

The natural process of shrub invasion of red tussockland. In the absence of fire, monao, manuka and then kanuka will progressively colonise these grasslands.

regime continues? When you also have grazing animals and associated nutrient depletion, and a suite of weeds (*Hieracium*, exotic grasses, heather and *Pinus contorta*) brought to the area by Europeans, the system degrades from tall tussocks to short tussocks to a mat vegetation of introduced grasses and *Hieracium*. Examples of this

trend are far less numerous in North Island tussocks than in the South Island, yet there are prominent examples.

Herein lies a management dilemma. While the tussock grasslands owe their origins and early maintenance to human-induced fire, the unsustainability of the practice in combination with grazing

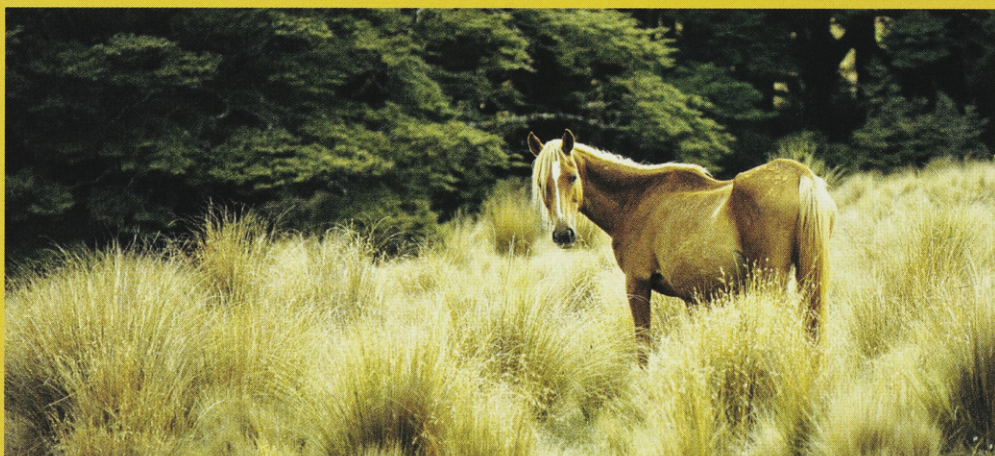
animals and the likely invasion of weeds makes it an unacceptable management practice today (see box page 22). There are a few areas where stock still use unimproved tussock grassland, and all display typical decay symptoms – progressive loss of tussocks and spread of exotic grasses and *Hieracium*.

Update on feral horses

FOR MANY YEARS, few conservation issues seemed as intractable as the problem of the introduced “wild” horses of the southern Kaimanawa and their impacts on the vulnerable tussocklands of the central North Island.

Conservationists despaired at the damage being done to the natural value of these important grasslands while horse lovers staunchly defended the rights of the herd to multiply and roam free. But in 1993 came a breakthrough.

Using recent research by Geoff Rogers that documented the severe impacts of the horses on rare and vulnerable plants and fragile ecosystems, Forest and Bird prompted DoC to convene a working party of interested groups to find an enduring solution to the horse problem. Last December, after two years of inquiry, negotiations and 4,800 submissions, a



Descendants of domestic stock released last century, the Kaimanawa horses were granted full protection in 1981 under the Wildlife Act – a strange protection for introduced animals. Over the next 13 years they multiplied nine-fold on the tussocklands in the Army reserve east of the Desert Road and their heavy grazing and trampling has severely damaged rare and important tussockland plant communities.

final Wild Horse Management Plan was produced and sent to the Minister of Conservation for his consideration.

Forest and Bird supports the draft plan which removes the herd from the important ecological and wilderness areas, but takes into account the future welfare of the

horses by trialing the retention of a smaller herd in the southern area and relocating a herd to nearby heavily modified paddocks. (see *Conservation News* July 1995).

At the time of writing, Mr Marshall had not yet approved the plan.

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