

PARKS AND GRAZING

Visitors in national parks in the South Island, or one of many other protected areas, will often be greeted by the incongruous sight of farm animals among the forests, wetlands and tussock grasslands of the backcountry. Unrestrained, and usually with the approval of the Department of Conservation, they graze with little assessment being done of their environmental impact. The integrity of these major protected natural areas is threatened, says MIKE HARDING, and these unique remnant slices of natural New Zealand are being slowly transformed into examples of an English country park.

CROPPED PASTURE and muddy stock-trampled tracks are familiar images of the grazing lands that dominate the New Zealand countryside. However, the herds of curious cattle or straggling mobs of sheep that are a common sight from our country roads are not confined to farm paddocks.

Over 114,000 hectares of conservation lands are grazed with impunity by domestic stock. And that does not include over 4,000 hectares of grazing licences within national parks or the many cases of trespassing stock. Each winter, at Mavora

Up to 4,500 sheep graze the Eglinton Valley within Fiordland National Park. A scientific assessment of their impacts in 1991 stated that sheep are restricting regeneration of forests and shrublands, trampling wetland margins, selectively grazing large native herbs and encouraging the establishment of weeds.

Lakes Park in northern Southland, some 600 cattle graze dense red tussock grasslands – the best protected remnant of the extensive native grasslands that once covered the Southland plains. Wading into bogs and streams, they wallow in the water that feeds the Mararoa River – one of the country's best-known trout streams.

Alongside the scenic Milford highway hundreds of sheep graze the grassy flats of the Eglinton Valley within Fiordland National Park, surrounded by the towering peaks of this prestigious World Heritage Area. Straying freely into the tall red and silver beech forest, they browse young seedlings and inhibit forest regeneration.

And each autumn cattle trample their way through the magnificent beech forests of Mt Aspiring National Park to spend the winter grazing the grassy flats of the Dart, Wilkin and Siberia valleys. At the entrance to Mt Cook National Park, one of the country's key tourist attractions, sheep graze the Birch Hill flats, a rare area of eastern montane grassland within a national park.

Why are these destructive animals allowed to graze in areas set aside for nature conservation and specifically for the strict protection of the indigenous flora and fauna? Several arguments have been put forward: historic rights to grazing; reduced fire risk; the impracticality of fencing; the economic viability of adjoining farms; weed control; the maintenance of grassland conservation values; and even the contention that browsing mammals replicate the role of extinct native avifauna, such as the moa. Somewhere in the debate it appears to have been forgotten that the public conservation estate contains only the battered remnants of a unique indigenous flora and fauna. Surely grazing can only be justified in national parks and reserves if it directly assists in maintaining conservation values, such as the light grazing of some tussock grasslands.

New Zealand's flora and fauna evolved over millions of years in the absence of browsing mammals. Introduced wild animals have had a devastating impact on palatable native plants, slowly



MIKE HARDING