Listener

KEEP OUT!

High tension in the high country

SPACE HEROES
An astronaut talks about the price they pay

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High country, high drama

by Gerard Hutching

Editor of *Forest and Bird*

Who should manage New Zealand's high country? Conservation and recreation groups challenge the long-assumed rights of runholders.

"WE HAVE a bunch of urban stirrers and academic know-alls assuming they can make a better job of managing the land in question than those people who . . . are in fact its day-to-day managers and caretakers" — Arthur Scaife, retired high country runholder, Wanaka.

The "land in question" is 2.7 million hectares, or 10 percent of New Zealand's land area: South Island pastoral lease land, a tawny tussock outback long celebrated by poets and painters.

A dramatic landscape, the high country arouses equally dramatic emotions. Sandwiched between native forests and alpine herbfields and spreading a mantle across the South Island's eastern ranges, its tussocklands rival the world's other famous natural grasslands such as the prairies of North America, the pampas of

"The issue is one of power and privilege versus a growing public desire to enjoy the lands."

Argentina and the steppes of Russia.

At a glance, tussock grasslands may appear uniform, however pleasing their subtle russet and gold colours are to the eye. In fact these ecosystems, over thousands of years of evolution, have become just as important a part of our natural heritage as are the great kauri forests.

Tussock grasslands contain a unique collection of plants and animals adapted to extreme temperatures, drought, snowfalls, fire and even to erosion of the unstable mountain ranges. Haast's buttercup, the penwiper plant and the vegetable sheep are all plants specially adapted to life on unstable mountain screes.

Beneath flat rocks near the 1500-metre summit of Otago's Rock and Pillar Range lives a huge striped weta that, in isolation, has evolved to cope with one of New Zealand's most inhospitable climates. At the foot of the range near Macraes Flat, the 30cm long Otago skink, one of our largest lizards, survives in reduced numbers among rock outcrops and short tussock. Further north, in the McKenzie Basin, the world's rarest wading bird, the black stilt, has now dwindled to only 11 breeding pairs. Black stilt are totally dependent on open riverbeds and tussock wetlands.

Resilient to the climate and rugged high country landscape, these unique plants and animals have been far less successful in adapting to pressures from human settlement, grazing animals and high country development. Tussocklands and their inhabitants are under threat.

Since European settlement, runholders have been given a relatively free hand over the use of this enormous public estate. Grazing has always been accepted as the predominant use, and many runholders have come to see themselves almost as *de facto* owners of the land.

Today, a coalition of conservation and recreation groups challenges that assumption. The Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, Federated Mountain Clubs, NZ Acclimatisation Societies and the Deerstalkers' Association have joined forces in a High Country Public Lands Coalition and are meeting the runholders head on in an effort to have other values of the high country recognised.

They are concerned that:

- Between 1975 and 1984 a fifth of New Zealand's pastoral lease lands were freeholded by the National Government.
- Efforts to protect environmentally unique tussocklands and animals have been unsatisfactory.
- Runholders have stopped deerstalkers from hunting on leasehold land even though the deer are public property.
- Runholders' leases extend to as high as 2500 metres — mountain lands more suited to climbing and tramping than sheep grazing.
- Some graziers have been compensated with hundreds of thousands of dollars when Crown land has been retired from grazing, yet they have retained grazing leasehold tenure of the land.
- Peppercorn rentals are paid to the government for the 2.7 million hectares of high country pastoral land — a total revenue of $131,000 in 1984-85 — even though much of it is highly productive Merino wool country.

Dr Gerry McSweeney, conservation director for the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, sees the issue as one of power and privilege versus a growing public desire to enjoy the lands for a number of different reasons. Historically, climbers, trampers and hunters have been treated with tolerance, but growing pressure to use the land has put runholders on the defensive.

"On the one hand you have the agricultural establishment transforming large areas of the wild areas of our natural high country into fenced ryegrass-clover pastures. On the other hand you have the public wanting certain unique areas saved for conservation, or access made easier for people to hunt, fish, raft or tramp. It is now time for a multiple-use approach to high country management," says McSweeney.

Natural history tours into the high country are booming. Cross-country skiing is taking off as a sport on Otago's block mountain ranges. Rafters have discovered the delights of spiralling down the icy waters of the South Island's high country rivers. Who should have control of access to these playgrounds?

