

Crown Pastoral Land Tenure Review

Lease name : Muzzle

Lease number : Pm 005

Fish & Game report

As part of the process of tenure review Fish & Game councils may provide advice on significant inherent values within the pastoral lease, and the information may be incorporated in the conservation resources report. The advice is part of the information gathered and assessed for the development of a preliminary consultation document.

The report attached is released under the Official Information Act 1982.

Copied November 2003

Fish and Game Values
of
Muzzle Station

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Neil Deans

Fish and Game Nelson Marlborough Tenure Review Report No 3
April 1998

Muzzle Station Fish and Game Values

Background

In 1994 the owners of the pastoral lease for Muzzle Station, Colin and Tina Nimmo, sought a tenure review for the property. This was initiated and a number of inspections have been made and reports made, of particular interest that by Mike Harding for the Department of Conservation. This culminated in a draft submission to the Commissioner of Crown Lands in December 1995.

In 1996 the Crown agreed that Fish and Game interest would be provided directly by Fish and Game Councils rather than indirectly through the Department of Conservation. Fish and Game were advised in late December 1997 that the lessee wished to amend and progress the proposal. Fish and Game staff David Oberdries and Neil Deans visited the property on 18 - 20 March 1998 to assess any particular sports fish or game bird interest to assist the Crown reporting. This report summarises that visit and makes recommendations on the basis of what was found.

Property Description

Muzzle Station occupies approximately 16 600 hectares of South Marlborough land between the Clarence River and the top of the Inland Kaikoura Range, between the Dart and Spray Streams. The vast majority of the area is steep and the upper parts mountainous, with a series of small streams descending to the Clarence River from the Inland Kaikoura Range.

It is remote, with 4WD access through Bluff Station only available under suitable weather and road conditions during the summer months. Aircraft are the main access to and from the property.

Fish and Game Issues

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Sports Fish

The adjacent Clarence River is a regionally significant brown trout fishery. Most fishing occurs in the upper river above the Acheron confluence, accessed from Hanmer, where the water usually runs clear. Fishing in the Muzzle area has been limited by the area's remoteness and a lack of access. It is also somewhat dependent upon suitable flow and water clarity conditions (see photos 1 and 2). Most anglers gain access by raft, kayak, horseback or 4WD so fishing may not be the only or the primary activity undertaken. Even when in the area, much of the river remains inaccessible to the angler except by water craft due to its gorgy nature. Trout are not usually abundant, but the angler is

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rewarded by the remote wilderness qualities, peace and quiet, naïve fish and the chance of the occasional trophy sized fish.

Salmon also run through the Clarence to spawn in the upper river or the Acheron and its tributaries. Most salmon fishing is undertaken at the river's mouth although some are caught in the lower Acheron or upper Clarence below the Styx confluence. In the Muzzle vicinity, the occasional salmon may be taken.

Fisheries values of the Muzzle Station

On the freeholding or change of status of any Crown land a marginal strip of 20 m will be laid off adjacent to the bed of any river or stream with an average bed width of 3m or more. Each of the Clarence River tributaries flowing through Muzzle will likely meet this criterion as well as the Clarence River itself. This should protect any fisheries associated with these streams and the Clarence River.

Each tributary stream was examined as habitat for sports fish; in particular to determine if any of the tributaries were likely as trout spawning or nursery streams. The average gradient of the lower 2 km reaches of these 10 streams is 9.7%, with the maximum gradient being 20% (Ravine Creek) and minimum 4% (Muzzle Stream). These steep gradients and the huge volume of sediment carried by these streams, their flashy nature, the unsuitable size of these sediments for spawning (being either too coarse or too fine), the lack of suitable holding water for adult fish and many being too small for adult fish to traverse all mitigate against being suitable trout spawning streams. Two examples are illustrated in photos 3 and 4.

The only stream for which any fisheries data is held is for Ravine Creek, which contains only common river galaxias (*Galaxias vulgaris*) in good numbers. Palmer Stream (to the south west in Clarence Reserve) is the only other nearby stream for which records are held. It is generally similar to Muzzle and Bluff Rivers. In addition to common river galaxias it also holds alpine galaxias (*G. paucispondylus*) and long finned eels (*Anguilla dieffenbachii*). Bullies (*Gobiomorphus* spp., probably upland bully *G. breviceps*) were observed in the shallows of the Clarence River and torrentfish (*Cheimarrichthys fosteri*) has also been recorded from the Clarence near Ravine Creek. Fish described as similar to common river galaxias were also stranded when the water is diverted away from the small hydro electric power generator near the Muzzle homestead (Colin Nimmo, pers. comm.). The lower reaches of this stream were inspected as it has a relatively low gradient, but the substrate was unsuitable for trout spawning.

