The high country of the South Island has a special place in the New Zealand psyche. The term “high country” refers to the dry eastern tussock grassland landscapes in the rain-shadow between the plains and the main divide.

The high country reaches down the South Island along the eastward side of the Southern Alps. It begins in the Marlborough foothills and the glaciated high valleys of the Nelson Lakes district, and crosses broad river valleys and glacial plains further south, before reaching the broad inland basin of Canterbury’s Mackenzie Country, the high mountains and lakes of Otago and the flat eroded tops of Central Otago in the south.

Most of the high country is owned by the Crown and is either leased for extensive pastoral farming, or is part of the public conservation estate.

While its landscapes may appear vast and empty, it makes a significant contribution to the national economy – and indeed its vast “emptiness” is its main attraction to visitors.

A large proportion of our single largest industry and overseas income earner, tourism, is based in the high country. Nearly a quarter of all tourist bed nights in New Zealand are spent in the high country, generating an estimated $4 billion in tourism revenue. By comparison high country farm gate revenue in 2005 was $113 million.
**High country biodiversity**

The changing character of the high country, from north to south, is reflected in the enormous diversity of the native plants and animals that have evolved to cope with its varying and harsh conditions.

Generally, the high country has a dry climate, and is often hot and windswept as predominant northwesterlies cause rain to fall on the Southern Alps, creating a rainshadow over the eastern grasslands.

Because much of the land lies above 700 metres it is also frequently cold. From daylight to nightfall the temperature can drop from baking hot to freezing. In winter, snow covers the mountains and many lakes freeze, while sheltered slopes and valley floors experience hoarfrosts.

Before European settlement, vegetation in the high country was predominantly tussock - ranging from red tussock in wetter areas to waist-high snowgrass on the mountainsides. Herbaceous and small shrubby plants, including hebes, heaths and many smaller species grew among the tussocks. Higher up, herbfields and cushion plants predominated. Some of the prostrate shrubs can be 200-300 years old, and the prostrate Raoulia daisy, or “vegetable sheep,” many times older.

Repeated burning of tussock to stimulate young growth for extensive farming has reduced fertility and increased soil erosion. Fire has removed the protection of many of the remaining beech forests on the mountainsides.

The insect life of the high country is extraordinary, including alpine butterflies, day-flying moths – even alpine weta that survive freezing conditions with a natural “anti-freeze” in their blood. The high country has a large variety of skinks and geckos, often found only in small local areas.

A range of birds, some endangered or threatened, live in the high country, or migrate there to breed. These include native falcons, riverbed-nesting birds such as the wrybill, oystercatcher, dotterel, black stil and black-fronted tern, mountain birds such as kea and rock wren, and high country wetland birds such as crested grebe, scaup, shoveler, grey duck, grey teal, parasite shelduck, Australasian bittern, Australian coot and marsh crake.

**High country forests – back to the future?**

Before human arrival, much of the high country was forest. Maori traditional knowledge speaks of Tamatea Pokai Whenua “striding the land” and warming it by lighting fires of possession. Oral histories say early Maori settlers burnt vast tracts of Otago and Canterbury to drive out moa, which were killed as they sought to escape.

Charred stumps and fallen logs are still found on some tussock slopes and a few forest remnants still exist in gullies which have escaped burning.

When grazing ceases, tussock grasslands recover and succession back to dry forest begins. This recovery of vegetation helps sequester carbon, provides habitat, and improves water management.
Public conservation land in the high country

In 1986, government departments managing land were restructured into state corporations and the Department of Conservation. The resulting redistribution of land protected some special high country lands (such as the Eyre Creek and Cainard Landcorp blocks in Southland). Public protests also stopped the iconic Molesworth Station passing to Landcorp.

Further conservation gains in the high country were slow until the 1998 Crown Pastoral Land Act under tenure review – a voluntary process in which former pastoral lease land is divided into freehold farmland and conservation land. The aim of this process is that land suitable for production is freeholded and land with high conservation, recreation and landscape values is retained in public ownership.

New conservation land from tenure review has mostly been dominated by less productive higher mountain land - lower altitude tussock and valley floor vegetation was rarely protected under early tenure reviews. Tenure review has only recently started to protect more lower altitude natural vegetation.

The government has made several purchases of all or part of some high country properties with the aim of protecting conservation and recreation values.

The creation of high country conservation parks has been enormously valuable in protecting conservation, recreation and landscape values of the high country.

Government purchases of properties such as Michael Peak are valuable additions to public conservation land

In 2001 the opening of the 22,000-hectare Korowai-Torlesse Tussockland Park was a quantum leap forward in high country conservation. An hour’s drive from Christchurch, it includes beech forest, lower altitude shrubland and tall tussock. DOC immediately began weed control on the block and has developed walking tracks and bike trails and the park is widely used by trampers, hunters and mountain bikers. Freed from cattle and sheep grazing, the park’s beech forest, red tussock and rare plants are now regenerating.

