



Grazing in the Australian Alps

The number of sheep or cattle that can be grazed in an area depends on climate, terrain and the amount of food available. Grazing has occurred in many different parts of the Australian Alps but only **seasonal grazing** of sheep and cattle occurred on the highest mountain plateaus where there were permanent **freehold** runs.

At lower elevations throughout the Australian Alps pastures were grazed but, in summer, these areas became dry and sparse while the high plains offered cooler temperatures and higher rainfall supporting lush native grasses and herbs. These alpine areas also provided a precious food supply in times of drought.

Records show that graziers were taking sheep and cattle into and across the mountains in the early 1820s in search of new pastures, free of drought and disease. An 1834 newspaper report mentioned cattle at **Gibson's Plains** (Kiandra) and some families claim that their forebears were in the area in the 1820s.

Some graziers came to depend on **public land** for summer grazing. In the first half of the 1900s it was a common practice to burn to encourage new growth of grass shoots. As a result, frequent burning became an important part of grazing in many parts of the high country, particularly where sheep were grazed.



Cattle grazing on freehold land near Benambra, Victoria

The history of grazing in the Australian Alps

In the early days governments encouraged graziers to use the high country to feed their cattle and sheep. Governments in Victoria and New South Wales introduced a system of annual licences, giving graziers the right to graze an area of alpine pasture. The early leases and licences did not limit stock numbers or the grazing season, which often led to extensive **overgrazing** of the land.

The gold discoveries of the 1850s and 1860s paved the way for closer pastoral settlement in the Alps. Many former miners took up small grazing selections in the narrow valleys and timbered foothills. The lowland selections were eventually converted to freehold ownership. The higher country remained public land, but it was divided into large blocks for seasonal grazing under either a licence or a lease system.

Both sheep and cattle were grazed in the Australian Alps, although sheep were grazed much more extensively in NSW than in Victoria.

Unlike Kosciuszko National Park, where grazing was removed from the high country by 1958, grazing in the Victorian Alps was withdrawn only from specific parts of the Alps.

In the 1940s, withdrawals occurred in response to the degraded condition of some of the most sensitive areas. As a result, grazing by sheep and horses and burning off was stopped.

In the 1950s cattle were excluded from the highest summits including Mounts Bogong, Hotham, Loch and Feathertop to protect water catchment and alpine vegetation. With the cooperation of the graziers, measures were introduced to control cattle numbers and the length of the grazing season.

As a result of Land Conservation Council (LCC) recommendations and the government purchase of the Wonnangatta Station, withdrawals occurred in 1988 from the area east of the Snowy River and the Howitt Plains/Wonnangatta valley area; followed in 1991 by parts of the Bogong High Plains, The Bluff, Wabonga Plateau and Davies Plain.

In 1979, and again in 1983, the LCC recommended that grazing continue over most of the Victorian Alps but be withdrawn from particularly high, sensitive areas. In 1989, Parliament passed legislation to establish the Alpine National Park and to exclude grazing from particular areas within it but to allow it to continue in the remainder. An Agreement provided for 7 year licences and included conditions covering renewals, transfers, protection of conservation values, numbers and management of stock and the use of huts, dogs, vehicles, horses and firearms.

For some Australians, traditional grazing practices in the Victorian Alps have acquired a cultural significance of their own – but people are generally unaware of the extent and length of scientific study showing that grazing has detrimental effects on alpine environments.

The impact of grazing in alpine areas

Much of the damage in the Alps today is a legacy of the impacts of use prior to the 1940s. A combination of overgrazing, deliberate burning and the occasional wildfire, such as those of 1926 and 1939, led to massive degradation of the highest mountain areas in both NSW and Victoria.

Scientific studies into the effects of grazing have been carried out on the Bogong High Plains since the 1940s. These long term studies show that cattle grazing has the following major effects:

- Cattle are free ranging and selectively graze most tall herbs, grasses and several shrubs. This alters the nature of plant communities and reduces the display of summer wildflowers, a notable feature of ungrazed herbfields.

