

Mountain Cattlemen protest through Alpine National Park

Movement at the station...

LEGENDARY Wonnangatta Station was once the most remote freehold cattle station in Victoria. The beautiful valley, tucked in between steep, mountainous bush on all sides, is east of Mansfield in the North East, north of Maffra in Gippsland and to the north and west of Dargo in East Gippsland.

Cattle had not graced the station since 1988 when the government of the time took ownership and halted grazing on freehold and leasehold country. However, that all changed in January, 2006, when groups of 'symbolic protest mobs' were driven into the station from Dargo and Merrijig by members of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

The gutsy move by cattlemen was not without its perils but was in response to the previous year's government ban on grazing in Alpine National Parks. It is illegal to have cattle in the national park however the cattlemen stated they were exercising their right to protest and reclaim original droving routes.

MCAV president at the time, Doug Treasure, Stratford, said rampant weeds, namely blackberries and St John's Wort, combined with long grass had created a potentially massive fire hazard and were the result of poor management on behalf of Parks Victoria.

"Wonnangatta represents with absolute proof the environmental disaster that occurs after removing grazing," Mr Treasure said.

He said the mountain cattlemen were a scapegoat for a community that expected the government to fix the environment.

"Kicking a few cows off the high country will not fix what humans are doing to the environment," he said.

The MCAV members were supported by rural lobby group, Country Voice, which is now known as Push For The Bush.

Country Voice chair, Bob Richardson, said the protest was much more effective than engaging in the expensive and exhausting consultation processes with government which had virtually become an industry.

"We have to recognise it was civil disobedience by green protestors which ultimately persuaded the government to lock up public land," Mr Richardson said. "If we want to take back our country we have to adopt similar tactics. The cattle drive highlighted to Country Voice members and the wider Victorian community that removing grazing from the Alpine National Park is the worst management decision for the environment," he said.

HISTORY

Wonnangatta's first permanent settler, Oliver Smith, was in residence in 1870. He went into partnership with the Bryce family who eventually took over the station up until 1914.

Stock routes out of the valley went to markets at Heyfield and Maffra, as well as Dargo and the goldfields at Talbotville and Grant.

Phillips and Ritchie, Delatite Station, Mansfield, took over in 1914 and used the valley to fatten steers from Wodonga which they walked out to Mansfield.

In 1918 their manager James Barclay and his cook Bamford were murdered in a mystery case that has never been solved. The station was sold and changed hands twice before it was taken on by the Guy family, of Crooked River, in 1934.

The Guys sold to the Gilder family of Licola in 1971. In 1988 Victoria's Cain government pressured the Gilder family to sell out to the government rather than a private buyer. The Station is now a Mecca for four-wheel drivers, trail riders, some with pack horses and walkers.

Wonnangatta homestead burnt to the ground in 1957 but its site and some yards are preserved. There is also a small cemetery, mainly of members of the Bryce family. It serves as a reminder of the hardship those pioneers encountered in such a wild, remote place.

THE PROTEST

THE droving started in the dark. The bush was silent as if it was waiting for the sun to warm it into life. As it grew light the small mob passed a sign that read 'Alpine National Park' and the drovers knew the protest was on.

No-one was sure if they would be stopped on the track by Parks Victoria or even the police but as it was a passive, democratic protest they could only carry on.

The steady drum of hooves could be heard as the cattle walked quickly in the cool dawn with no idea of the long steep climb that lay ahead of them. The morning quickly turned in to a hot day as the sun finally mastered the fog. Frequent rests were required all the way up the old stock route and the trip was dry.

Little Baldy provided a spectacular view of Wonnangatta in the distance but the steep downhill climb meant there was a long way to go before the haven was reached.

The cattle nearly stopped Wonnangatta River's flow when they finally reached it mid-afternoon and by evening they were hidden away from view

in case of prying eyes.

The following morning the cattle were driven further into the valley and hidden again in case Parks Victoria came by.

Early the next morning the drovers started again but the droving trip was only a few kilometres.

The mood was filled with immense anticipation. The media was to be ready and waiting for the mobs' arrival. Parks' rangers had already intercepted the Merrijig drovers and taken their names and addresses. Possible fines of \$1000 a beast were talked of but no-one shied away from giving their name. 'No comment' was the response to all other questions.

THE MEDIA

Three helicopters had landed in the valley before the signal was given to move out from under the tall trees, close to Conglomerate Creek and the homestead site.

The two mobs, one from Merrijig and one from the Dargo side, met at the old cemetery and their drovers shook hands, greeting each other as their mobs joined together. They were followed by supporters on horses, in 4WDs and also on foot.

The cattle were driven through the wort and blackberries to the homestead site and speeches were made while the cameras rolled. Unbeknown to the cameras, a Parks Victoria vehicle pulled up on the outskirts of the crowd. Parks pulled up but kept out of the spotlight until most of the helicopters had lifted. A few of the drovers rode to their car and held them up for a while but it didn't take long for them to find the small mob of cattle.

After some tense negotiations the rangers left the flat apparently intending to leave the valley. The drovers wanted to take the cattle to water and as they moved the cattle off the rangers changed their direction and once again intercepted the mob and took the drovers' names. They even wrote down the names of the drovers they had previously encountered.

A second Parks vehicle arrived with a policeman on board and there was more tense negotiating until an understanding was reached.

Eventually the Parks rangers and policeman vacated the drovers camp. The following morning the cattle were driven up another bridle track and over a saddle, across the Great Dividing Range. They were rested a few days later and by that time the annual Mountain Cattlemen's Get-Together had started. The event attracted about 3000 people and was held on the Rose River, near Whitfield in Victoria's North East.

The small mob made a grand entrance on Sunday and were driven to the

middle of the flat and held among the crowd. Speeches were made by Liberal and National representatives in support of the cattlemen.

Doug Treasure told the crowd cattle grazing had become a political football and the MCAV had to play a political game - like it or not. He asked the crowd to vote against Labor at the next election.

The protest was a successful demonstration requiring a huge amount of organisation but it was testament to what can be done by a group of people if they want to achieve the same thing.

The week before the protest had started the government had announced it would spend \$7.5 million in the national parks.

“Announcing that money to fix cattle damage they can’t even point out while allowing tens of thousands of feral deer and wild pigs to graze out of control is unacceptable,” Mr Treasure said.

“We drove our cattle through the park to keep the spirit of the cattlemen alive and also to highlight the gaps in alpine management.”