Further high country parks have followed: Te Papanui in Otago; Taka Ra Haka/Eyre Mountains in Southland; Hakatere Conservation Park (established with strong support from farmers) protects the Ashburton Basin and Lake Heron wetlands; Seaward Kaikoura Range and Te Kahui Kaupeka Park on Canterbury's Two Thumb Range.

Tenure review and the new parks have guaranteed open public walking access to many formerly inaccessible parts of the high country, created hundreds of kilometres of new walking and mountain bike trails, and preserved historic sites.

The Craigieburns

Following the end of 150 years of pastoral farming, an extraordinary recovery of native plants has taken place below the peaks of the Craigieburn Range, 100 kilometres west of Christchurch.

When the land was part of the Castle Hill pastoral lease, sheep grazed nearly to the summit of the Craigieburn Range, while cattle grazed the beech forest, tall and short tussock further down. There was little beech regeneration and tall tussocks were being grazed to extinction.

In 2004, the Crown, through the Nature Heritage Fund, bought three quarters of the Castle Hill pastoral lease (8517ha) for conservation and public recreation.

Following removal of stock, beech forest, tall tussock and wetland plants have made a strong recovery. Even on the shifting, seemingly inhospitable environment of the mountain scree slopes, native plant life flourishes, and the streams and rivers that drain the range into the Waimakariri River now flow clear and unpolluted.

The public has also gained with the opening of the land for recreation. The Mt Cheeseman skifield road provides easy access to view amazing scree plants, such as the large mounds of “vegetable sheep”, the dark cushion-shaped flowers of black cotula, and the bright yellow splashes of Haast’s buttercup.

Mountain biking and walking are very popular, and a new Waimakariri Basin community conservation group is removing invasive pine trees and coordinating pest control. The park is hugely popular among outdoor adventurers and is visited by hundreds of tourists every day in summer. Among the most popular attractions are the 362-metre-long cave at Cave Stream Scenic Reserve, the limestone rock battlements of Kura Tawhiti Conservation Area and rock climbing and “bouldering” in the adjoining 52-hectare Spittle Hill block.

Castle Hill is a great example of progress made in protecting the special plants and animals of the high country and bringing the people to enjoy these special places.
Benefits of new public conservation land

Recreation and tourism

Tourism is already the biggest industry in the high country, but has traditionally been concentrated around national parks such as Arthurs Pass and Mt Cook, skifields and the southern lakes.

Guaranteed public access to new areas of conservation land has provided new opportunities for tourism and recreation. Throughout the high country, tens of thousands of visitors now enjoy wild places that formerly were largely the preserve of sheep, cattle and a handful of people. New visitors participating in recreation and tourism have grown the high country economy and transformed towns such as Hanmer, Springfield, Lake Tekapo, Naseby and Wanaka.

New business ventures offering heli-biking, heli-skiing, mountain biking tours, guided tramping and nature tours have sprung up to take advantage of these new opportunities. The new public conservation lands are being developed for recreation, with hundreds of kilometres of new tracks.

Conservation

Pest control is also better managed in the new public conservation areas, particularly control of broom and wilding trees, and animal pests such as goats.

DOC has been allocated sizeable funds to deal with these “inherited” pest problems and in Otago and Canterbury extensive weed and pest control is conducted on most former pastoral lease lands.

The expansion of the high country public conservation estate is also an opportunity to achieve better balance of protected areas. Most of New Zealand’s public conservation land is confined to the main mountain ranges, and the wetter forested hill country on the western coasts of both main islands.

Ecosystem services

The high country also contributes significant “ecosystem services” that have great economic and social value.

The high country is the source of many of the country’s major rivers, and contains most of our major lakes. Most of New Zealand’s hydro generation and irrigation relies on rivers draining the high country.

New Zealand’s tussock grasslands contain almost as much vegetative carbon as all of the country’s plantation forests. Retirement of land from grazing leads to a significant increase in carbon sequestration as tussock grasslands recover and the succession back to dry forest begins.

It also improves water capture and retention, leading to greater certainty of water supply in dry periods and lessens the impact of flood peaks. The value of Te Papanui Conservation Park for water services alone has been estimated at $136 million.

Tussock fenced off from grazing stock is an effective means of storing carbon
High country farming and tenure review

The New Zealand public (through the Crown) owns about two million hectares in pastoral leases and licences in the South Island high country. While this land is farmed by the leaseholders, for many New Zealanders this country nevertheless represents a significant part of our “public commons”.

Historically high country farms have been based on fine wool production from merino sheep, with some beef cattle on lower areas. Farmers are both guardians of their lands and aim to run a profitable business, leading to changes in high country farming.

Diversification into meat lamb production, dairying, deer, grapes, and subdivision of larger properties into lifestyle blocks have been some of the strategies adopted to secure the survival of many high country farms. This results in greater development of the lower altitude parts of the high country, increasing pressure on remaining wetlands, valley floor shrublands and tussock grasslands.

This change has been greatly assisted by tenure review. Tenure review usually results in the former leaseholder giving up their lease in return for the freehold ownership (privatisation) of the more productive (lower altitude) parts of the property, while the Crown takes full control of the rest of the property. Most of this land becomes public conservation land managed by the Department of Conservation.

