

# HIGH COUNTRY LANDSCAPES

*Too much change, too fast.*

*Golden tall tussocks, the glittering twists of a braided river, horizons which stretch to shimmering mountaintops — such enduring images of the high country landscape are etched in our minds and have become valued as part of our natural heritage. In many ways this seemingly timeless landscape is changing, and not necessarily for the better. In this article consultant landscape architect, Diane Lucas of Geraldine, outlines the values of this landscape and the need to retain them.*

The high country is special to us all, not just in terms of production or recreation. Somehow we all recognise it as a significant part of our natural heritage, even many of those not fortunate to live or work in, or visit it.

What is it that creates this special character? It is, of course, the vegetation which visually sets the high country apart from other regions in New Zealand. The vegetation, in concert with the climate and the seasons, provides us with subtle textures, patterns and colours — the greys, browns, golds during the day and the purples at night. This vegetation results in a semi-wild character, which is possible because people do not appear to dominate — there is a lack of dominating developments or formal human-created patterns.

And yet intrusive developments and patterns have been created, disturbing the surface of the land and our relationship towards it.

## Two impacts

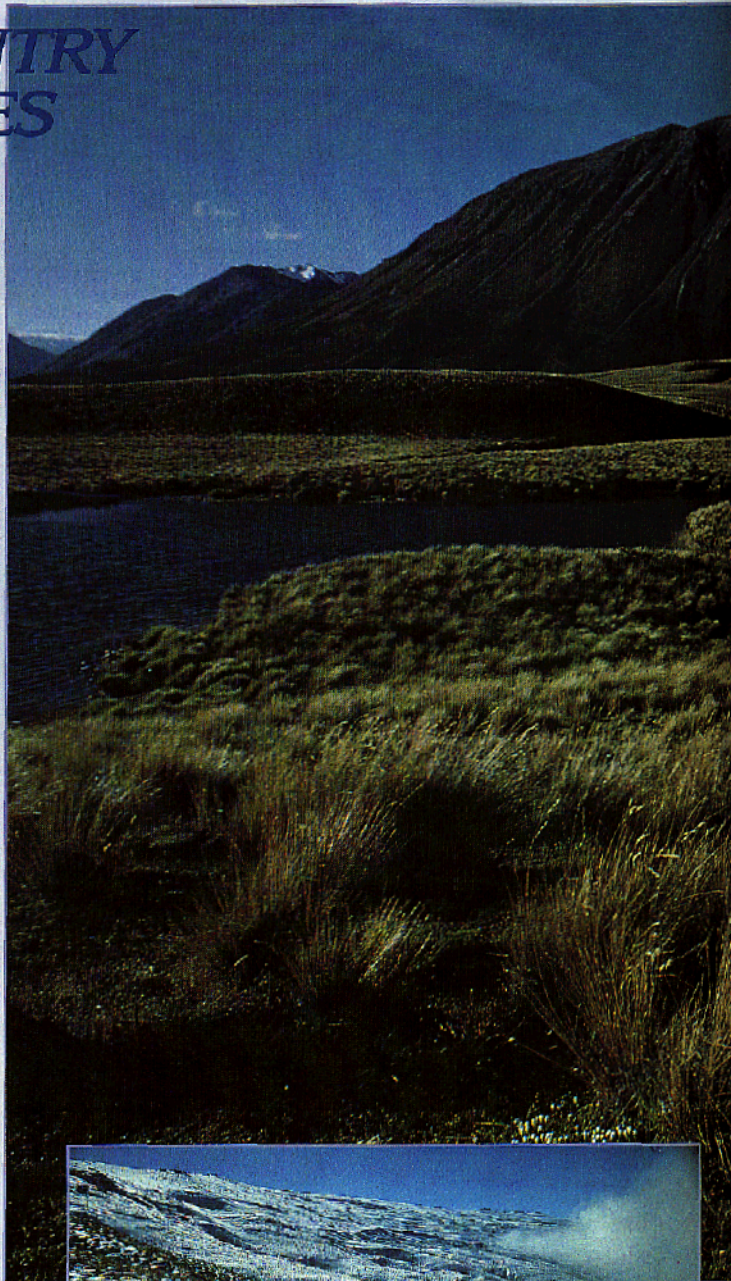
These developments have two major kinds of impact: on the one hand they provide a sharp dissonance; on the other they change the character of the high country subtly and almost imperceptibly.