If battles were won on numbers, the conservation and recreation coalition would have carried the day long ago. Forest and Bird, FMC and the Deerstalkers' Association have a combined membership of 60,000 and the Acclimatisation Societies add their support of 250,000 members. Against them are ranged 365 Crown lessees, who with dependents probably total no more than 3000. The average run is 6850 hectares.

The stakes are high. As well as the 2.7 million hectares of Crown pastoral leasehold land in the South Island there are a further million hectares of high country tussockland (including Molesworth) 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 3 percent of our total sheep and 1.5 percent of our sheep farmers.

According to the High Country Public Lands Coalition convenor, Dave Henson, pastoral leases are a hangover from colonial times when boundaries were drawn along simple ridgelines or river boundaries. Much of the land was too rugged or too high for grazing, although that did not deter runholders from keeping it under their control.

Leases last for 33 years and entitle the lessees to grazing of pasturage only, subject to tight controls. Lessees have had a perpetual right of renewal but no right to freehold. This was changed in 1965 to allow limited freeholding of land classified as suitable for farming rather than grazing. While leases only give grazing rights, farming development may be permitted subject to departmental approval.

In an attempt to come to grips with the problems caused by competing interests for pastoral lease land, the National Government set up the Clayton Committee in 1980. It recommended phasing out pastoral leases in favour of freehold. It also suggested 10 percent of the land be set aside for conservation and recreation. However, not all runholders wanted freehold, and the conservation and recreation lobby loudly protested that 10 percent of these natural lands was not enough.

The latest bureaucratic move is the recently published document *Review of Policies for Destocking and Surrender* compiled by the Land Settlement Board and the National Soil and Water Conservation Authority. This report should set the framework for gradual destocking and compulsory surrender of severely eroded mountain lands considered unsuitable for grazing. The board has also released a new policy which will allow more freeholding of better farming land subject to the establishment of reserves, surrender of high land and protection of recreational access.

The political winds of change today favour a better deal for the public. A new land bill, in the pipeline for three years, is due to be introduced into Parliament later this year after having been held up by the previous Government. It should bring major changes in high country administration, as should a host of policies recently adopted by the Government to protect high country landscapes, wetlands, forests, natural areas and recreational and educational opportunities.

However, it is now questionable whether these policies will receive a fair trial. As a consequence of last year's major restructuring of environmental administration, a commercial Land Development and Management Corporation, largely independent of political control, seems likely to control pastoral lease land.

Federated Farmers have claimed a victory. However, conservation and recreation groups believe that such a proposal is doomed to failure on both economic and environmental grounds.

McSweeney says that putting pastoral lease lands into a land development corporation would be a disaster.

"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 cast of the pastoral lease drama is elaborate, including runholders, bureaucrats, politicians, recreationists and conservationists. The following is a brief description of their roles.

Runholders

Conservative by nature, many see themselves as the only people with a real stake in the land. They consider they have more right to this land than others, and fear stock disturbance, fire and vandalism if the high country is further opened up. There is no doubting runholders love the high country, but like all farmers they have been subject to huge pressures to increase production, often at the expense of nature.

While much is made of management problems if unfarmed lands are removed from their leases, it is obvious that runholders do not enjoy losing their right to graze lands that have been "theirs" for more than a century. Their arguments are essentially a rearguard action.

The Department of Lands and Survey

This government agency administers pastoral leases under policy set by the Land Settlement Board. Traditionally it has had a heavy bias towards farming and the Public Lands Coalition asserts that many decisions are made regionally which are counter to policy. It is a department considered long on administration but short on expertise in natural resource management.

Catchment Boards

Responsible for water and soil conservation, they have argued that their only concern is with these two matters. They have therefore subsidised destocking of lands, but have asserted that the surrender of those lands from pastoral leases to full Crown control is outside their jurisdiction. Under the new surrender policy they will now help identify severely eroded land to be removed from pastoral leases, but the Land Settlement Board will carry out the removal.

Politicians

The National Party has historically sided with the runholders, but the Labour Government has a different view of Crown land.

Prior to election, Labour promised that conservation and recreation interests would be represented on the Land Settlement Board. This has been done, and district committees have also been given representation. It also promised all Crown land retired through catchment board subsidy would be surrendered from leases and revert to direct Crown control. The new surrender policy is the result. However, the possible allocation of high country lands to a wholly commercial corporation runs contrary to Labour's election policies.