Many high country farmers have also diversified into tourism and recreation. The new high country parks encourage visitors to stay longer and make greater use of facilities provided by high country residents – including some farmers.

Pressure to turn back the clock

Rather than embracing changes which diversify and strengthen the high country economy and communities, the government is under pressure to turn back the clock.

Some high country landowners are lobbying to allow grazing of new high country conservation land and want to stifle further conservation initiatives. They argue for an even greater proportion of leasehold properties to be privatised, with covenants and sustainable land management plans used to protect significant landscape, ecological and cultural heritage values.
Public versus private

Concern over inappropriate freeholding of land with high ecological, landscape and recreation values led to a significant clarification of government policy in 2007.

Both Land Information New Zealand and DOC had failed to recognise the strategic importance, landscape and recreational values of lakeside areas such as Lakes Wanaka, Tekapo and Pukaki. The Government agreed that freeholding of lakeside land was inconsistent with its high country objectives:

(d) to “secure public access and enjoyment of high country land”
(j) to “obtain a fair financial return to the Crown on its high country assets.”

The spacious, open, undeveloped character of the Mackenzie Basin still exists because most of the basin is still largely in pastoral lease tenure - and therefore is under stricter control of the Crown Pastoral Lands Act than if these lands were in freehold ownership and subject to only weak district plan restrictions under the Resource Management Act.

Such weak measures have failed to protect significant indigenous biodiversity and limit the impacts of intensified and changing land use which results from land passing into freehold ownership.
Covenants

The High Country Accord and other farmer representatives have suggested that more pastoral leases could be freeholded and their significant inherent values safeguarded through sustainable management plans and covenants. This is strongly opposed by Forest & Bird.

Cost

It is often assumed that the government will save money if these lands are under private control. However government costs may be the same or higher than if these lands remained in public ownership.

Under the terms of some existing agreements on private land the government is liable for rates, pest control, wildfire suppression, fencing and monitoring of compliance with agreements.

Covenants often require greater staff time and costs in undertaking conservation work on them.

Accountability

Covenants can be modified or extinguished at any time without public notification. There is little public accountability for the actions of a landowner or officials responsible for upholding the terms of an agreement.

If the Crown is no longer the landholder, enforcement of sustainable management plans and covenants would be difficult, if not impossible. Covenanting authorities are loath to intervene when covenants are breached, and more usually accede to landowner demands to ignore or amend their terms. The Crown and QEII Trust is entitled to enforce the terms of a covenant and seek damages through the courts, yet they have rarely done so.

Problems often arise with subsequent owners of covenanted land. Elsewhere QEII covenants are usually sought by people who are passionate about preserving something they value for future generations. In contrast, covenants created during tenure reviews are often negotiated with little commitment to long-term protection of conservation values.

Conservation and public access

QEII Trust high country covenants often do not require fencing or exclusion of stock from sensitive environments – largely defeating their purpose and achieving little conservation gain.

Covenants also do not guarantee public access, or encourage development of facilities such as tracks and huts.

The Crown should continue to manage significant conservation and recreation land. None of the mechanisms for private conservation management match the security, accountability and public remedies afforded by continued public ownership of high country lands with significant natural and recreational values.
Why the high country needs public ownership

**Flexibility**

Public ownership allows maximum flexibility to amend land management to adapt to changing ecological, social and recreational needs. Any necessary changes to the rules/law go through public process, with appropriate checks and balances.

**Balancing conflicts of interest**

Inherent conflicts exist between economic aspirations of farmers wishing to make a living from high country stations, and communities who wish to protect areas with significant inherent values. Continued public ownership and stewardship is the best mechanism to balance these tensions.

**Accountability**

Management of these significant natural resources requires direct political accountability. Public administration of publicly-owned lands is subject to the Official Information Act – recourse not available regarding activities on privately-owned land. The Conservation, Reserves and National Parks Acts also ensure responsible stewardship and right of public access to public conservation land.

**A way forward for the high country**

In the last 25 years a partnership has been developing that allows for both economic benefit and nature protection in the high country. These two land uses are not mutually exclusive – a balance can be achieved through partnership between the tourism and recreation industries, high country farmers and the rest of the community.

The public has made it clear that it does not want the iconic high country landscape ruined with lakeside subdivision or inappropriate tourism development. They want assurance that significant high country habitats and wildlife are protected and managed in the public interest.

Support for public access for recreation, tourism and education can be seen in the large numbers of people visiting and enjoying the new high country conservation parks. Local economies and communities are flourishing, where just a few years ago they were in serious decline.

Tourism, farmers, nature lovers and recreational users can work in close partnership towards a shared vision of benefit to all through the creation of high country conservation parks.

This can be achieved through careful implementation of tenure review, which sees the continued protection of land of significant conservation value in public ownership and management, while creating conservation, recreation and tourism opportunities in a comprehensive network of high country parks, and allowing freehold ownership of productive land.

[www.forestandbird.org.nz](http://www.forestandbird.org.nz)