In summary there is unlikely to be any suitable trout spawning waters in the streams flowing through Muzzle Station. It is possible trout may spawn in the Clarence itself, but more likely they would move upstream to more suitable tributaries than to risk mainstem spawning. Salmon are more likely to spawn in the main stem of the Clarence, but again almost certainly move up to more suitable waters in Molesworth. The lower reaches of

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some tributaries such as the Seymour Stream in Clarence Reserve or particularly the Elliott Stream on Molesworth are more likely suitable for trout spawning. Even if there was spawning, marginal strips being laid off should provide for protection of this habitat and any native fish values.

Legal access for all anglers to the fishable water in the Clarence River should also be protected by laying off marginal strips. Access for anglers to the area is likely to remain difficult, with fishing most probably an incidental part of their whole visit rather than as its primary purpose (eg rafting, horse trekking or hunting). As pressure comes on elsewhere it is likely aerial access for fishing or other activities including fishing in the middle Clarence will become more popular. In principle Fish and Game would support this provided that the fishery is sustained and there are no opportunities to create exclusive fishing.

Game Birds

Waterfowl

Muzzle Station lacks any wetlands of value for waterfowl. Significant habitat for waterfowl is provided only by the Clarence River and its tributaries. At the time of our visit, the property had been suffering a prolonged drought and a stock water pond and the Dead Horse Gully wetland identified by the Department of Conservation, (Harding 1994) were effectively dry and provided no waterfowl habitat whatsoever (photo 5). These might normally be expected to provide very limited habitat for some paradise shelducks, dabbling ducks or perhaps Canada geese.

Clerke (1992) reported on a river bed bird survey of the Clarence River between the Acheron River confluence and Matai Flat undertaken by the Department of Conservation in November 1992. The most abundant waterfowl species in the reach of the river adjacent to Muzzle were 51 Canada geese, with 18 paradise shelduck, 4 grey duck and 2 mallards.

During the March 1998 survey several flocks of Canada geese were noted on the Clarence River flats on or near Muzzle Station, located downstream of Ravine Creek (23) as shown in photo 1, at Ravine Creek (60), the Rapu (25), shown in photo 6 and at Smoker's Hole (24). There was a further pair of Canada geese near Red Hills Stream. As the first mob moved south in front of the vehicle it is possible these numbers may include some double counting. These birds were easily disturbed but apparently are often located in these areas (Colin Nimmo, pers. comm.). Numbers of geese were noted by both Colin Nimmo and Richard Murray of the adjacent Bluff Station as increasing in recent years, particularly following goose hunts in Molesworth. It was noticeable that geese were concentrated in the only improved pasture flats remaining green under the drought conditions.

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Paradise shelducks were the most widespread waterfowl species noted in the 1992 riverbed survey (Clerke, 1992), being recorded in all separate reaches of the river. This is unsurprising given the strong territorial nature of this species, being usually seen in pairs at regular intervals. This was also the case throughout the property on this inspection, with occasional pairs seen throughout (totalling 12 birds).

The only dabbling ducks (mallards and greys) noted on this survey were at Muzzle homestead and were effectively pets. There was negligible habitat for these species on the property at the time of the inspection, although may be some more habitat in some locations with more rainfall, especially for nesting birds during spring. Even then, the Clerke report indicated the numbers of dabbling ducks were very low in the whole middle Clarence. There would not likely be sufficient numbers for hunting without the provision of more stockwater ponds or similar habitat.

Upland Game

Much of the lower altitude parts of the property provide suitable habitat for Californian quail. In the 1992 survey Clerke (1992) noted quail throughout this reach of the Clarence River bed but gives no indication of numbers or relative density. Three coveys or family groups were observed in various locations on Muzzle during this inspection varying in size from around 12 to over 24 birds. In all cases a distinct majority were cock birds, suggesting hen birds may be more vulnerable to predation. The effects of the recent rabbit calicivirus outbreak in reducing rabbit numbers with a consequential reduction in poisoning activity and predator numbers may affect upland game populations but it is too early to say whether this will be positive or negative for upland game in the short to medium term.

