

Challenges and dangers in the high country

By Brian Turner

FROM TIME TO TIME successive governments have looked to revise the 1948 Land Act which is the main instrument for controlling and managing what happens in that great swathe of New Zealand known as the high country. For reasons both contentious and mysterious, but typical of the beast known as “the political process”, and because of the political clout of rural—especially farming—New Zealand, most governments have shied away from high country tenure review. But now things seem to be moving again, and at racing speed. Why?

On the one hand it appears that rabbits, hieracium, and ideologues who wish to privatise just about everything, are behind moves to freehold some of New Zealand’s finest open country landscapes and natural grassland ecosystems.

On the other there are those who see a review of the Land Act as opening the way for the creation of a network of high country conservation parks and reserves. It could also enable nature conservation and public access to be two of the objectives for the management of pastoral leases.

To large numbers of people, especially those who live in the South Island, mention the words high country and you arouse feelings which go right to the heart of their sense of identity, their sense of what is uniquely New Zealand. The mountains, rivers and valleys, and the tussock grasslands have a significance for us similar in importance to the pampas and prairies of the Americas.

Over the years, high country lessees have developed a deep sense of belonging; they have both a financial and an emotional attachment to place. To all intents and purposes they regard themselves as owners not tenants. It’s easy to understand how this has happened. The fact that they have, in the main, paid peppercorn rentals for the privilege of occupying these lands seems only to have enhanced rather than lessened feelings of ownership.

To people like me, a regular visitor to the high country since the 1950s, and thousands of others who go there to tramp, climb, ski, hunt, fish, sightsee and so on—there is an extremely wide range of public conservation and recreational interests. Lessees are stewards of lands and resources that rightly belong to us all irrespective of rank or station, of ethnic origin or religious creed.

Some lessees argue that the remaining conservation values are proof that private interests can and do protect natural values. In some cases this is true. But in the main it is closer to the truth to say that where such values do remain, in many cases it is in spite, rather than because, of farming activities.

All farmers today claim to be conservationists. It is unpolitic to say otherwise. Yet the reality is that most farmers don’t adopt a conservation practice unless they can see some productive gain in it for themselves.

The Department of Conservation is acutely sensitive to criticism that it is too hard line, not flexible enough, wants to “lock everything up”, and is a poor neighbour. Senior staff often say, with curious logic, that the fact that they often find themselves a little at odds with both “developers” as well as conservationists and public recreational groups is proof that

they must be getting it right. In my view DOC is silly to think that it can be all things to all people; its priorities must be with conservation and recreational needs.

And then there’s the question of adequate funding to do the job that DOC is charged with. Often DOC’s fiercest critics are those who object to it being voted the money it needs to do a better job. There’s no doubt that many DOC staff feel under siege.

So there is sympathy for the department and its predicament. However it is clear that senior levels of DOC are susceptible to political interference, and that personal ideological views colour the advice to ministers and other authorities. It’s often a puzzle as to who prepares or requests some of the many reports and discussion documents that get written and released.

So what is required in order to protect conservation values, and provide for recreational interests in the high country? Firstly to retain in public ownership and control those lands with significant conservation values, and secondly to secure legal public access to these and other lands and waters for recreational users.

Some areas, particularly those suitable for intensive farming and other activities like grape-growing and forestry, could be freeholded. Subalpine and alpine areas should be surrendered from leases; other areas could be the subject of special leases to cater for a variety of activities mindful of the need for sustainability.

It’s certainly time to protect a raft of qualities such as water and soil, scientific, botanical, and landscape/open space values.

Wetlands and the margins of rivers and lakes should be better protected. So should historic sites for their cultural value. Native forests and shrublands need more recognition, and there’s an urgent need to conserve both our short and tall tussock grasslands.

Some people—not too many I believe — think that private owners will quite happily and responsibly attend to these matters, I don’t. Some promote the idea of covenants. Covenant is a word with a nice ring to it, but I’m not convinced that this approach will work. Covenants can be amended or extinguished in secret without any public input.

To many, the best way of resolving the issues and coming up with tenure reviews which cater for the considerable variety of interests and concerns about the high country, is to reclassify the land on a property by property basis. Subject to provisions for sustainable land use, public access, marginal strips and conservation values, freehold much of the lower country (“de-

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veloped" river flats and terraces), issue special leases over the mid-altitude lands, take out the rest and give it to DOC. (Perhaps a separate category for currently highly degraded land.)

In Otago and now in Marlborough there are instances where this has been done to the satisfaction of all parties. This approach is not as "clean" a method as the privateers would like — but it's one which is most likely to achieve the best result overall.

Such a system would seem to provide benefits all round: conservation values would be better protected, the public's recreational and other interests would be secured and often enhanced, and others would be able to get on with diversifying and optimising and land's productive potential.

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