Conservationists and recreationists

Initially the High Country Public Lands Coalition was set up to oppose substantial freeholding. Since then it has gone on the attack, questioning many aspects of high country tenure and management. The organisations are all seasoned campaigners. They have a two-tier strategy: at national level they debate the principles; at a local level they look in detail at individual leases. Voluntary groups have been set up in all the eastern South Island provinces to put forward public concerns about the high country.

The coalition's Dunedin researcher, Bruce Mason, has provided much of the ammunition for the charges of mismanagement. Using the Official Information Act, he has concluded that the relationship between Lands and Survey

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and runholders has in many cases not led to fair and balanced use of these lands.

The coalition has several objectives. First, it wants large areas of severely eroded high altitude land within leases which have never been grazed or are no longer grazed to be surrendered into direct Crown control. Since much of this land borders National Parks, state forests and unoccupied Crown land, transfer should not be a problem.

Second, it wants more reserves in what is one of the more "forgotten habitats" of New Zealand. Reserves will not only protect these key natural areas, but also help look after wetlands, lakes and rivers.

Third, it is pressing for national recognition and protection as National Reserves of such areas as Southland's Mavora Lakes; the Remarkables, Garvie, Old Man Ranges and the Lammerlaw-Lammermoor Ranges in Otago; Canterbury's Torlesse and Two Thumbs Ranges; and the Kaikouras and Molesworth country of inland Marlborough.

Fourth, the coalition wants guaranteed, practicable access.

Above all, the coalition says it has a genuine desire to continue working with farmers so that the twin goals of increased production and protection of key areas can be achieved.

The coalition can also raise powerful arguments about equity and the public interest. Present policy trends favour it. In 10 years' time the high country blueprint will probably look much more like their blueprint than it does now. ■

Runholders' response

by Ewan Chapman

THERE is comparatively little high altitude land remaining within present-day pastoral leases. Significant areas of this land have already been surrendered. But the question goes further than simply the surrender of this land. The significant costs of preserving New Zealand's heritage must not fall on the few farmers who stand in possession of the land. Some pastoral leases may be rendered uneconomic if significant areas suitable for grazing were returned to the Crown. In this case lessees must receive compensation for the very real reduction in their economic wealth.

In addition, management plans and expansive fencing projects must be undertaken to separate high altitude country from pastoral leasehold land. The Crown would also lose its in-house manager of the land and must therefore appoint new personnel to supervise wild animal control and management of this land.

The present system of pastoral lease management provides a mutually beneficial relationship for the state. The state specifically protects against the risk of erosion by withholding any right to disturb the soil, remove any of the existing tussock cover or trees. The natural beauty of the area is therefore preserved in return for the lessee's right to graze the land. In my experience lessees have a high regard for the need to conserve and protect natural areas of their environment — to do otherwise would only damage their own economic welfare. Soil erosion is just as much a threat to farmers as it is to conservationists and recreationists, as it diminishes the land's grazing potential. To this end limitations are placed on stock numbers and run plans must be approved to ensure a conservative approach to erosion control is taken.

The Protected Natural Areas Programme, recently conducted over much of the South Island high country, has given farmers a greater knowledge of what representative ecological and biological areas are contained on their land. Greater awareness of the management practices required to protect these representative ecosystems is one alternative to creating large and expensive reserves over much of the high country land. Farmers who are vested with the day-to-day management are arguably in the best position to voluntarily protect wildlife and flora and fauna, provided they are made aware of their values from the outset.

Protection of endangered species does not, however, fall completely on the farmer's back. The black stilt, for example, New Zealand's rarest mainland bird species, breeds in the braided river beds of the Upper Waitaki Basin — primarily on publicly-owned river bed. It is arguable that its habitat is disturbed to a greater extent by trampers, hunters and fishermen than by the neighbouring pastoral farmers. Greater exposure to the public can also pose a danger to threatened and endangered species.

As far as access is concerned, pastoral lessees have the same rights to prosecute trespassers as any other farmer with freehold title. Quite apart from the legal liabilities, however, there are few practical problems in obtaining access to leasehold land. The majority of lessees will willingly grant access to anyone who asks. It is only in isolated instances such as mustering, lambing or other stocking problems or where there is an extreme fire risk that access is denied. This custodial responsibility can take up large amounts of time, but is important from a safety point of view. No one wants hunters and recreationists wandering in the same vicinity.