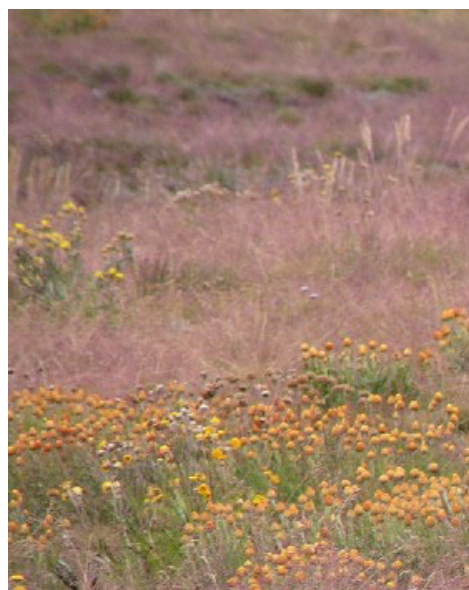


Cattle exclusion plot on the Bogong High Plains, established by Maisie Fawcett over 50 years ago

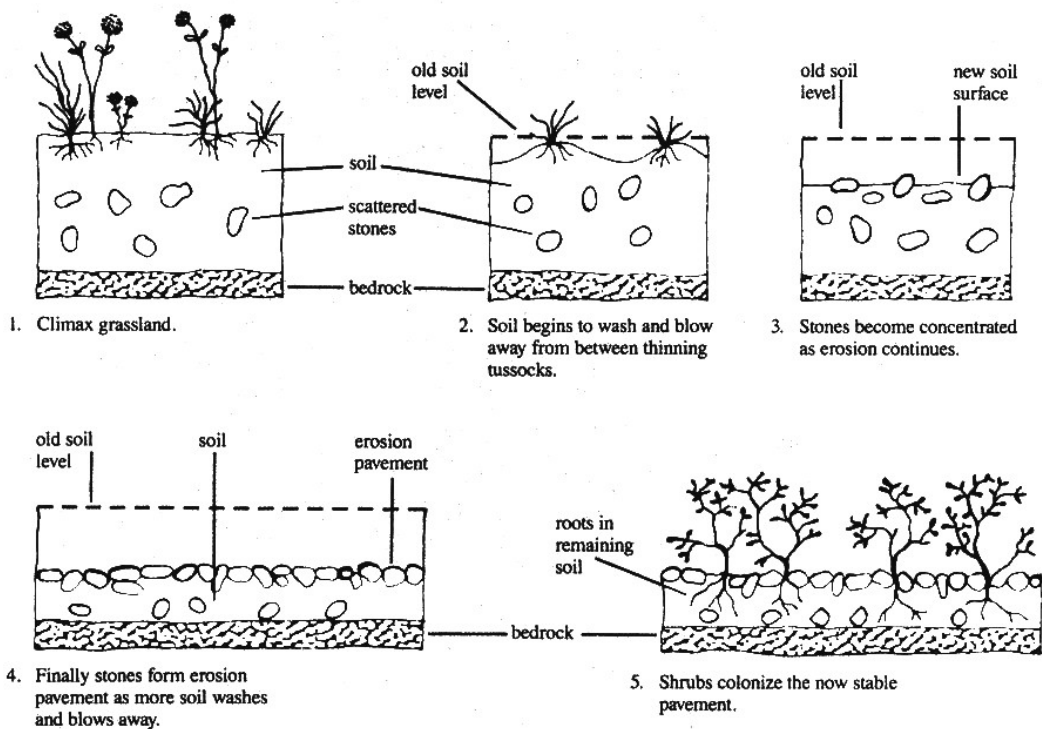
- Cattle cause damage to fragile wetland and moss bed communities. Wetlands contain organic peaty soils which are particularly susceptible to trampling because of their structure and the fact that they remain wet year round. Many wetlands in the

Alps are degraded to the point where extensive erosion pavements occur at the ground surface. These communities are vital in storing and regulating the flow of water from mountain catchments.

- Cattle compact the soil and increase the chances of erosion. The hard hooves of cattle compact soil, preventing new plants from establishing and leaving the soil unprotected from erosion by water and wind and from damage by frosts.
- In the early part of the last century grazing and fire caused massive degradation of the alpine environment. Scientific studies have shown that continued grazing delays the recovery of past damage.
- The presence of, and disturbance by cattle can help to spread weeds. It is probable that the highly invasive noxious weed English Broom has been transported to the high country by cattle.



Poa and flowers, Australian Alps



Research shows that grazing affects the soil and changes the composition of plant species.

R. J. Williams (1991) sums up the outcomes of the scientific work:

A substantial body of high-quality scientific evidence has accumulated over this period which has shown unequivocally that grazing by domestic livestock has had detrimental effects on the soils and vegetation of the Australian alpine environment. Common consequences of grazing are soil erosion, the selective grazing of sensitive plant species and plant communities, the alteration of vegetation composition and structure through persistent selective grazing, and an increase in the disturbance of soil and vegetation through trampling.

The cattle are free ranging (there are no restrictive fences) and prefer to graze in open vegetation communities such as grasslands, open heathlands and herbfields.

