

FORESTRY AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE GOLD COAST.

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Forestry is seldom a spectacular enterprise, and persons who come into contact with Forest Officers invariably put the question "What is Forestry?"

Forestry has been defined as the management of growing timber, in its broadest sense as the science, art and business of producing, reproducing and improving forests for forest purposes and of practising the most appropriate methods of harvesting, converting and disposing profitably of forest produce.

Apart from its business aspect, and particularly in the tropics forestry has a wider scope and is intimately bound up with the whole question of economic agriculture. So much has been written on the benefits indirectly derived from the existence of suitably situated forests and the influences they exert on the climate of a locality that it is only necessary to refer to them briefly here. Forests maintain, continuously, a higher atmospheric moisture content than any other crop; nothing has yet been discovered to surpass them either in their capacity for maintaining an equable flow in rivers and in protecting their sources or in protecting hill sides and preventing erosion and land slips; they make most suitable windbreaks and sanctuaries for bird friends of agriculture; they are the best means of reclaiming lands suffering from excessive aridity or denudation; in a one-crop country they are the best and cheapest means of preventing the spread of diseases injurious to that crop and, finally, they furnish the most convenient means of supplying the timber and firewood requirements of the population. Forestry, therefore, has a claim to consideration.

Man has been taught to believe that forest growth has been specially designed by an otherwise more or less beneficent Providence for his particular annoyance and so he designed the axe. There is no question about the utility of that particular implement but there is a possibility of its use being carried beyond the beneficial stage and becoming a menace to its users. Such a contingency is by no means unknown, time and again in the world's history has the excessive use of the axe taken away the means of livelihood from the people it has hitherto assisted. It is the function and privilege of forestry to step in before the axe recoils on its wielders or, to put it briefly, forestry and agriculture are interdependent and act conjointly in promoting and sustaining the progress of a country. It is not, therefore, in the best interests of any country to sacrifice the one wholly to the other.

Forestry, in spite of the benefits it may confer on the community is not popular and is generally looked on, if not as a menace to economic progress, at least as an unmitigated nuisance and its supporters as a band of ill-balanced fanatics. This may be due partly to the fact that while the occupation of large areas of land under forest is irritatingly obvious, the compensating advantages of conservation are not immediately apparent as long periods must often elapse before forests attain their maximum production, and partly to the general desire to exploit the land to the fullest extent, regardless of the consequences and of the interests of posterity.

In a country where there is no immediate shortage of forest produce or while the effects of excessive deforestation are not immediately apparent, forestry is of little interest and the general feeling is that the land can be more profitably utilised in growing other crops. Such a short-sighted policy may be successful for a time, but after the limit of useful deforestation is passed not only does indispensable forest produce commence to become scarce but the climate is progressively altered to the detriment of existing crops, necessitating the substitution of others. These substituted crops must be capable of surviving under more arid conditions and the process of substitution is repeated until the final effect of deforestation is attained, the production of desert conditions. The world is dotted with the results of excessive deforestation, examples of this progressive desiccation, are on record from Africa itself and may even be seen within the Gold Coast Colony where the gradual drying up of streams has necessitated the moving of whole villages.

Other countries have realised that forestry means something more than indiscriminate land grabbing in order to provide a play-ground for zealous foresters. Not only are its climatic effects recognised but also is the fact that the world consumes annually an enormous amount of timber and other forest produce and that this amount is steadily increasing with the general raising of the standard of living; this, in spite of the many materials now used where once timber and natural products were solely employed.

It does not require any strenuous mental effort to realise that if forests continue to be cut down without any attempt at conservation and replacement there will come a time when timber will be very scarce. This time is well within sight and as a result most countries have jettisoned their policies of indiscriminate deforestation and substituted policies of conservation. The United States of America, one of the most important sources of the world's timber supply has, for the last decade, prosecuted a vigorous policy of conservation and reforestation; her neighbour and competitor, Canada, has taken stock of her resources with a careful eye to the future. France recognised the protective and productive value of forestry long before the war and her forests were a valuable asset during it, and it is well known that in her forest Germany had a valuable ally. England was handicapped by the meagreness of her home timber supply and the lessons then learnt have been subsequently applied.

The average inhabitant of this country who has travelled through the Colony and Ashanti and has seen what he supposes to be vast tracts of forest may be excused for believing that there is no great need at the moment for forest conservation. A closer investigation reveals the fact that many of these apparently forested areas are honeycombed with farms that are continually expanding, until now it may be generally said of the eastern half of this once wholly forested area that it is more farm than forest. This state of affairs appears to have been brought about since the introduction of cacao, *i. e.*, within the last 30-40 years. With the rate of expansion in the future being the same as it was in the past it is obvious that the coming generation will see the destruction of the remaining forests.

This country, for many years past and in spite of its vast resources of native timber, has been importing lumber. If that was necessary then how much more necessary will it be when all the accessible areas have been denuded of their forests and at how much greater cost when the world scarcity is more acute? It might be argued that because cacao is so much more valuable a product, bulk for bulk, than timber it is to the country's advantage to use all the available land for the cultivation of cacao. Lumber, however, is becoming increasingly expensive and all forecasts are unanimous in stating that it will continue to do so and it is conceivable that there may come a time when it might have paid this country better to have retained sufficient timber producing areas to meet the needs of its inhabitants.

Apart from the *£. s. d.* aspects of forests, they are necessary for the maintenance of the very industry they are being destroyed to make more room for. The influences that forests exert on the climate have already been mentioned and all these influences are necessary for the continued cultivation of cacao, a crop which cannot do without, a high atmospheric moisture content, suffers, in common with any other perennial crop, from alternating floods and drought, requires shelter from strong winds and is here subject to every disease known to science.

Continued deforestation has a cumulative effect on the climate and it is obvious that if cacao and allied crops are gradually deprived of the physical conditions necessary for their existence the desiccating process will bring the staple crops of the country to the point when they will begin to suffer and they will eventually die out altogether. The effects of excessive deforestation, it is believed, are apparent in some parts of the country already.

It seems so much simpler to maintain under forest certain areas that are necessary to protect the principal industry of the country and to supply locally the timber and firewood requirements of the people than either to exhaust that industry and then commence to establish another or to resort to costly reforestation schemes after the damage is done and the country most needs its resources.—The Journal of the Gold Coast Agricultural and Commercial Society, Vol. III, No. 2.
