

High country public lands — Stewardship or exploitation?

Since 1983, the Society has joined with Acclimatisation Societies and Federated Mountain Clubs in seeking recognition for the natural, scenic and recreational importance of the high country. Such attention is long overdue. Over the last 12 years, nearly a third of the high country pastoral lands have been freeholded with virtually no protection for scientific, scenic or recreational values. Advances in agricultural technology since the 1950s have replaced more than perhaps a million hectares of tussock cover with introduced grasses.

In the United States, seas of tall prairie covering nearly a million square kms awed early pioneers pushing west. Today less than two percent of this remains — virtually all of it unprotected. A major rescue effort is now being mounted with the Government prepared to spend \$US15 million to secure a 20,000 hectare reserve for a national park. To a degree, the New Zealand experience is similar, although fortunately our grasslands are still in Crown ownership. Obsessed with mountains, we neglected to set aside the tawny tussock long celebrated by our poets and painters. Meanwhile the landscape has changed, and so too have the homes of the Otago giant skink, the black stilt, Cromwell chafer beetle and Armstrong's hebe — all of which have dwindled to the edge of extinction. Protected Natural Areas survey teams are now piecing together the patchwork of our remaining tussocklands and once identified, officials will consider exchange arrangements and covenants to secure such areas.

A host of policies recently adopted by the Land Settlement Board should now prevent or at least lessen further damage to high country values. The Government also recently endorsed two significant policies: one allowing for severely eroded lands to be excluded from leases, the other to prevent key natural and recreation areas from being freeholded.

However, it is now questionable whether these policies will receive a fair trial. A Land Development Corporation, not the Department of Conservation, has been recommended as the controller of pastoral lands. Federated Farmers have claimed a victory. We believe the recommendation is unworkable on both economic and environmental grounds. A lean, commercially-oriented corporation cannot succeed if it is saddled with the management of a huge estate of essentially non-commercial land. Nor can it hope to administer effectively no less than 28 different policies or statutes designed to ensure the balanced use of the high country. The business solution would be to hock the land off to the highest bidder. We have seen that in the past and it must never be repeated.

The stakes are high. There are 2.7 million hectares of Crown pastoral leasehold land in the South Island and a further million hectares of high country tussock land (including Mōlesworth) under direct Crown control. This is nearly 14 percent of New Zealand's land area, and a full third of our publicly-owned natural land. The high country makes up nearly a third of our sheep farming land, supports three percent of our total sheep and 1.5 percent of our sheep farmers. In 1982-83, 369 lessees paid \$172,000 or a mere 6.8 cents a hectare for the land.

The Society has recommended pastoral lands should be placed under the control of a neutral stewardship agency advised by both the Department of Conservation and the Land Development Corporation. In the longer term, as further information is gathered on the protective and productive values of such lands, they should be allocated through a public procedure for protection, multiple use production under leasehold tenure or freeholded for farming. Never again should the high country be seen as an outback awaiting exploitation.

Dr Alan Edmonds, President



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C · O · N · T · E · N · T · S

Articles

- 2 Full protection for the kea
- 6 Protected Natural Areas programme starved of finance
- 10 Why our wetlands have gone down the drain
- 14 Catlins council meeting
- 16 Hoiho — world's rarest penguin
- 18 Reflections on the new environmental administration
- 22 Special plants of inland Marlborough
- 24 Threats to Queensland rainforests



2



16



22

Departments

- 27 Conservation Update
- 28 Junior Section
- 30 Bulletin
- 31 Society officers
- 32 Society lodges

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