They are highly selective, preferring palatable species of grasses, daisies and small heathland shrubs. This means that the sensitivity of the plant communities and individual plants to grazing is variable. Some communities will experience a relatively low grazing pressure, whilst in others the effects of grazing pressure will be high. In addition, because the cattle are free ranging, it is impossible to keep them out of the most sensitive areas.

Fires in the Alpine National Park in 1998 and 2003 further fuelled the debate about the impact of grazing. The fires had significant impact on the alpine environments exposing them to risk of erosion, reduced water quality and weed invasion. Sensitive areas such as alpine bogs were particularly susceptible to damage. As a result, grazing restrictions were placed on a number of areas for 2 years.

Myth: Alpine Grazing Reduces Blazing

Scientific studies on the Bogong High Plains show that grazing does not reduce the fire hazard. The alpine and sub alpine vegetation of the Victorian Alps has evolved in the absence of frequent fire and grazing by hard hoofed animals.

Historically, there has been a low frequency of fire in the alpine and subalpine areas. Because of the relatively cool climate the grasslands remain moist and resistant to fire during summer. However, the severe 1939 wild-fires burnt freely through these areas even though stock numbers were much higher than at present.

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Up until August 2005, cattle grazed much of the Victorian Alpine National Park while the NSW Kosciuszko National Park has not been grazed since 1972.

Australian alpine environments occupy just 0.1% of the continent. Vegetation in these landscapes is typically of a low height due to the extreme climate (winter snow and frost) and the altitude (above about 1600m). Fire is rare in these landscapes, but during January 2003 tens of thousands of hectares of alpine and sub-alpine country were burnt.

Long term monitoring plots (set up in 1946) show quite clearly that cattle grazing has not affected the shrub cover - and therefore fuel loads - over a 60 year period. This has been a consistent finding at several other long-term monitoring plots in the Bogong High Plains.

In many areas on the east coast of Australia, cattle graze dry eucalypt forests that are frequently burned at a low intensity for temporary pasture improvement. This combination of disturbance has been identified as having negative impacts on native fauna and flora, and as a result a decrease in biodiversity.

Source: Australian Conservation Foundation, 12 January 2004

Control and withdrawal

The grazing issue has been an integral part of the debate about appropriate land uses in the Victorian Alps.

Grazing of domestic stock does not conform to generally accepted national park management objectives. The interference to natural ecosystems and the presence of exotic animals (including horses and dogs at mustering time) conflict with many people's expectations of land declared as a national park.

In May 2004 the Victorian Minister for Environment established the Alpine Grazing Taskforce to investigate the impacts of cattle grazing and examine options for the future of cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park.

The Taskforce undertook extensive consultation, heard many expert presentations and visited numerous sites within the Park.

The Taskforce handed down findings on (among other things) grazing in relation to:

- environmental benefits and impacts (including fire);
- cultural heritage benefits and impacts;
- economic and social benefits and impacts;
- recreation and tourism benefits and impacts; and
- National Park standards.

Some key findings were:

The Taskforce finds significant damaging impacts and no overall benefits for the environment from cattle grazing.

Both grazed and ungrazed areas were burnt and unburnt in the 2003 fires, with fire severity predominantly determined by the prevailing weather conditions, topography, fuel loads and fuel flammability types, not whether an area has been grazed.

Historic huts and other structures associated with grazing are important elements of the cultural heritage values of the park.

The Taskforce concludes that the cultural heritage related to the grazing of livestock in the high country does not depend on ongoing grazing.



Freehold grazing near Harrietville, Victoria

In May 2005, the Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks, announced that cattle grazing licences in the Alpine National Park would not be renewed when most of them expire in August 2005. The last four expire in June 2006.

Media release extract

Media release from the Premier and the Minister for Environment

Tuesday 24 May, 2005

Cattle grazing will no longer be permitted in Victoria's Alpine National Park, but will continue elsewhere in the high country, Premier Steve Bracks, said today.

Mr Bracks said the Government had made the decision to protect one of Victoria's most significant natural assets and important water catchments.

The Government will now work with the NSW and ACT Governments to seek World Heritage listing for the National Park...

The Alpine Grazing Taskforce established last year to investigate cattle grazing in the National Park found it damaged soil, with cattle trampling mossbeds and watercourses, threatening rare native flora and fauna and spreading weeds.