The open character of the high country landscape makes it highly vulnerable to the impact of obvious insensitive developments which come in many forms: a zig-zag track over a smoothly curving ridge, a shiny shed in a dull setting, a bright square of lucerne sitting on a prominent fan; windbreaks, woodlots and wilding trees in open grassland.

The location, type and scale of impact are all critical in fitting in a development. Often instead of becoming an achievement, it becomes an intrusion.

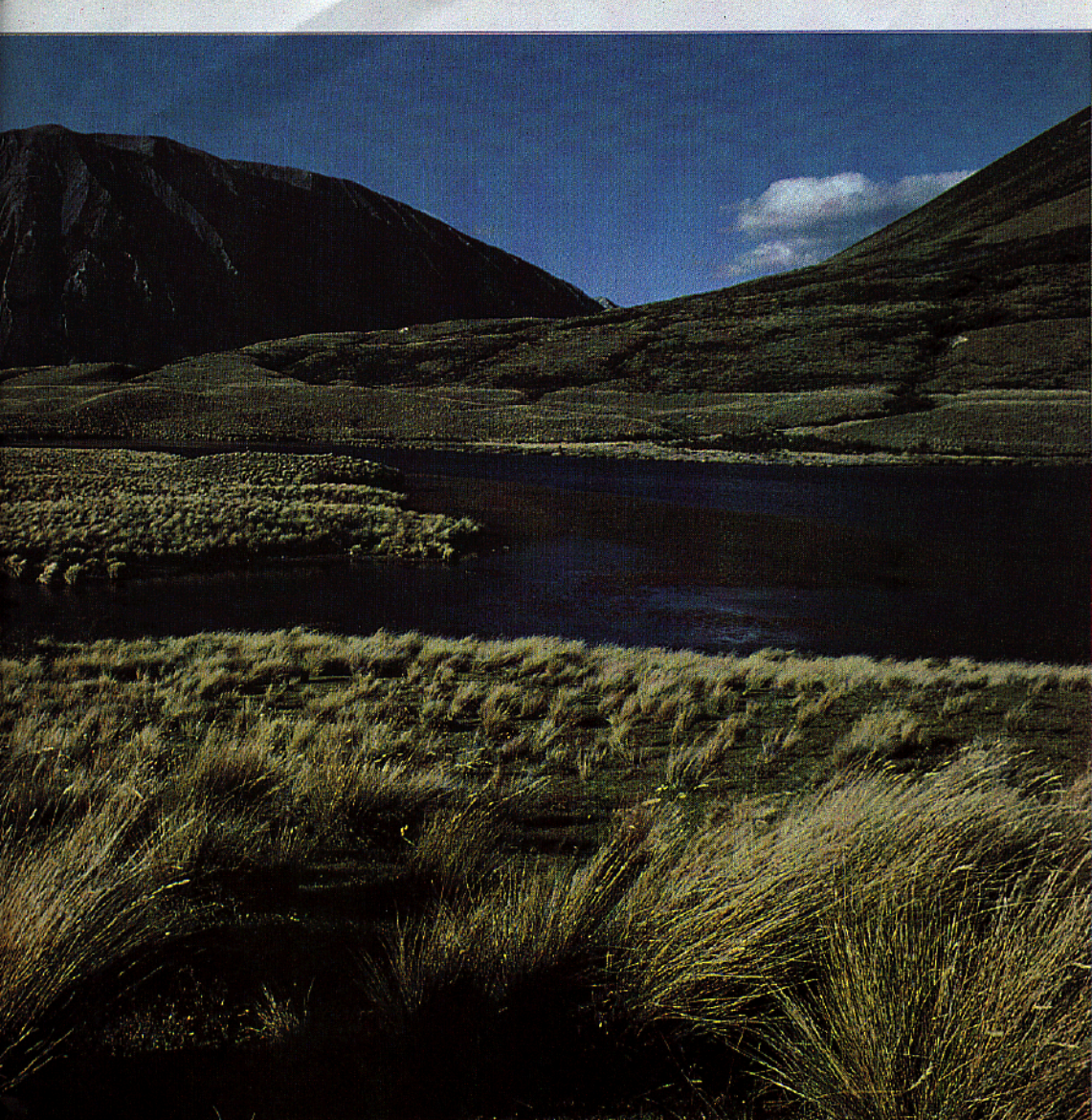
But the greater threats to our high country landscapes are the slow, subtle changes, changes which many closely associated with the land do not notice because they are so close to it.

