

# The pastures are now regenerating

By David Mason-Jones

A project at the historic Cooma Cottage near Now, NSW, is demonstrating how livestock owners and the National Trust can come together for their mutual benefit.

The use of non-selective grazing animals on the historic property is showing that appropriate grazing is not in itself with the property's heritage value. Rather, the use adds to the interest. More than that, appropriate grazing can help save land for the National Trust by converting its image with regard to weed management from that of a land neighbour to that of a good neighbour.

Cooma Cottage, 7.5 kilometres north of Now, is not to be confused with the original town of Cooma hundreds of kilometres to the south. It is valuable to the National Trust because it dates back to 1857 and is the very earliest cottage in the district. It was built by Henry Collins, an original settler. In 1859 the cottage and 40 hectares of land around it was purchased by Hamilton Hunter - the nephew of Henry and Harriet Lane. Hunter lived there for 35 years and built extensions.

For many years the farm was a Merino wool production property. Then, in the twentieth century it became a home and then the decade of the 1950s.

There are essentially selective grazers and they can cause widespread weed infestations on the land, as horses graze the tasty grasses over and over and leave the weeds to grow and set seed. The problem, therefore, on properties grazed for a long time with horses is that there can

be a large buildup on the end of all of the various weeds. Given a long enough period of selective grazing by horses, any part of ground can become totally dominated by weeds. This is what appears to have happened on the pastures surrounding Cooma Cottage.

The National Trust acquired the property in 1979 and renovated the building in 1988.

The Trust, however, with its focus on the building and not on the land, did nothing to set in place a plan of appropriate land management to regenerate the farm. The state of the pastures consisted of thickets and the weed seed bank grew stronger all the time. Extensive trials of weed eradication.

For a time the land was used by the Now Sheep Company to conduct wooler trials but no effective land management or pasture management was carried out.

The state of the land became so poor that even the Now Sheep Company took their sheep off the land in 2007. It was about this time that the current property manager, Rick Williams, arrived.

Although by career from an education background - rather than a farming background, Rick quickly identified that land management was lacking. There was a movement of weeds. On the one hand the Trust had surrounded the cottage and it was in a reasonable state but on the other, the farming land was run down and choked with weeds.

Nothing substantive had ever been done to regenerate the pastures. The Trust would simply pay for the mandatory spring calving year and leave it at that. This



Cooma Cottage and the 40 hectares block around it was purchased by the National Trust in 1979, the building was renovated but for a long time the land was choked with weeds.



Years of neglecting effective pasture management led to vast stands of tall weeds all over the historic Cooma Cottage landscape. Weeds may have some function in a properly balanced pasture but this is not them.



The state of the problem can be seen by comparing the thick weed growth in the Cooma Cottage paddock in the foreground with the neighbouring property in the distance.

## ON THE LAND - Using cattle for conservation grazing

was not an effective way of addressing the problem,' Rick said.

This is a case where the good intentions of the Trust came unstuck, when it came to the practical challenges of managing a farm. As he explains, 'You cannot grazing a public image as a land neighbour with regard to wild management, which would be completely contrary to its desired image of being a good neighbour.'

'When the first fence came also my control on the job from some weeks earlier,' says Rick.

Rick approached the Forestry Commission Trust and the Ag Group to discuss the problem. He found out that the earlier stage of annual grazing was likely to be ineffective unless it was combined with some other land management practices. It was recommended that the best way to handle the state of the land was to graze it and manage it properly.

Fortunately, it happened that the owner of a nearby cattle yard was looking for some additional aggressive land, which was run down and would instead so he could give a practical demonstration of the land management potential of his particular breed of cattle - the 'cattle breed'.

Rick continues, 'He showed me that these cattle had been used to graze this conservation grazing site in heritage value properties in the British Isles and Ireland. He wanted to do the same thing here in Scotland as a solution for his land.'

The particular characteristics of the land to be used is that they are regarded as suitable for non-selective grazers. What this means is that they will not favour particular types of other species such as horses - and so will favour land usage that other breeds of cattle, for example.

Using non-selective grazers, the cattle were likely to eat



some of the 'weeds' that the horses and sheep had once grazed. This, he explains, together with a selective program of spraying and mowing, could lead to a situation where the strong growth of the weed would be opened up so that sunlight could get through to the grass below.

Under the management scheme, the farmer the owner of the cattle and the Trust, the owner would receive a very maximum for a period of up to five years. This was on condition that he received the pasture, controlled the complete growth of weeds, and increased the productivity so that they increased the condition of Cattle Cattle milk. The benefit for the farmer was that he would gain the very aggressive by weeding and mow. 'With a model case study of the non-selective grazing cattle in view.'

The benefit for the Trust was that, after the restoration period, the appearance would have a wide heritage value for members of the public - visitors will not

The cattle owner has a good record of services to the National Trust. The poor state of both fencing and pasture is shown here.



Before and after: the paddock on the right has been grazed by non-selective grazers. The paddock on the left is yet to be grazed.

## ON THE LAND - Using cattle for conservation grazing

only use a historic cottage farm also a model working farm.

'The project has now been running for 12 months and the results are in line with the predictions made by the cattle owner,' says Rob Williams.

'The owner uses 25 of his cattle in a rotational grazing pattern to eat down and manage the woods. The cattle help eat out the tall parts of the wood growth and this lets the rest get down to ground level.

'The pasture is definitely re-growing. We have also had some rain and the best thing is that there has not been an uncontrollable outbreak of weeds as would have happened before. The rotational grazing habits of the 'Cullinan' cattle certainly seem to be critical to the success of the project,' says Rob. ■



Correctly managed, these non-selective grazers can help restore healthy pastures, sequester carbon and restore full groundcover.

■ Rob Williams, Manager  
Cooma Camp 0488 962 472

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