

FROM MY observations in the Eglinton Valley over many years, the bush can only deteriorate further if grazing continues. What is advancing is pasture and weeds as would be expected in the presence of stock in this area of part-bush, part-clearings and open flats.

Although over the long period of utilisation by stock many species of trees on the margins have disappeared save for the odd relict specimen, most will return naturally.

With protection from stock and fire, effective restoration occurs and in many instances in New Zealand there have been spectacular results over 15 to 20 years. The mention of reserves in the context of national park grazing can be misunderstood. While grazing continues in some national parks as a transitional measure under special conditions, no bush reserves are approved or managed without appropriate fencing protection from stock. Even bush covered by QEII conservation covenants (that is privately-owned bush) is subject to strict requirements for provision of fencing. This official policy, in existence for many years, confirms the obvious that there is no point in having a reserve unless it is secured against destruction by stock.

On this matter, Federated Farmers' intemperate, convoluted rhetoric in the press is incomprehensible and certainly overdone. We know as farmers that good planning and alert practices are necessary to ensure that stock do not get where you don't want them especially in young plantations or shelter belts which can be severely damaged or even wiped out by stock well into the post-establishment stage. What then is so different in a national park?

Fiordland's appeal lies in the dramatic land-forms, the lakes, rivers, and abundance of pure clear water and the bush and birdlife. Most would know that the mature trees are 300 to 400 years old and not threatened by stock. The critical aspect, however, is the total disruption of the regeneration cycle and the species composition of the bush edge. Our custodial responsibilities to future generations demand that we correct this. The area in question is large. How large is hard to quantify, because the sheep penetrate up many of the side streams and well into the bush, but it must be several thousand hectares, a sizeable and important habitat for native animals.

Herbivores in general find most New Zealand native plants palatable. Those most avidly taken are the most important, especially in bush margins where they dominate unless suppressed by stock or deer. These are the flowering, nectar-

More on Sheep and Forests...

Mike Harding's article on grazing in national parks and reserves in the last issue referred to a debate that continues to rage in Southland about the Eglinton Valley of Fiordland National Park. LES HENDERSON, retired farmer, a founder of Forest and Bird's Southland Branch and distinguished life member, put the case for the forest rather than the sheep in a recent letter to the Southland Times.



yielding, fruiting, quick-growing range of sub-canopy species which have been a vital component of the habitat for countless millennia. Nectar, pollen and foliage, while taken direct by some native birds and probably by geckos and bats, support a vast range of native insects. A continuous supply of these is vital to nestlings of most native bird species and the total life support at all times for others.

The whole ecological fabric from the soil, vegetation, insects to birds, reptiles and bats has been an interdependent whole and damage to any part can gravely threaten a natural system. Just as the animals depend on the vegetation, many plants have evolved in response to their environment in such a way that they

depend entirely for effective survival on pollination by insects and the distribution of seeds by birds. The whole robust dynamics of the bush edge, where ample light, moisture, space and shelter ensure relatively rapid change and vitality is being destroyed by sheep.

On the removal of sheep there will be some immediate response in seedling occurrence, local at first, then progressively over the whole area freed from grazing but excluding initially those areas where pasture grasses are established. It will take many years to achieve anything like healthy natural restoration. By the time the tree and shrub seedlings are joined by the fresh growth of ferns and the smaller plants, a significant further bonus will merge.

At present the furry predators, rat, stoat and ferret, have free range throughout with much less obstruction than they would encounter without browsing in the bush. As regeneration gathers momentum a damp micro-climate develops, at times dripping with moisture, which is an important natural deterrent to these foreign raiders. At present 90 percent of South Island robin nests are predated and the yellowhead is in serious decline. Obviously all native birds need any life they can get as soon as possible as well as the progressive restoration of their habitat with its attendant food resources.

The purpose of national parks is to protect important features and wildlife habitats along with the wide range of natural values involved. New Zealanders and visitors alike, in great numbers, seek out these areas for relaxation, recreation and in the pursuit of hobbies but expressly to enjoy the unspoilt natural environment. We are immediately seen to be insincere if we carelessly ignore the world-wide criteria, also embodied in our own National Parks Act "to as far as possible remove the exotic and as far as possible . . . protect native flora and fauna.

This magnificent valley deserves the best we can do for it. It demands that a well-planned vigorous course of restoration be adopted. The other option, continued grazing, offers an unthinkable dismal prospect – progressive deterioration and a horrifying weed problem already well advanced due to stockings.

It is my hope as the general health and attractiveness of the vegetation in the valley improves in the absence of stock, visitors, by merely stepping off the road into the bush margin, may experience that flash of insight at the beauty of tree, flower or bird which sets alight the soul and gives meaning and joy to life. We need this inspiration more than ever today. Sheep will never enhance the magic of our Fiordland, only destroy it. ♦