Time for an alpine change

Early 1900s	Grazing was excluded from the high country in the ACT to protect water catchments.
Late 1930s	There was great concern about the condition of the catchment of the Hume Reservoir which included mountainous country in both Victoria and NSW.
1938	The NSW Government declared the Upper Snowy River and its tributaries as 'an area of erosion hazard'. The soil conservation organisations of both states also began research to study the causes and effects of erosion in the Australian Alps, setting up a series of long-term research projects in NSW and on the Victorian High Plains. The field sites of some of these projects are still being monitored today, 50 years late.
1940s and 1950s	The decades of catchment protection; soil conservation bodies were established in Vic and NSW to monitor deterioration of the high country catchments and implement strategies to protect and rehabilitate damaged areas.
1940s	Land management practices were introduced to restrict stock numbers and control burning. In Victoria, burning ceased altogether and the grazing of all sheep and horses was withdrawn. Leases were provided for grazing cattle during a definite season.
1944	Kosciuszko State Park was declared. In response to concern about catchment protection in the Snowy Mountains, grazing was withdrawn from the highest parts of what is now Kosciuszko National Park in NSW.
1950s	Grazing withdrawals occurred in the most sensitive areas of Victoria's highest summits, including Mounts Bogong, Hotham, Loch and Feathertop to protect water catchments and alpine vegetation.
1958	The NSW government excluded grazing from most of the high country above 1,370 metres and the Soil Conservation Service commenced revegetation and repair. The Service developed a long-term program to stabilise soils in the area. Repairing the damage involved establishing vegetation cover as quickly as possible to create surface stability essential for native species to re-establish. In some instances, more substantial structures such as rock weirs and artificial banks had to be built to control water runoff. Seed used in revegetation was from introduced (exotic) species, because of its ready availability and because the vital role of indigenous vegetation in the functioning of ecosystems was not appreciated as it is today. However, even with introduced species, once an area was stabilised, native species could take hold and eventually replace the introduced species.
1961	Grazing was discontinued in the few remaining snow leases in New South Wales.
1967	The National Parks and Wildlife Act was passed and Kosciuszko State Park was declared a national park. Grazing in the park was totally banned in 1969 and three years later the last leases were finally terminated, bringing to an end 135 years of seasonal grazing in the Snowy Mountains.
1970s	Grazing ceased in the area that was to become Namadgi National Park in the ACT and snow leases closed.
1979	With the declaration of the Gudgenby Nature Reserve in 1979, followed by the Namadgi National Park in 1984 and extensions in 1991, all farming ceased.
1981	Stock were removed from within Falls Creek resort.
1981	NSW Minister for the Environment, the Hon. Eric Bedford, gazetted 15,764 hectares of former travelling stock, camping and water reserves to Kosciuszko National Park. This placed the control of stock movement through the park with the NPWS.
1988	Grazing was withdrawn from the area east of the Snowy River and the Howitt Plains (Wonnangatta Station) in Victoria.
1989	The Alpine National Park was declared.
1991	In Victoria, grazing was withdrawn in parts of the Bogong High Plains, The Bluff and Wabonga Plateau.
1991	Seven-year licences were issued to cover all grazing in the Victorian High Country. As part of this process, a panel was established to resolve a dispute concerning the conditions of the licences. One of the panel's findings was that monitoring should be extended and results of monitoring should be reported during the initial seven year licence period.
2005	Ban on grazing in Alpine National Park. Fifty-seven cattle grazing licences in Victoria's Alpine National Park expired in August and were not renewed (the remaining four expire in June 2006), ending cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park.

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Glossary

Freehold land

Represents privately owned land. In certain circumstances, freehold title can be held by a government body, such as a State forestry commission when land is purchased to establish forestry plantations.

Gibson's Plains (Kiandra)

Gibson's Plain was the name previously given to Kiandra by early European settlers. It had been named after Dr. Gibson. The Sydney Morning Herald in 25th February, 1860, states that: 'In the year 1839 Dr. Gibson visited the country (that is now Kiandra), and being struck with the beauty of the plain and the extent of pasture, sent men up to erect a stock yard, taking with them a quantity of cattle. By the time they had finished the stockyard the winter had set in and the cattle perished.'

Overgrazing

The removal of more vegetation than is required to stop soil erosion and degradation as a result of stocking too many animals in one area.

Public land

Public land belongs to the Crown and includes land which is reserved, owned for public purposes or vacant. It typically includes reserves for nature conservation,

forestry, marine conservation, water conservation, mining, defence, and vacant and other Crown land.

Seasonal grazing

Seasonal grazing in the Australian Alps involves taking stock into the high country (subalpine and alpine zones) in summer to graze on the native grasses and herbs.

Plant and animal species

Sphagnum Moss

Sphagnum cristatum



environment ACT



<http://www.australialps.deh.gov.au/>