It's a bit of a case of what's one person's meat is another person's poison. Where the recreationist or ecologist sees the impressive tussock landscape as a free, open space for recreational activities and home for a variety of high country creatures, the farmer sees the high country as one of New Zealand's best "fine wool" producing areas — and he pays ever-increasing rental to produce that wool.

With greater awareness on both sides, these varied activities can successfully co-exist within the framework of the existing pastoral leases. Leases which ensure that conservational values and custodial responsibilities are exercised by the runholder. ■

Ewan Chapman is a legal spokesperson for Federated Farmers.

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Ewan Chapman is a legal spokesperson for Federated Farmers.

Listener 22 March 1986

LETTERS TO THE EDITO

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA

Federated Farmers' response to your lead article (March 1) opens with a grave piece of misinformation. Rather than there being comparatively little high altitude land remaining in pastoral leases, the reverse is true. Historically, these have been confined to hill and high country tussock grasslands. The hill country has largely been freeholded, a trend accelerated by the last Government's reclassification to farm land of ¼-million hectares of pastoral lands. The remaining 2.7 million hectares is predominantly the more difficult high country with extreme or severe limitations on production. Perhaps only 15-20 percent is at lower altitudes and capable of sustained pastoral production.

Legal advisor Ewan Chapman's claim that significant areas of land have been surrendered from leases is also misleading. 483,000 hectares of severely eroded high country have been destocked since 1959; however half this remains legally occupied. Only eight percent of total leasehold land has been surrendered. The National Water and Soil Conservation Authority identifies another 700,000 hectares that should be destocked and surrendered from pastoral leases.

Most of the cost of the above catchment authority programmes has been borne by the state. Government grant rates of between 60 and 100 percent for fencing and "off-site" compensation (development of alternative grazing) have been the carrots used to reach voluntary agreements with runholders. Lack of progress is the main reason for the Government opting last year for compulsory resumption of severely eroded lands when agreement cannot be reached.

There are, as Mr Chapman states, substantial legal controls over pastoral leases. These limitations on use distinguish this form of tenure from all others. However despite there being 37 environmental statutory and policy controls, breaches and abuse have become normal rather than exceptional. These consist primarily of wetlands drained (including on one lease inspected by the Prime Minister on his Mackenzie tour), burning, cultivation, roading, exceeding stock limitations, and unauthorised tourist ventures. On the majority of leases investigated by me one or more serious breaches of lease covenants have occurred in recent times. As a direct consequence of pressures from our coalition, Lands and Survey's record of control has improved. However this progress, and the public interest, is certain to go down the tubes under a politically unaccountable and solely commercial land development and management corporation.

Bruce Mason
Researcher
High Country Public Lands Coalition
(Dunedin)

... All outdoors-loving people should be worried at the prospect of a commercially-oriented corporation administering pastoral leases. Increased rentals (and their inevitable consequences) will force runholders into charging the public for the scenery, fish and deer, the snow on which we ski, and effectively for the air we breathe.

Is this the goal this Government is aiming for?

Ross Davies
(Dunedin)

LETTERS TO THE EDITO

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA

We were swept with horror and disbelief when opening the March 1 *Listener* to find the beautiful hills of our own property depicted in reverse on the cover behind an imaginary barbed-wire fence, superimposed provocatively under the headline "KEEP OUT! High tension in the high country".

The only high tension in the photograph could be attributed to power cables and pylons crossing freehold land in the foreground, carrying South Island electricity northwards.

The cover story was written in such a way as to create plenty of tension among high-country landholders where before there existed an environment of mutual enjoyment of this landscape by all prepared to make the journey to view it and the owners of the land who farm it.

As the article is concerned with Crown land under pastoral lease tenure the choice of photograph was particularly inept.

