally eradicated and replaced by weeds. So far as I can tell on limited knowledge, weeds have not significantly impacted on upland swards, though they may have in valleys.

As everywhere, weeds mostly introduced by stock, such as St John's Wort, sorrel, blackberry, thistle and clover, are endemic in the high country. Their introduction has provoked criticism of high country grazing, but since they are already endemic they do not argue against future grazing – the damage is done. On the other hand, stock compact soil and clog ephemeral water sources such as springs, to the detriment of some native species, and the high country still has such valuable habitats.

Option 4. Essentially the paper advocates this. The fire skills generations of mountain cattlemen have accumulated are valuable, and too much ignored today, when what counts must be on paper. Given our ignorance compared to 1788, option 4 does seem the best available, or more exactly might become so if its problems can be resolved.

The key problem is that you can't burn and graze in the same place at the same time. In this situation cattlemen will either not burn, or burn for cattle. This is so today across northern Australia, with results better than doing nothing, but still not protecting species diversity. Burning for cattle is not the same as burning for diversity: it is more likely to be sheet- rather than patch-burning, and hot rather than cool. Northern cattlemen are increasingly realising the folly of such management, particularly in the face of persistent scrub regeneration (as has occurred in Gippsland too). Grazing must therefore take second place to properly managed fire. Cattlemen will argue that this is possible. I agree, if we learn more, and find ways to ensure compliance.

Another problem is a good balance between option 4 and summer recreational use in national parks, especially where admission charges give the latter some sort of priority. Controlled fire, cattle, campers, bushwalkers and 4WDs don't mix, but all are entitled to access. Controlled fire should remain the first priority; without it the rest is at risk anyway. Few will ever be happy with how the rest compromise, but above all it should not licence a "do nothing" or "no fire" policy.

Today experiments are trying to see how fire and grazing interact. These merit support, to test such broad assertions as made here, and to discover the myriad small details about species survival they overlook. Nonetheless, the lessons from 1788 need no experiment. The lesson is clear. Fire is the key ally in managing country. We must burn more, and learn how to do it well.

But the public needs persuasion. Perhaps three trials, each in several distinct areas, might be set up on blank ground after the next big fire (which under present practice will surely happen some time). One trial would test fire management regimes, another (presumably recent cattle leases) fire + grazing, and for political reasons the third, despite overwhelming evidence of its failure, "do nothing". Apart from garnering expertise on high country management, each trial might entice its advocates to see that it gets the best test possible, and ultimately to accept which is the most effective option.