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Stuart Rintoul

Cattle wars

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Mounting a challenge ... horseman Charlie Lovick says cattle grazing is beneficial for Victoria's high country.
Photo: Thom Rigney

Graziers and environmentalists share a love of Victoria's high country, but as Stuart Rintoul writes, when it comes to how best to protect it, the love stops.

It is long after dark and Charlie Lovick is riding back into camp on a mountain peak high in the Victorian Alps. Wind and rain are blowing up from the valley, lashing at his face, while lightning is flashing through the storm clouds below him. He is in the violent grandeur of the tempest.

As he recalls it now, 35 years later, his eyes bright with the memory, he says, "I belong to that country. I'm part of it and I'll never be removed from it. It's in your heart. It's your homeland." Lovick, 63, is president of the Victorian Mountain Cattlemen's Association, an organisation defiantly proud of its heritage, perennially at war with environmentalists for the right to graze cattle in the Victorian Alps over the summer months, as their forefathers did for 150 years, and loud in their warnings that the Alpine National Park high country has degraded since their expulsion in 2005, and is in danger of burning.



Ranging concerns ... Charlie Lovick's daughter, Kellie, shares her father's passion for the high country.
Photo: Thom Rigney

"The country is in peril," Lovick says. "We have always felt that the national park has been a death sentence for our high country, an absolute death sentence." He says if cattle are not permitted to return, "I will be heartbroken for the country, because I know what's going to happen to it."

Lovick's attachment to the high country is six-generations deep, from his great-grandfather to his grandchildren. His conviction is strong. And he is not alone in his devotion.

Research scientist Henrik Wahren has worked in the Rocky Mountains of America, the Arctic tundra of Alaska and the Australian Alps. He talks about his love for the

Alps, his sense of connection: "In this land I'm at home, at peace. Yet the land is not mine. It isn't something I or anyone else can own or have the right to do with as we please. My hope is that our current society will look after the land or, at worst, just leave it alone.



Protective detail ... former Labor environment minister John Thwaites beside a damaged peat bed, before his government banned alpine grazing in 2005. *Photo: Phil Ingamells*

"What has taken my breath away? The morning silence after a night of heavy snow, or the time a lonely emu followed two of us around for a whole day, or when two wedgies swooped low enough to ruffle the hair on my head, or seeing the alpine marsh marigold flowering under melting snow, or the first light on a favourite rock."

And so the protagonists return to the trampled battlefield as Victoria's mountain cattlemen revive their case for taking cattle to the high country in the new political environment of conservative state and federal governments. Within days of the Abbott government's election, Lovick was pressing for a new

"scientific trial" to prove that grazing reduces the risk of bushfire, a concept that has been dismissed by a raft of inquiries and scientific reports over decades. "Déjà vu," says Wahren.

At this home in Merrijig, at the base of what Banjo Paterson called the "torn and rugged battlements" of the high country, Lovick weaves a story with an uncertain ending. It begins in 1829, when his great-great-grandfather, Thomas Lovick, arrived in Van Diemen's Land as a convict from Norwich, a smuggler who was given "a free ride" to the new world.



For peat's sake ... An intact moss bed that has been protected from cattle. *Photo: Colin Totterdell*

By 1860, his Australian-born son, William Mitchell Lovick, was following the lure of gold along the Howqua River into Victoria's high country. He built the Merrijig Hotel in 1873, bought land, "and from there we've sprung". The Lovick family made their home and their name and settled into the seasonal rhythm of taking cattle onto the lush high plains in summer.

Mount Lovick on the Great Dividing Range, where the Lovicks established the King Billy Run around 1900, is named after Charlie Lovick's great-uncle Frank Lovick, who is remembered with a kind of awe. He once drove a mob of cattle caught in early snow down a sheer and frightening cleft in the mountains known as the Blowhole, saving himself, his mate and his stock.

Charlie Lovick's father, Jack, was awarded a British Empire Medal for risking his life numerous times to save people lost or injured in the high country. "There's probably been pretty much one legend each generation for their knowledge of the high country,"

Lovick says. "When you're brought up on those stories, it can't help but end up in your blood. It is in my DNA."

Lovick was horse master for *The Man From Snowy River* films, based on the Banjo Paterson poem, which includes the lines: "*And the man from Snowy River never shifted in his seat - It was grand to see that mountain horseman ride.*"

For the past dozen years, Lovick and other mountain cattlemen have ridden in the Melbourne Cup parade: bearded, dressed in bushman's clothes, Australian flags waving.

