

# The high country a collective natural heritage to which we all belong

By Brian Turner

Just about everyone agrees that a high proportion of New Zealanders are passionate about rugby. But we are also, I think, passionate about a whole lot else.

Many years ago Gordon McLauchlan wrote a book in which he upbraided us for being a “passionless people.” I think he was wrong. What he should have said was that we tended — and still tend for that matter — to be undemonstrative, except when tanked up. It’s then that many of us, especially males, become physically aggressive, ugly and generally boorish. I think we are a people whose passions smoulder away. We bear grudges, harbour resentments, and are stupidly quick to take offence, take umbrage. We don’t like criticism, too often taking it personally. In other words, we are always getting miffed.

But gradually we are becoming more open with our feelings, although one has to feel apprehensive about the mob enthusiasm for rugby and rugby league. The violent overtones are a great worry.

Because rugby, league and cricket get so much media coverage, there’s a tendency for our other popular, more reflective pursuits to be under-emphasised. For instance, New Zealanders have an enthusiasm bordering on passion for the outdoors, for the sea, rivers, beaches, lakes. For golf courses and bowling greens. For horses. For fishing. And especially for the high country, our magnificent mountain lands.

That is why there’s so much heat and passion over moves to privatise more of the high country, why tens of thousands of anglers, hunters, trampers, climbers, canoeists and others are concerned about the effects of the growing commercial interests.

For years recreationalists and runholders co-existed amicably. Friendships were — and still are — widespread. All shared a love for the magnificent, spiritually and visually glorious high country lands.

Those of us imbued with a love of the high country saw it as the heart of what made New Zealand special. It was an essential part of our identity as New Zealanders.

Many of us liked to think that in this regard Maori and non-Maori shared a deep sense of belonging to this country, this place, this land.

But over the last decade or so things have changed. Attitudes have changed, divisions have opened up. Some Maori claim high country lands were stolen and want them back.

Unfortunately, they seem unwilling to accept or concede that many non-Maori have an equally deep sense of belonging to these places, and feel there should be a greater acceptance of their importance as part of a public rather than predominantly a private estate.

Some Maori are also scornful of those non Maori who see the natural world as having aesthetic appeal and spiritual taonga and everything in it as intrinsically valuable.

Those of us who object to Maori claims to the Greenstone and Caples, for instance, and say that before the government should consider handing over such lands to any private interest groups, claimants should have to prove that the lands were nicked in the first place, are accused of being racist.

It’s long past time that those who bleat about cultural sensitivity showed more of it themselves. The moral high ground is a knife edge.

Overseas interests are moving in, raising hackles and fears — justified in my view — that they lack an appreciation of the ethos which has long been that while runholders have rights allowing them to deny access to the public, this clause in their leases is a bit draconian and in practice has rarely been enforced.

Most runholders in my experience have fully understood why recreationalists want to roam and enjoy high country lands and have placed few restrictions in their way.

Country folk often refer to their right to “peace and quiet.” I sympathise. But like so much else, it’s all relative, as urban dwellers will attest.

And haven’t farmers and the like led the way in introducing helicopters, light aircraft, trail bikes, four-wheel-drive vehicles and so on, into the back country? So much for peace and quiet. If access to some high country areas needs to be controlled — and there’s a good case to be made in some areas and for some activities — then surely priority should be given to the public, not to commercial interests. The fear is that the trend is in the other direction.

Recently I read where high country farmer Bob Brown said that after the Land Act of 1948, farmers in the high country became private owners in all but name. This is a revealing remark, one that overstates and misrepresents the facts.

The government, acting on behalf of the public, never intended that lessees be seen as owners. They were given grazing rights, but were required to keep stock numbers to a level that didn’t harm the land, and generally to ensure there would be no degeneration.

In return for a willingness to care and tend for these magnificent parts of our collective natural heritage, they were treated with extraordinary generosity and leniency by being asked to pay only peppercorn rentals and given leases with a perpetual right of renewal.

The result, for a variety of reasons, has been that over time, many of the runs have got to the point where they are no longer commercially viable as farming units. In many areas tussock grasslands have all but disappeared. Natural values have been destroyed; land degradation is widespread.

## ***A collective heritage continued...***

It is a sad story all round.

Rather than pointing the finger, recreationalists and conservationists are now saying: Let's do our best to protect what remains. Let's reclassify the lands, let lessees freehold the bits with high farming values and little remaining conservation and recreational value, and take out the higher altitude lands and put them into the conservation estate.

Make it a requirement that marginal strips and access ways are provided to waterways etcetera, and through freehold land to conservation lands.

Where appropriate, issue permits to graze non-freehold lands.

For some reason, government ministers are reluctant to do this. It seems whenever the High Country branch of Fed Farmers jumps up and down, successive governments run for cover.

High Country Fed Farmers bleat about a "land grab" where the reality is that for them the status quo has always been the bottom line, and that their aspirations involve more control, a good deal of add-on.

Conservationists and recreationalists (often one and the same) simply want to see remaining natural values protected and the public be given security of access where it doesn't exist already.

This need not impinge on legitimate farming operations, nor strip lessees of rights to which they might reasonably be entitled, given current attitudes to land and other species, and to the condition of the lands.

Aldo Leopold hit the nail on the head when he pointed out how many of our problems come back to the fact that too many people saw land as "a commodity belonging to us" instead of "a community to which we belong."

We need to examine what we mean when we talk of "land development" and consider the ethics of what we do.

Utilitarianism, when driven by those who put private interests first, too often results in abuse.

Perhaps we'd all do better to revise our thinking about our relationship to and so-called "ownership" of land.

Perhaps we'd be better to concede that it is just as great a privilege to be allowed to farm land, as it is for the wider public to enjoy and have access to it.

Perhaps we all ought to recognise that none of us truly owns land at all, we merely own property.

Perhaps Maori and non-Maori alike should stop wrangling over who did what, when, and to whom, in the past. Say, "Look, we're sorry, but every race and community has, and has had, its ratbags, so let's get on and try to do better from now on."

Of course, when it comes to saying sorry, we have been saying it for years and years.

I'm not saying sorry any more, sorry.

I don't feel guilty. I don't feel shame for the actions, real or otherwise, of predecessors with whom I have no perceptible connection. I can certainly understand how some people feel ashamed of the actions of some of their forebears, and feel it important to work towards tangibly atoning for some of the transgressions of the past. But you can't force people to keep on eating humble pie, anymore than you can expect them to meekly walk away from a place, or give up their share or rights

in it, when another group decides it will act as judge and jury on matters relating to perceived historical grievances.

I'm also conscious of the fact that the system some say was devised by non-Maori for the purpose of oppressing and suppressing Maori appears to have served the likes of Derek Fox, Ranginui Walker, Tipene O'Regan, Sandra Lee, and scores more, a good deal better than most of my relations, materially and educationally. I quite agree with those who point to the injustice of having such a disproportionately large percentage of Maori and Polynesians on low incomes, and of the dangers and problems inherent in it, but I think the cause isn't racism. Rather it is the socioeconomic consequences of political ideology and the system evolved from it.

In the end, anyone who feels committed to living here belongs here, in my opinion. And while most of us come to regard it as "our" land, we're jumped-up if we think we really "own" it.

Perhaps we might all do better to make a genuine effort to share more and be less avid in our desire to acquire more at the expense of others, and of the world around us.

Perhaps we'd then have greater cause to be proud of ourselves as human beings, and be less overbearing all round.

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