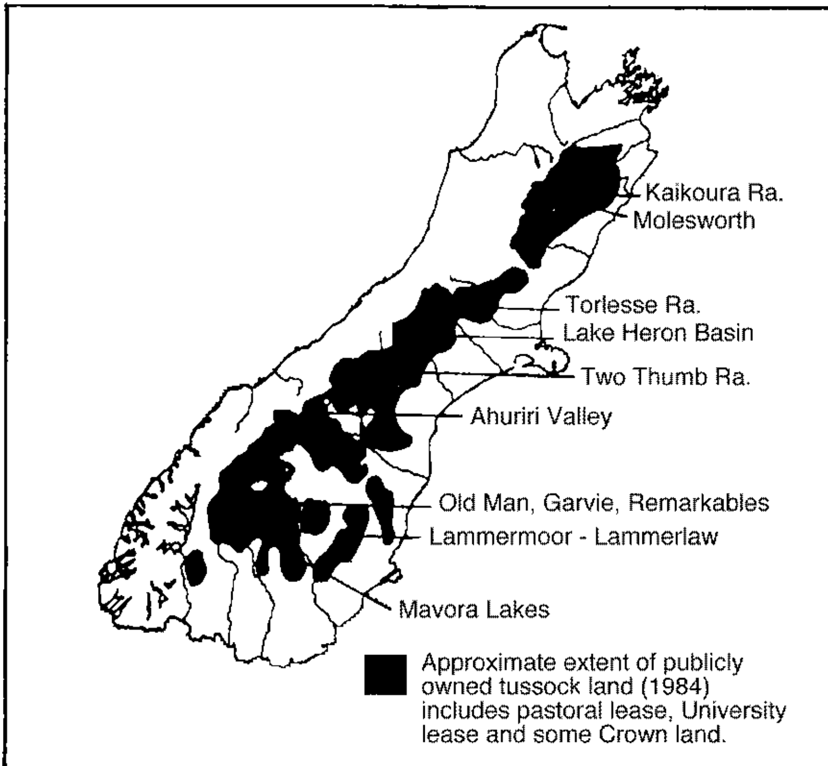
The foreground showed grazing land which has been under freehold tenure for 130 years. The background will be recognised by the many trampers and climbers who have frequently and freely used public access to the spectacular Tapuaenuku Scenic Reserve on the Inland Kaikouras.

E G and A S Pitts
(Mt Gladstone Station)

(*Our cover photograph was provided by the National Publicity Studios in answer to our request for a suitable illustration for the article we intended to publish on the high country leasehold land controversy. We regret that an error has occurred and offer our apologies to E G and A S Pitts —* Editor.)

Listener 5 April 1986

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA



The magnificence of the New Zealand high country arouses an almost religious emotion in many people. Those of us who make our lives here are not immune to this, and we understand the feelings of outrage in the public when they are led to believe their high-country heritage is being harmed (*Listener*, March 1).

As a conservation-minded observer of my own part of the high country for 15 years I feel the area is indeed endangered. The danger is not from the runholder extensively grazing his stock in the time-honoured way, but from the ill-informed, emotional "greeny" element and the "greedy" element who covet something they admire without being prepared to take up the responsibilities that go with its possession.

The *Review of Policies for Destocking and Surrender*, by the Land Settlement Board and the National Water and Soil Conservation Authority, is a document which reached high-country leaseholders last August. In the months preceding its release those runholders who subscribe to Federated Mountain Clubs and some sporting magazines had advance warning of what it contained. Others of us were exploded from our burrows by the shocks it contained.

While none of us questions the need to destock and protect land which is genuinely threatened, such as the severely eroded areas in low-rainfall regions, the statement that "all Class VIII land should be permanently retired, and there does not appear to be any argument with this assumption" shattered our peace. The suggestion that Section 117 of the Land Act 1948 should be used to enforce this policy should the leaseholder not be willing to co-operate added fuel to the conflagration.

A phone call to our local catchment board representative informed us that he and his staff had not been involved in the decision, and in his opinion the policy was not justifiable on water/soil conservation grounds in our area.

The retirement of the tops under catchment board run-plans has given leaseholders the option of changing their style of farming from the extensive management of large areas of land to comparatively intensive management of smaller areas to produce similar amounts. No one in conservation circles, it seems, questioned the consequences of this policy. The farmer changed from a harder, riskier form of farming to one where he could use a vehicle to visit his stock. The public paid large sums of money to implement the policy. For this they have some areas destocked and some areas on such short-term leases they can reclaim them from the sheep virtually any time the experts deem it necessary. The fact is that tremendous amounts of the land retired were in no danger of accelerated erosion and have sufficient vegetation for farming to continue.

Justifiably the taxpayers cry that they want something from their investment. There is a good case for the public to be able to use these areas for recreation. The problem is usually that access is now through more intensively farmed land, which may be even more sensitive to stock disturbance. Land which once carried one wether per hectare may now be carrying four or five ewes instead.

