

(especially the rural portion), before seriously introducing practical forest conservancy, of the direct and indirect advantages a country derives from the existence of properly-managed forest areas, and in some cases it became necessary to override public opinion for the good of the community.

“Happily for the colonies, neither is necessary; the knowledge exists, but in spite of this widely-spread knowledge of the advantages of permanent and effective forest conservancy, yea, even of the necessity thereof, State forest conservancy and management are in an extraordinary backward state, as may be seen from the following facts: (a.) The forest laws of the country are inadequate; nevertheless, they contain some important practical points which might be applied with considerable advantage if such was the serious intention of the Government. They have, however, been allowed to lie fallow, and have sometimes even been superseded by contradictory and mischievous circulars and orders. (b.) The area of inalienable State forests has not been increased since Mr. Vincent’s report of 1887 was written. (c.) No doubt additions have been made to the area of the timber reserves, but other forests of this kind were again thrown open, thus proving the inadequacy of permanent conservancy. (d.) The protection of the forests against fires has never even been attempted, and neglect and waste in their treatment are now as rampant as in the days when Mr. Vincent framed his indictment against this management in an able report to His Excellency the Governor, which should be wider known than is the case.* (e.) The income from the forests is ridiculously small, and quite out of proportion to the large supplies drawn from them; and the money spent on their protection, maintenance, and improvement is entirely inadequate.

“The reasons for the self-evident mismanagement of the forest property of the country are well known, and were, in fact, first pointed out to me by independent colonials; they are political, and centre in the disregard of the general public weal where this clashes with the monetary profits of individuals or classes who can exert a direct parliamentary influence. The smallness of individual interest raises no special defenders in the cause of the conservancy of State forest property, and the onus of moving in the right direction rests, to a great extent, on the shoulders of the Government.

“If the country will support the Government and remove once for all the management of the State forests out of the whirlpool of party politics, the Victorian forests will doubtless prove now, and even more so in the future, of great benefit and value to the country: whereas, if the existing system of management is allowed to continue, the reconstruction of the ruined forests will sooner or later become necessary at the cost of enormous sums, which might be more usefully spent than in correcting the effect of mismanagement and neglect on the part of the present generation. Without the support of the country the Government is powerless. It may carry on forest conservancy as an empty shadow, but no real progress can be made so long as it remains the watchword that the extraction and conversion of forest produce for private benefit is tantamount to an industry by which the national wealth of the country is increased, and that, for this reason, the Government should not merely be satisfied with nominal prices for the material removed, but also suffer without complaint any amount of mismanagement and waste in the extraction of the produce. But so it is at present. ‘Little Jack Horner’ must not be disturbed in his development of the Christmas pie, even if it should otherwise suffer by his method of extracting the plums. The cases are identical; in both instances it is Jack who reaps the sole benefit.

“This seems wrong. The forests of a country must be looked upon as a capital left in trust for the whole community, and though it may be quite right to divert a superfluity of the capital into other and probably more profitable channels, a sufficiency of the original investment must be maintained, and of this the interest alone should be consumed.

“When a country which lies within the forest zone of the globe, or, in other words, where the necessary degree of humidity and heat exists to favour arbor vegetation, it is, when first occupied and settled, more or less densely covered with forest growth. It is evident that civilisation, which in every instance is primarily founded on agriculture, cannot advance without the removal of the forest cover from the greater portion of the surface of the country.

“At the outset when labour and demand are scarce, and when the produce is of comparatively little value, the most wasteful and wholesale destruction by ring-barking and fire takes place, and is, under these circumstances, not only excusable but frequently advisable. It is, however, equally easy of proof, both by historical evidence gathered from all parts of the globe and by the results of modern scientific inquiries, that a certain proportion of a country must be maintained under forest cover in order to secure the permanency of national progress and prosperity. The percentage of forests which it is necessary to maintain varies considerably with local conditions, but the fact remains that it is easier to dis-forest the superfluity of forest lands than to recreate forests where they have been devastated and are found wanting.

“It is consequently a matter of great importance that the Government of a new country should make up its mind as early as possible both with regard to the extent of permanent forest reserves and their final situation, that the areas selected should be made inalienable, safe for serious special reasons of State, and that they should be treated for the one purpose of permanent retention under forest cover. This action is certain to pay its way sooner or later, even in a direct manner, and the indirect advantages of judicious conservancy are incalculable.

“To judge from Mr. Vincent’s report, and from conversations I had on the subject, which are supported to some extent by my own personal observations, the opportunity of securing the most advantageously situated and best adapted forest areas has, in many cases, already been missed, and is almost everywhere in the colony of Victoria a question of urgency and importance.

* This is not quite correct. Very considerable efforts were and are still made to keep fires out of the forests, and at one time miles of fire-breaks were annually constructed, but as the forest vote was lessened year by year, so this very necessary work had to be abandoned.—G. S. FERRIN.