

WHY CATTLE SHOULD GO BACK TO WONNANGATTA

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The State Government has applied to the Federal Minister for the Environment Greg Hunt to put cattle back into Wonnangatta Station. The Government are required to go through that process under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act. An answer to the request is expected before Christmas.

Wonnangatta was privately owned and was grazed from the late 1860's until the Cain Government purchased it in 1988 and incorporated it into the Alpine National Park. It was the most remote and inaccessible cattle property in Victoria at an altitude of 500 metres.

The Government wishes to conduct a grazing trial at Wonnangatta over three years to assess if grazing reduces fuel loads and assist with management of some suitable areas of the Alpine National Park. This follows a previous proposal for six grazing trials throughout the Park which was refused for political reasons by former Federal Minister, Tony Burke.

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV) has offered the Minister for Environment Ryan Smith every assistance to conduct the trial but at the time of writing has not been formerly asked to take part.

When the Station was resumed by the Government there was outrage expressed by mountain families and others who knew what the

long term consequences of such an action would be. When grazing was stopped, the Wonnangatta flats were short green and the valley was a lovely place to ride and walk. Within a few years all that changed and nowadays the flats are impenetrable.

Everyone who has visited Wonnangatta in recent years will be aware of the dangerously high fuel loads, the invasion of weeds and gradual invasion of the bush and scrub onto the iconic open flats. It is obvious to those visitors who know what they are looking at, that the present management regimes of mostly 'just leave it alone', are not working.

Earlier this year eminent historian and writer Professor Bill Gammage visited Wonnangatta with a group of people including myself. We camped under the elms at the Station. We were privileged to have Prof. Gammage explain on site, how the aborigines deliberately managed the land with cool fire which in turn encouraged the grazing animals which in turn became dinner. That process ensured the land was "clean" not "dirty" and it remained open and attractive.

This management over centuries created a park like structure of bigger trees in much of the NSW and Victorian Alps with very little or at best a balanced understory. Gammage's book goes into great detail and is backed up with evidential references.

Mountain family's anecdotal history relates how the early settlers followed the example of the first

people and cool burned regularly. This created a mosaic pattern in the bush and this plus the short green grazed areas dampened any rush of wildfire. However Government policy gradually stopped the cattlemen conducting cool burns. The inevitable hot bushfires germinated a forest of seedlings and there were no following cool fires to reduce the new growth. Except in the regularly grazed areas, the landscape changed until today most of the Alpine area is dense bush and the park like features noted by the early explorers has disappeared.

We are at a point where there must be a total change to the management of the High Country. Future management must be on a landscape scale and use every tool in the tool box. These tools must include much more cool burning at the correct time and where possible in collaboration with local experience. Grazing cattle in the grazing areas of the High Country must be reintroduced where it can be useful while protecting any extremely sensitive areas. It is a question of accepting there has to be a trade-off and balance to achieve the greater good.

Environmental groups have done both the land and the general public a huge disservice by claiming that all the Alpine National Park is pristine and would be trashed by cattle. They have extrapolated some minor scientific work done on a small section of the Bogong Plains to claim that the findings apply to the entire Park. They have neglected to acknowledge that rangeland grazing is carried out throughout the world in National Parks and is regarded by the public as a vital management tool in those countries.

If we are to reverse what is happening to the High Country there has to be a complete rethink and approach to management. Wonnangatta is a good place to start with a combined burning and grazing program. The side benefit of such a program will preserve the traditions and knowledge of both the Aborigine's and Mountain Cattlemen. The land would be the ultimate winner.