The goodwill of the farmer has been lost by the belligerent attitude of some people who feel that they are as entitled to be there as the man paying the rent. They forget that he is also a New Zealander, paying taxes, and has responsibilities for weed and pest control and is in a most unenviable position of liability for fires, including accidental ones not of his own making.

Mr Hutching's article refers to the chance of a "better deal for the public" in the new political climate. I find this extremely hard to agree with. The stated policy of this Government is user pays. If the leaseholder no longer controls the land then the High Country Public Lands Coalition may well get the bill for its maintenance. Pest board rates alone might give them quite a fright, even without the "realistic rent" suggested to farmers for mere pasturage rights — how much more might be justifiable for skiing rights, for example?

Our own farming has in the past been compatible with a long list of recreations including climbing, tramping, shooting, fishing, four-wheel driving, trail biking, horse riding, photography, phys-ed student training and, recently, heli-skiing. Free access is granted up the valley floor, and provided people contact us beforehand and respect any conditions it may be necessary to impose temporarily, all these activities can take place at no cost above their contribution to the IRD as New Zealand taxpayers. Contrast this with what might be the situation if our farming enterprise were not subsidising them in caring for the land.

Not all members of the public are responsible, caring citizens. Vandalism and theft are all too common in back-country huts, litter and waste are sometimes left unburied, and access tracks are ruined by inconsiderate vehicle use. Stock disturbance can be a major problem, and this seems to be something that urban recreationists are unable to grasp. There are many occasions when stock are vulnerable to disturbance, not just at lambing time.

If we had not cared so well for the land there would be very little incentive to visit it. Our lower slopes, covered in relatively undisturbed native vegetation, are appropriate next to the enormous areas of national parks which preserve plant species so palatable to sheep that they are now scarce in the grazed areas. We can all see the consequences of run-plans which have retired the tops in exchange for destruction of the lower tussock: straight fencelines and greenswards; and the fertiliser necessary to maintain this "improvement" results in eutrophication of our waterways. Does the destocking of the tops justify paying this price? The system of light grazing of large areas of high land for three or four months each year allows the tussock land at lower snow-safe levels to be left in its natural state.

We are a democracy, and if the people decide that high country leases are undesirable, they have the power to put us off the land. Life on the dole has much to commend it when I am doing a lambing beat in a blizzard. Like the other life forms in the high country I am adaptable, and can find another way of life to satisfy me. I hope, though, that reason will prevail, and New Zealanders will see us as being more in harmony with the land than many of the people who criticise.

Perhaps the facetious suggestion that runholders should throw themselves on the mercy of conservationists on the ground that we are an endangered species might not be so silly. We are perhaps among the last people in New Zealand making a living from harvesting a renewable resource with minimal disturbance to the environment from chemicals, growth promotants and fertiliser. Our shearers are practically the last workers who are paid by production rather than hours spent at their place of work. And we have preserved our environment so well that hundreds of thousands of caring Kiwis want to get out of their own environment and take over ours.

Iris Scott
Rees Valley Station
(Glenorchy)

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA

The push to have non-grazable land excluded from high country grazing leases (March 1) makes good sense in an era when more leisure time is being made available to the working man.

Half the population of New Zealand now lives north of a line drawn just south of Hamilton and a lot of these people look to the South Island high country for their recreation. Pastured (lease) land is not really the objective, but the high hills and peaks beyond are.

The problem of public access across leased land to the high peaks, which has in the past brought arguments, can be overcome by using the New Zealand Walkways Act. This act gives permission-free access over private land (freehold and leasehold) but at the same time protects the landowner against damage to stock and/or property should that unlikely event occur.

Runholders must bow to the change in public attitudes toward Crown land. Their control of vast areas of mountain lands outside the true objective of their leases is no longer acceptable. The proposal by the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society and its partners is a reasonable compromise and should be accepted with good grace.

Robert Arthur
(Auckland)

Listener 3 May 1986

APOLOGY

In the *Listener* of March 1, 1986 there appeared a full-page cover photograph of a high-country scene with a person in the foreground driving a mob of sheep. An image of barbed wire was laid over that photograph. Between pages 14 and 16 appeared a three-page article by Gerard Hutching, editor of *Forest and Bird*, which was critical of the position and attitudes of some high-country runholders. There also appeared on page 14 a further photograph of the same high-country property and the same farmer with a mob of sheep.