Lovick feels the admiration and the longing in the crowd. "You ask the general public throughout this bloody nation what they think of the mountain cattlemen," he says. "They want us there. For the latte-sippers who say we're a dying breed, I've got news for them: we're not going anywhere."

In their renewed campaign, the cattlemen are pressing for a scientific trial of at least three years to test their claims that cattle cause little damage in the 16 to 18 weeks they graze in the high country of Victoria's Alpine National Park over summer, while greatly reducing the risk of bushfire. It is an argument built on the twin pillars of

fire and heritage: that no one knows, or loves, the high country better than the mountain cattlemen and that the risk of fire has increased dramatically since they were locked out of the national park in 2005.

Lovick says the high country was in "really good condition" when there were 8000 cattle grazing on it over summer, and when cattlemen burned the land where they saw it was overgrown. He says there has been a "scary" deterioration since their eviction and that protected areas, rather than thriving, are showing signs of senescence, adding green philosophy has been allowed to conquer common sense. "They don't like to stand in cow shit," he says.

In late November, the Victorian government backed a three-year trial of cattle grazing in the low-lying Wonnangatta Valley, on what was once Victoria's most isolated station - and the scene of a famous unsolved murder in 1918. But Lovick says it is "very true" that graziers hope this small trial, involving about 60 head, will lead to grazing being reintroduced "across more of the country".

Among environmentalists, there is incredulosity that new life is being breathed into this old argument about whether cattle have a place in the high country, whether the Alpine National Park is a national park or a paddock, whether heritage trumps protection and whether grazing reduces bushfire blazing. Cattle were phased out of the Kosciuszko National Park in NSW between 1944 and 1969 and were progressively removed from the Victorian Alps from the 1950s. In 2005, the Bracks Labor government terminated the last of the cattle licences, which covered almost half of the 660,500 hectares that comprise the Alpine National Park.

The ban followed an Alpine Grazing Taskforce report, which concluded grazing did not make an effective contribution to fuel reduction and wildfire behaviour in alpine areas, cultural heritage did not depend on grazing, and grazing caused ecological damage that was not compatible with the national and international standards for a national park.

The report found there were at least 25 rare and threatened plant species and several species of rare or threatened fauna in the alpine and subalpine areas of the national park that were threatened by grazing. Among them were native wintercress and bogong apple-moss, billy-buttons, eyebright and woodrush, skinks and tree frogs - all vulnerable to "disturbance, browsing and trampling".

Environmentalists, who had been campaigning to end the "farce" of grazing in a national park rejoiced. But in 2010, Victoria's Baillieu Coalition government returned 400 cattle to six "research sites" in a "scientific trial" on the impact of cattle on bushfires, despite strong opposition from the Australian Academy of Science and the World Commission on Protected Areas.

In 2011, Labor's federal environment minister Tony Burke used his powers under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act to remove the cattle. Environmentalists have been on edge since mid-year, when the Victorian Coalition government reconvened an alpine advisory committee heavy with pro-burning and pro-grazing members.

One member of that advisory committee is David Packham, a former CSIRO scientist who wrote angrily after 2009's deadly Black Saturday bushfires, which killed 173 people, that public policy had been perverted by the "environmental fantasies of outraged extremists and latte conservationists".

When we speak, Packham has just returned from a field trip into the Alpine National Park with the advisory committee and is shocked by what they found. He says the condition of the high country forests is "as dangerous as it has ever been" and "just terrifying".

Packham proposes returning "as fast as we can and as intelligently as we can" to the constant burning practices of Aboriginal people. The issue of whether grazing reduces fire risk is more "complex", he says. But he says cattle are capable of keeping damaging fuels under control and he makes this point: "If you get the cattle up there, you get the cattlemen up there, who truly have enormous respect and even love for the country and who do want to look after it."

He also says that grazing did not end when cattle were banned, but that the Alps are now being heavily grazed, by tens of thousands of Sambar deer and thousands of brumbies.

In Darwin, retired CSIRO scientist Dick Williams, a key opponent of grazing and burning in the high country, says the weight of scientific evidence is "crystal clear" that grazing has little or no effect on the occurrence or severity of fire in the alpine areas because cattle don't eat the most flammable vegetation; that grazing has well-documented negative impacts on the conservation values of Australia's rare alpine and subalpine ecosystems; that the extent of Aboriginal burning in the high country is unknown; and that descriptions of fuel loads as "dangerous" and "terrifying" are unscientific and unhelpful.