No chukar were noted although there is considerable suitable habitat. Little or none of this habitat was visited during this inspection, however. Colin Nimmo advised there are small numbers in parts of Muzzle, but chukar numbers have remained low in his nearly 20 years on the property

Hunting Opportunities

Remoteness has limited hunting opportunities in the middle Clarence Valley, especially since both the road to the Muzzle via Bluff Station and the road over the Kahutara Saddle via Clarence Reserve are effectively impassable from May until September due to frost or snow. The former road is not public and can only be passed with permission of the owner of Bluff Station. The latter road is through Conservation Estate but is not normally open to 4WD vehicles, only to walkers, mountain bikers and horse trekkers with permission. Access to Muzzle across the Clarence River is via a ford which is frequently impassable to most 4WD vehicles.

In the foreseeable future this situation is likely to continue. During the late autumn and winter gamebird hunting season the property is only accessible from the outside world by

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air and much would be difficult to move around in at that time of year except on foot or on horseback. The only realistic gamebird hunting opportunities are for Canada geese with its season being open over the summer period. The most effective hunting for these could be undertaken in conjunction with the spring and autumn Molesworth hunts and/or by well equipped hunters familiar with decoying and calling birds to their traditional feeding and loafing areas. Any such hunting would need the approval of the landowner, which might be forthcoming if the timing was suitable. Even so, gamebird hunting on Muzzle is not presently sought after due to its inaccessibility.

Given the opportunity presented by a tenure review it is important not to overlook potential future public access. Vehicle access is presently limited at the discretion of the landowner/manager, both through the adjacent Bluff Station and Clarence Reserve. The degree of present access is appropriate to the present public hunting and fishing opportunities available on Muzzle. It seems appropriate, however, to recognise that future public interest may be different or that there may be technological changes which would make physical access easier or that access through Bluff Station might change. For this reason it is recommended that the present 4WD road become a paper road to protect rights of public passage into the future, even though this would not confer any rights of vehicle passage at present. This would secure the option of public access should this become appropriate at some future point.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Sports and other fisheries in the area and recreational access to them are likely to be protected by the laying off of marginal strips adjacent to both the Clarence River and its tributaries.
2. Gamebirds are likely to continue to use some of the areas sought for freeholding, particularly paradise shelduck, Canada geese and Californian quail. There is no particular need to retain any areas other than marginal strips as gamebird habitat or for hunting. Hunting opportunities are likely to remain limited in the immediate future due to the property's inaccessibility during the hunting season, with the exception of Canada geese. Goose hunting opportunities are likely to remain with any change of land status; it is likely to be in the landholder's interest to work with hunters to keep goose numbers to acceptable levels if they increase.
3. Practical access to the area is likely to remain restricted in the foreseeable future due to legal, geographical and climatic constraints. The greatest potential for change in the foreseeable future is to aerial access. Retaining public control over the present road line through Muzzle by its becoming public road would leave the option open to change from walking, horse and mountain bike access should it be considered appropriate in the future, while leaving the status quo in the mean time regarding vehicle access since this is required through private land on the adjacent Bluff Station.
4. Fish and Game should be able to gain access to the property for management purposes on the same basis as the Department of Conservation.

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Summary

Muzzle Station was visited for three days in March 1998 to ascertain its fish and game values as part of a pastoral lease tenure review. Trout and salmon fisheries were noted in the Clarence River but not its tributaries, nor were the tributaries likely to support trout spawning. Potentially huntable populations of Canada geese exist, with quail and paradise shelducks being in sufficient numbers but inaccessible during the hunting season. Tenure review of the pastoral lease should make little difference to the sports fish and gamebird populations, nor to fishing and hunting opportunities.

References

Clerke, P. (1992) Clarence River Bird Survey Unpublished file note (PES 162) held by the Department of Conservation, Renwick

Freshwater Fisheries Database Records held by NIWA in Hamilton (a copy of which is held in the Biosite database by the Department of Conservation in Nelson).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Colin and Tina Nimmo for allowing use of their old homestead during our visit.

Neil Deans
Manager
Fish and Game New Zealand
Nelson Marlborough Region

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Photos



Photo 1 Looking up the Clarence River towards Ravine Flat



Photo 2 Fishing in the Clarence River just below the Seymour Stream

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Photo 3 Dart River Valley and Mt Tapuaeouenuku showing unsuitability of spawning habitat



Photo 4 Spray Stream showing unsuitability of habitat for trout spawning



Photo 5 Dead Horse Gully Wetland - dry in March 1998 and of negligible waterfowl value



Photo 6 The Clarence with the Rapu in the foreground, 25 Canada Geese located on these flats in March 1998