Over time tussocks are replaced with other pasture species in a process traditionally referred to as "improvement" of tussock grasslands. The improvement that



In grazed areas, tussocks are significant for breaking up the snow cover, allowing stock to feed. More emphasis must be placed on the benefits of tussocks for farming.

*Photo: Alan Marc.*



**Top:** Round Hill ponds near Lake Coleridge, a landscape that epitomises wide open spaces and freedom. *Photo: Barney Brewster.*  
**Left:** Some intrusions in the tussock landscape stand out starkly. Old Man Range, Central Otago. *Photo: Graeme Loh.* **Centre:** The establishment of exotic pasture alters the subtle patterns, colours and textures of the landscape, as well as the ecology. Gorge Hill, Southland. *Photo: Barney Brewster.* **Right:** Mackenzie Basin plantings. Conifer plantings become a focus in a tussock grassland landscape, disrupting the subtleties and continuity. *Photo: Diane Lucas.*

involves gradual loss of the tussock component sees the tawny hills changed with a new, simple green landcover that has no semi-wild or remote quality. High country lands thus developed will have a landscape character little different from much hill country and lowlands elsewhere in New Zealand.

Similarly, high country afforestation proposals seriously threaten the distinctive character of these landscapes. Even when carefully sited at the base of mountain slopes, they often disrupt the visual relationship between the slopes and the terraces, basin or valley floor below. This often separates the landscape into developed flats with the mountains merely a remote backdrop.

### Continuity suffers

It is the continuity of the landscapes that suffers because of these pressures. We need overall harmony — but that does not mean no development. Often development can be carefully contained within a tussock landscape, depending on how it is sited, designed and managed.

I believe that a balance can be struck between the competing claims of soil conservation, farm production and landscape values. For example, the importance of retaining tussock grassland for sustainable farm production has never been strongly enough emphasised. We see research papers from the Ministry of Agriculture on the best ways of destroying tussock grasslands, with not a mention of their values.

Management techniques that conserve and enhance tussock cover need to be investigated for different types of tussock association. Depleted and destroyed tussock grasslands can be managed for restoration of the tussocks and associated plants. An available seed source is critical.

The range of values of tussock grasslands, and the threats to these values, have seldom been acknowledged in planning,

development or management strategies. Nor have the broad landscape values been acknowledged in proposals for preservation of tussock grassland associations, such as in the PNA programme. The Environmental Council acknowledged the significance of these issues, and last year commissioned a short study aimed at defining tussock grassland landscape values. The study was undertaken by a graduate landscape architect, Michael Ashdown, under my supervision.

