Abuse of the land by man is nothing new. With unthinking enthusiasm our forefathers here and in many other countries poured into the forest in search of raw materials and farms. To some extent the process is still continuing.

However, when one side of the scales rises the other falls, and an interesting, but rather alarming, trend is now appearing on the recreational scene. Ironically it represents in part a reaction against the misuse of land elsewhere.

I refer, of course, to the deification of wilderness, and the social pressures subconsciously being built up which say that only in the mountains or in isolation can a man find his soul. Now alpine lands are, by definition, lands subject to severe constraints of climate, soil and (usually) topography. They offer very limited (if any) agricultural or forestry opportunity, and their use for recreation is fraught with physical danger to the user.

Their carrying capacity is low, and their rate of recovery from damage is slow. So for the land manager, the trend causes problems.

The objective of the land manager must therefore be to hold back use as much as he can. He will do this primarily by not providing access, by not providing user facilities such as huts, and by not granting concessions for commercial enterprises. He will look with disfavour on groups who run recruiting campaigns based on the mystique of the high country, on rangers whose developmental instincts cause them to oversell their wares, and on schoolteachers who preach the values of wilderness to children far from ready to appreciate what it is. He will look with equal suspicion on the grazier and the game manager.

The land for which he is responsible offers few opportunities for use and he must ensure that the uses that appear to be compatible with alpine lands are themselves controlled.

Over the years there has been considerable publicity on the state of the Routeburn and Heaphy tracks, where tramping has become fashionable; and the Forest Service is now sending people to Nepal to assist in the regeneration of forests destroyed by mountaineering expeditions seeking fuel. All users exploit.

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173
The problems of use in alpine lands stem largely from access. If this is made easy there are problems, and the land manager must therefore beware of improving tracks to such an extent that they can be used by people who require accommodation to survive in the mountains. Alpine lands are not for family groups, the old, young or infirm in body.

Similarly he will resist the building of roads and tracks and the use of all-purpose vehicles such as motorcycles and 4-wheel-drive vehicles. The owners of such vehicles will claim that they have a “right” to an area in which to use their toys. They do not, unless suitable sites occur, and these will not be in alpine lands. Man has the freedom to go where he likes — on foot, if he can.

The values of the land must be retained for those who may seek them later, not zoned to suit demand. He will therefore be very chary of the deerstalker who requires “game management”, or who pleads that deer are part of our heritage. They are, indeed, but most of us have things in our past that we would rather forget. Deer are not a part of the land’s heritage. Grazing animals, in a delicate habitat not adjusted to their presence, are exploiting that habitat. This is tolerable in some circumstances, acceptable because the cost of total removal is prohibitive, but not to be encouraged. Management means reduction to the carrying capacity — not generally what the deerstalker means by the term.

One of the problems of the present is that there is, in some quarters, a sense of disillusion with our times, and this seems to manifest itself particularly amongst those who teach. Their response is to endeavour to impress on their pupils the unique value of wilderness and the alpine experience, inculcating in a new generation the mass feeling that these delicate areas are necessary for human fulfilment.

Children under (say) 16 do not require an alpine experience, and they should not be given one in a formal and organised fashion. Their depth of knowledge is insufficient to handle, and their experience is insufficient to appreciate the particular values of an alpine scene; and their experience is insufficient to handle its dangers. They can find as much wilderness as they can cope with sleeping out on the beach, and they will learn more from a constant acquaintance with the more robust and accessible lowland plant communities, even if these have been sullied by man. Familiarity breeds more knowledge and understanding than a once-in-a-lifetime visit to a distant youth adventure camp. Their mountain experience should come later if they want it, as the end portion of a continuing process of expanding horizons.
Thus the land manager views with some trepidation a continuing tendency for schools to want to have their own pursuit centres many miles from home. None should travel more than 50 km for natural studies. The alternative to a mini-outward-bound is to put the money in the YMCA where the children will benefit and learn how to survive in their urban surround; and to use for outdoor experience areas such as a local estuary, where lack of use encourages abuse. This is their habitat. They should come to terms with it first.

We live in our home for 90% of the year and are on holiday for 10%. We need to be taught to understand and use better our workaday habitat, rather than to run to the mountains like a borstal boy heading for a car with keys in the ignition.

This is not of course to say that a use of mountain land is necessarily bad — simply that it should not be built into our list of expectations. The mountains await those who want or need them. We must not destroy them in pursuit of our own ego.

Forest managers have an opportunity to provide the continuum of outdoor recreational pursuits that ultimately (for some) will lead to the mountains. Those involved with young people should accept the challenge of placing their effort where most people live. They should forget their image of themselves as hirsute backwoodsmen, forgo the selfish pleasures of mountain instructions, and let people walk the path in their own way and in their own time.