The solicitors for the farmer who was depicted in both photographs have approached us and pointed out that their client does not hold the views attributed to runholders, was not associated with the publication in any way and gave no consent to the use of the photographs on the cover or in the article. In fact the *Listener* obtained the photographs from the National Publicity Studios and can confirm that the runholder depicted in the photographs did not consent to or associate himself with their publication in any way. It accepts that he does not hold the views or adopt the positions attributed to runholders by the article. The *Listener* therefore acknowledges that those readers who recognise the runholder should not draw any inference from the article as to his views or stance in relation to the controversy. The pictures were published to exemplify the high-country land which is the subject of the controversy with which the article dealt and were not intended to refer to any particular runholder or property. The *Listener* has apologised to the runholder because it is apparent that some readers have thought otherwise — Editor.

Listener 10 May 1986

... Most runholders are friendly, admirable people. They understand that urban-based people who lack the good fortune and privilege to lease and farm land are entitled to access provided they respect stock and property, and don't act irresponsibly and in contravention of the law. They also understand that a huge majority of the people who like to walk, fish, hunt, climb, and so on, in the back country, have a profound love of these areas and all they have to offer.

A large number of these urban-based people may not have a practical knowledge of farming, although they know a good deal about flora and fauna and they have a real knowledge of ecology. But there is no denying that in some areas access is more of a problem than it used to be, and that the placing of pastoral leases under the control of a hard-nosed commercial organisation will add to the tendency for people to be charged for access and for access to be refused. This runs counter to everything that the majority of the people who use and enjoy our pastoral lands believe in. It must be resisted.

Brian Turner
(Sawyers Bay)

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA

As a tramper I have walked freely on high country among sheep as of right for 25 years in Britain. There the high country in such areas as the Lake District is grazed by sheep and also is open without restriction for public use, with no conflict in my experience. Why can this type of arrangement not be introduced in New Zealand? Why do people here always seem to think in terms of exclusive usage of land for either sheep or recreation?

Your correspondent Iris Scott (April 5) states, "There is a good case for the public to be able to use these areas for recreation. The problem is usually that access is now through more intensively farmed land which may be even more sensitive to stock disturbance." Only too true! This problem of poor access is widespread in New Zealand. Why could not specific routes be designated over such land for use freely by the public for access? The path need only be about one metre wide and could follow a fence-line. If it were felt necessary, a second fence could be put on the other side of the path to keep stock away from people, possibly at the expense of the taxpayer.

Is such a simple solution too much to dream for here? Manifestly it has worked for many years elsewhere. It is true, as Iris Scott states, that "not all members of the public are responsible, caring citizens", but neither are all farmers. This is not a perfect world. Why must the many be penalised because of the possible folly of the few?

John Richardson
(Tawa)

Listener 17 May 1986

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA

The article on pastoral-lease land (March 1) highlighted the variety of uses this land has, and the conflicting views on how well and how fairly it has been managed in the past. This significant area is to be administered by the commercial Land Development and Management Corporation. What was not mentioned was that another agency to be established in the environmental administration, is eminently more suitable for the control of this land. That agency is the stewardship division of the Department of Conservation.

The stewardship division is intended to administer land which has both production and conservation values. As such it would be the ideal agency to cater for the variety of interests in the use of high-country land.

Once land has been identified as suitable primarily for production it could be transferred to the corporation. This could safeguard land that could be irreparably damaged when its limitations are not fully realised. Unfortunately, the past administration of pastoral-lease land has not prevented this damage and it is naive to imagine that an even more commercially-oriented corporation could safeguard these other values of the land.

P N Eman
Conservation convenor
Christchurch Tramping Club
(Christchurch)

Listener 31 May 1986

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA

There is considerable irony in the attempt by the Director-General of Lands, Mr Lucas, to justify his department's generally poor record on pastoral lands administration by emphasising the quality of national parks.

We owe our parks system to an informed public opinion and the dedication of citizen bodies such as the National Parks and Reserves Authority and the regional boards and their predecessors. Parks were established in the face of departmental indifference and if you were one of the minority of staff dedicated to their administration you were unlikely to achieve high office.

