

GRAZING

IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS



Grazing once took place in many different parts of the Australian Alps, the number of sheep or cattle in an area depending on climate, terrain and the amount of food available. On the highest mountain plateaus there were permanent freehold runs where seasonal grazing of sheep and cattle took place.

At lower elevations pastures were also grazed but, in summer, when these areas became dry and sparse, the high plains offered cooler temperatures and higher rainfall supporting lush native grasses and herbs. These alpine areas also provided a precious food supply for sheep and cattle 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 which were 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.

In the early days governments encouraged graziers to use the high country to feed their cattle and sheep, with sheep being grazed much more extensively in NSW than in Victoria.

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.

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Kosciuszko National Park, where grazing was removed from the high country by 1958, grazing in the Victorian Alps was withdrawn only from specific parts of the Alps.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

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 two years.

THE HISTORY OF HIGH COUNTRY GRAZING

GRAZING

THE IMPACT OF GRAZING IN ALPINE AREAS

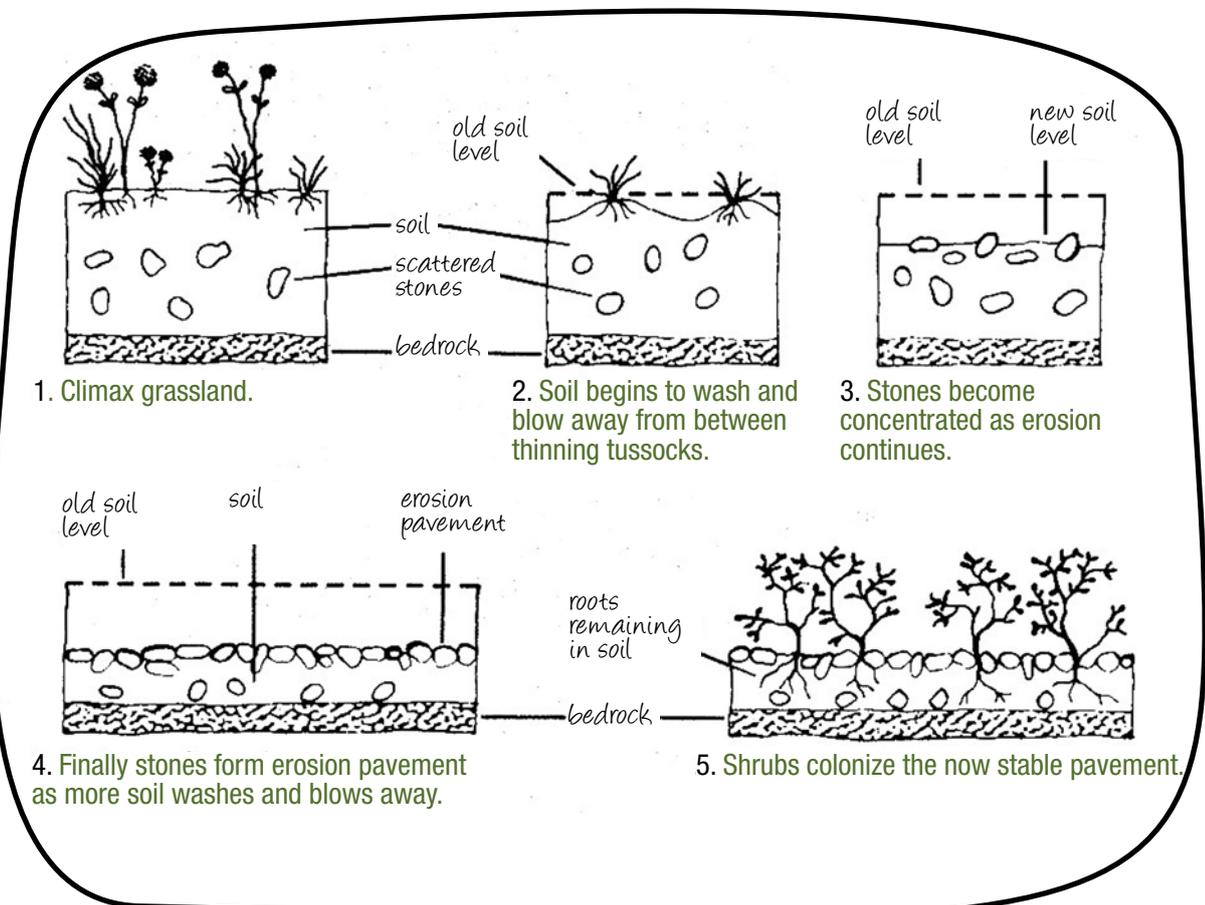
Much of the damage in the Alps today is a legacy of the impacts of use prior to the 1940s. A combination of overgrazing, deliberate burning and the occasional wildfire, such as those of 1926 and 1939, led to massive degradation of the highest mountain areas in both NSW and Victoria.

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 shrubs. This changes the natural make-up of plant communities and reduces the display of summer wildflowers, a notable feature of ungrazed herbfields.
- Cattle cause damage to fragile wetland and moss bed communities. Wetlands contain organic peaty soils which are easily trampled because of their structure and the fact that they remain wet year round. Many wetlands in the Alps are now degraded and eroded. Healthy moss bed 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 (*Cytisus scoparius*) has been transported to the high country by cattle.



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



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.

Among the key findings were the following:

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.

In May 2005, the then Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks, announced that cattle grazing licences in the Alpine National Park would not be renewed. However in 2010 cattle were returned to the park as part of a project aimed at reducing fire risk on crown land. Up to 400 cattle were introduced into six research sites.

In response to this project, in 2011 it was announced that the Victorian Government must refer any plans to return cattle grazing to the Alpine National Park to the Federal Government. It is the Federal Government's role to consider and approve for it is responsible for any action - such as grazing - likely to have a significant negative impact on a matter of national environmental significance. This is stated under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act), and an action such as this must be referred to Federal Environment Minister. It's then up to the minister to determine if re-introducing cattle grazing fits the definition of a 'controlled action' under the Act.

Cattle exclusion plot on the Bogong High Plains.



Grazing timeline.

Date	
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 later.
1940s & 1950s	The decades of catchment protection when soil conservation bodies were established in Victoria 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	The then 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 licenses 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 licenses. One of the panel's findings was that monitoring should be extended and results of monitoring should be reported during the initial seven year license period.
2005	Ban on grazing in Alpine National Park.
2010	Cattle were returned to Alpine National Park as part of a project aimed at reducing fire risk on crown land.
2011	It is announced that the Victorian Government must seek approval for grazing from the Federal government due to concerns that grazing may be in breach of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. The cattle were removed.

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GLOSSARY

Freehold land: 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, 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 too much vegetation as a result of stocking too many animals in one area - vegetation necessary stop soil erosion and degradation.

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 (sub-alpine and alpine zones) in summer to graze on the native grasses and herbs.