"There is no scientific justification for any of this," says Williams. "The science is very clear and compelling. It doesn't work and it's got large ecological costs." He says while there might be a place for grazing and burning in lowland foothill forests outside the national park, there is no scientific case for grazing and burning in Alpine country and any attempt to reintroduce it could ignite a "fire wars" similar to the "history wars".

At the Victorian National Parks Association in Melbourne, Phil Ingamells runs the organisation's park protection project. In 1985, he was working at a yoga ashram when he "fluked" a six-month job in the education unit of Victoria's National Parks Service. He was kept on at the newly amalgamated Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, where he stayed for 10 years until the Kennett Coalition government closed the unit. He got to know environmental scientists and alpine ecologists, bushwalked in the high country, became involved with the Victorian National Parks Association, spent a decade on its board and then went to work for it.

He is a passionate environmentalist. "You have to absolutely feel for nature," he says. "You have to know the predicament that nature is in - and that takes a long time. It is not a very easy thing to see. And you can't despair. You have to believe that we can win this and we are not winning now. Our job really is to hold the line as best we can. Conservation is a constant battle, through every generation. You don't just win and go home."

For Ingamells, there is no place for cattle that foul the mountain headwaters and chew the grassy plains down to rubble. He tells a story about walking across the high plains during the 2005 inquiry, with a group of cattlemen who spent the day denying that cattle caused environmental damage until finally they came across a dead cow in the middle of a sphagnum bog. There was a long silence, finally broken by one of the cattlemen saying, "That's not my cow."

He says the grazing era is over, that many of the cattlemen "have recognised that their time is up" and only a few are fighting on. These "old guys" are free to ride their horses into the high country, Ingamells says. "But most of the time, they take their four-wheel-drives up and come back and take the kids to basketball. I mean, you've got to be realistic, this is 2013."

He is witheringly dismissive of their appeals to heritage and tradition. "Times change," he says. "We don't churn butter in wooden butter-churns any more, we don't go whaling any more."

He says environmentalists conceded the heritage value of retaining the cattlemen's mountain huts, built from snow gum and alpine ash and corrugated iron, which he thinks are "cute", but the cattlemen do not have a mortgage on heritage. Aboriginal people had a presence in the Victorian Alps for thousands of years. There is also, he says, "a whole other heritage in the high country that is completely forgotten about - and these are the naturalists, the scientists, the botanists, who went up there from the 1850s."

He talks about the unrealised benefits that might come if complex ecological systems, such as those that are to be found in the Victorian Alps, are allowed to survive, and the research that remains to be done in microbiology. "When we really understand the system - and that day will come - then I think the battle can be won."

At Merrijig, Lovick acknowledges the passions of the environmentalists are strong and that they also have a certain kind of love for the high country, although he gives little ground. "They walk in one side and walk out the other," he says. "We live in the bloody place. We fight the fires."

He also acknowledges, remorsefully, that some cattlemen have walked away. "They didn't have the guts," he says. "They didn't have the guts and the conviction and didn't feel the responsibility to the country that us stronger ones have. It broke some families up, the pressure of it."

The Lovick holdings have never been large. When he was evicted from his alpine lease in 2005, Charlie Lovick had a licence for fewer than 100 head of cattle, including calves, split between himself and his brother John, grazing on 10,000 hectares for 16-18 weeks of the year. He says he makes more from the horseback adventure business his family started more than 40 years ago than he does from cattle, and it makes no financial sense to take cattle to the high country.

"It's our love for the country that makes us go back," he says. "And our responsibility to look after it." He says cattlemen burned with rage when environmentalists said they were only a few selfish graziers looking for a free feed for their cattle. He felt it was disrespectful of their heritage, "because we have the value of that country in our hearts".

In the days that follow, Lovick's daughter, Kellie Purvis, 27, writes to say what the mountains mean to her: a question she feels she has been answering all her life.

"I hold it very dear to my heart," she says. "Heritage and tradition is a big part of Australia. I embrace it with open arms and wear it proudly." She says that at a time when it is easy for young people to leave the land, "we choose to stay and see what the year brings". She adds that she shares her father's concern that the high country is poorer for their banishment and "to see what once was so beautiful now hungry for life.

"I'm very much like my father," she says. "I have the burn in me like fire."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/cattle-wars-20131202-2ykfg.html#ixzz2mlfUr0wE>