To be fair, Mr Lucas is probably the first director-general to take a personal interest in parks. However, this also has its problems as he had much to do with the 1980 National Parks Bill which sought to bring the semi-autonomous parks system under direct control of the department. A major campaign had to be mounted by organisations such as Federated Mountain Clubs to retain a reasonable degree of public involvement in park management. The suspicion of departmental motives caused by this episode has probably carried over into the current debate on pastoral lands.

Administrative shortcomings in the handling of pastoral-lease lands are not a matter of opinion but of fact, and I would like to give two examples:

Legislation provides for stock limitations on pastoral leases to ensure that over-stocking does not lead to aggravated erosion and damage to natural values. The High Country Public Lands Coalition sought information on these limitations, run by run, and was refused until the Ombudsman ruled that the information should be made public. Since release it appears that breaches of these limitations are common as runs for sale consistently advertise stock well above official limits.

Another situation concerns pastoral occupation licences, which are a temporary tenure giving right to control access.

As long ago as 1974 the Land Settlement Board resolved that POLs should only be granted while stock was being phased out on surrendered land. Despite this the department has continued to issue licences over completely ungrazed land. Fourteen such licences, covering 50,000ha, still exist as a symbol of the department's willingness to prolong runholders' control of land they do not use.

David Henson
(Christchurch)

HIGH COUNTRY, HIGH DRAMA

John Richardson's comments (Letters, May 10) on his experiences with sheep when tramping in Britain are interesting and highlight the differences in high-country sheep management between the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

British sheep are more intensively managed than merinos in the high country here, and are more used to people as a result. In New Zealand the animals behave more like wild animals, and they can travel great distances when disturbed. If their direction of movement is out, that is away from a snowline fence, in summer few problems arise, but if they gather up and run back to a fence they may hang there and not disperse over their grazing area. This results in severe overgrazing next to the fence and illthrifty stock. If the sheep go the other way in the autumn they may be put at risk in the event of a snowfall.

In the United Kingdom, where farmers get about $100 per lamb, more frequent shepherding is justified, but here, with shepherds receiving $70 a day, farmers' returns do not justify more than the minimum. If a party of trampers passes the day after the stock have been checked it may be two or three weeks before the farmer is aware that his stock are "hanging". If trampers discuss their plans with the farmer beforehand, he can arrange his shepherding accordingly if possible.

Fencing in our area now costs about $3/m, and the idea of double-fenced lanes is not often practical or aesthetically desirable. Runholders who have walkways on their land have sometimes found that people are much more difficult to keep on tracks than sheep are. Kiwis have a natural curiosity and many lack the tradition of abiding by the rules found in the United Kingdom.

It would be far better to acknowledge that we are different from overseas countries in both farming methods and general attitudes. If people want to roam freely as of right they can do it in national parks. If they want to roam on land being leased for farming, they will find that courtesy and sympathy for the leaseholder will lead to more co-operation, and in those areas where access is denied there may be very good reasons for the lack of co-operation. If the High Country Public Lands Coalition will undertake to inform its members of the need to consult lessees, the farming fraternity will do its part in educating its members.

I agree with Brian Turner that farmers can learn a lot from urban people who have studied ecology, and their practical observations of the natural history of their own properties can be greatly enhanced by an exchange of information. I do wonder however at his suggestion that the proposed Land Management Corporation will be a "hard-nosed commercial organisation". Its predecessor has been accused of not being commercial enough — the rentals for our leases have been described as peppercorn without the reasons for this being acknowledged. The rentals were set at low levels to encourage production from difficult land, prone to severe stock losses and requiring much greater investment simply to get the essentials for life to the homestead site and the products out again. The "bite of the cherry" taken by the service industries has always been higher in the back country, and as an example I give the fact that transport and killing charges for our lambs this year exceed the price we receive.

Mr Turner suggests that people may be charged for access and he may be right. Higher costs and lower returns mean farming may no longer be able to subsidise the recreating public, and we are told that tourism is the most attractive form of diversification. If a leaseholder diversifies into such an enterprise, provides the facilities and pays the necessary levy to the Crown Land administration he will not take kindly to unauthorised visitors. In the past, poachers of wild animals and growers of illegal crops have caused problems, but farmers have in general been busy enough farming without wasting time pursuing them. If the runholders' livelihoods are to be gained from commercialised recreation, the situation is different. It will be interesting to see what justification is given for preventing them doing just that.

Iris Scott
Rees Valley Station
(Glenorchy)