Although visual values are a critical component, they are not the sole basis of landscape values. The combination and interaction of the ecological, cultural, visual and economic values together constitute total landscape values. These together create the character and identity of a place. The concept of landscape implies a human response to these factors — that is, perception and recognition of the patterns. These patterns are typically expressed visually. In tussock grasslands, the main visual patterns are an open landscape dominated by landform. The more distinctive the landscape pattern, the stronger the sense of being in a particular place, and hence the stronger the area's "landscape identity". A sense of place is reinforced by your activity in, and the meaning you attach to, the landscape. This varies between people, depending on your background.

### Dramatic diversity.

New Zealand is a land of dramatic landscape diversity. This quality is significant in considering tussock grasslands.

The visual subtleties of the tussock grasslands, and the low height of this form of vegetation, means that the underlying landforms, the shapes and steepness, the smoothness or roughness, etc. are all easily observed. Geological differences become a fundamental criterion in determining landscape character, and consequently landscape diversity.

From this it is possible to divide the country into landscape regions. Regions of the country where tussock grasslands are perceived to dominate vast areas were identified as individual 'tussock grassland landscape regions'. The 11 distinct regions denoted are confined to the central North Island and the dry areas east of the South Island main divide, "the high country". It is suggested that grassland conservation management and enhancement strategies be developed for each individual tussock grassland landscape region.

The report stresses the need to recognize not just the "special" landscapes, but also the "typical" as essential in the overall distinctive regional character.

This factor needs to be considered when assessing each and every development proposal or land management intensification which may have an immediate or eventual impact on a tussock grassland landscape.

Change has always been a feature of tussock grassland areas. When in tussock grasslands, we can marvel at the processes that created the landforms, and often the immense change from forest and shrubland caused by earliest inhabitants. The grasslands will, because of their ecology or our intervention, continue to change. We need to ensure that they can do this without losing their meaning for our past. ✎

### References

Lucas, Diane. "A Farm on the Right Tracks." *The Landscape* 32/33: 10-13, 1987. Swaffield, S; Lucas, D. "The High Country — Philosophical and Practical Landscape Management Issues". *The Landscape* 24: 15-17, 1985.

Copies of book: *Tussock Grasslands, Landscape Values and Vulnerability*, by Michael Ashdown and Diane Lucas are available from Forest and Bird's Mail Order service (see catalogue).

## The Ryton Station Case: Will DoC/Landcorp Partnership Work?

In March, Pinnacle Resorts Ltd announced they were investigating a major tourist development near Lake Coleridge — what has been described as Canterbury's largest tourist resort, estimated to cost about \$100 million. The proposal included a new skifield in the upper Ryton basin on the Craigieburn Range.

In April a 6-km vehicle track was quickly bulldozed up the Ryton Valley to the crest of the ridge between Mt Olympus and Mt Cheeseman. A tramping party traversing this ridge met a 4WD vehicle at 1800 metres altitude. The road cuts a swathe through the tussock basin and reaches the ridgetop via a highly visible zig-zag.

Pastoral lessees require permission

for track construction and in the 60's and 70's approval was given for much insensitive roading, sometimes to 1700 metres altitude, for land development. Recently commercial recreation has caused a new wave of tracking.

An official landscape policy now exists and Land Corporation must consult the Department of Conservation before issuing permits. Theoretically new roading should be both essential and of minimal impact. Unfortunately deliberate breaches still occur.

FMC enquiries established that construction had not been by Pinnacle Resorts but by the lessees of Mt Olympus Station. Their connection with the tourist company is unclear but the road is for use in skifield surveys. DoC

advised that the runholder had applied for a permit and they had stipulated it must end in the valley floor until a decision had been made whether to develop the skifield. Illegal track construction pre-empted these conditions.

Landcorp, when approached was obstructive. They attempted to justify the lessee's actions and challenged interest groups' rights to object.

Officials now propose a bond of \$10,000 to cover landscape and vegetation restoration should the skifield not proceed. It is doubtful if such restoration is practicable. The real question is whether DoC's recommendations on natural and landscape values will be respected by Landcorp and lessees in future.

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