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A CASE FOR MORE SYLVICULTURAL WORK IN THE

NATIVE FORESTS

By A. C. Harris

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NATIVE FORESTS

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In a recent Forestry and Timber Bureau statement on potential production (2000 A.D.) we find the following -

"Production from Australian hardwood forests can be expected to increase from 308 million cu. ft. (log) in 1961/62 to 368 million cu. ft. (log) in 2000 A.D."

Is there any valid reason for such optimism? Can we look at our hardwood forests and honestly say we believe such an increased figure for 2000 A.D.?

Under present conditions in our native forests, is there not reason to believe that there will be a decline in Queensland and Victoria at least, with New South Wales also open to query and Western Australia can hardly expect to do more than hold its present level.

I believe that much more will have to be done to make hardwood forests productive enough to live up to such an estimate.

The native forests of Australia have suffered every form of abuse for some 150 years past - a story too well known to need detailed recapitulation to foresters.

still -
When did we find out?
 The story is one of fire, indiscriminate cutting, removal of piles and poles in large quantities without any practice of thinning to preserve a succession of age classes, indiscriminate cutting of saplings and poles for tent poles, horse yards and the alienation of first class forest areas for farming. The forests now remaining contain a great quantity of overmature and useless trees and some species of little or no commercial value.

There is a tremendous need to remove useless species, overmature and useless trees, and to thin the pole and pile stands resulting from natural regeneration, which followed early day cuttings. Some of this regeneration has suffered severe fire damage.

At present there are insufficient worthwhile industries available to use much of the material involved, in most of our native forests. It must be felled or ringbarked to make way for the better trees, if maximum productivity is to be attained.

Western Australian forests have always been worked on some sort of selection system and the openings are now reasonably stocked with groups of immature trees. The first 70 years of cutting was an uncontrolled type of selection system and poles and piles of a durable species such as Jarrah were cut by tens of thousands and exported. Treemarking was instituted in the mid-1920's and the indiscriminate slaughter of poles, piles and vigorous growing mill log trees was gradually brought under control during the ensuing decade.

Today the forest carries uneven-aged groups requiring thinning and cull felling. Considerable areas need the removal of defective trees and useless species, to make way for regrowth.

If we could increase current increment by only 5 cu. ft. per year in our Jarrah forest, it would amount to 20 million cu. ft. per year, i.e. 50% of our current cut on State owned forest land.

Forestry in Australia appears to be carrying a high overhead for the actual silvicultural work being done, other than in plantations. We have had to build an administrative machine to take care of general administration of the timber industry, roading, fire control, training and research, etc., and when this is achieved we have little money to spare to improve the forest itself. With existing staff, plus a relatively few extra foremen and lower grade officers, we could spend millions on labour for forest improvement if the money was available. At present, there are too many Chiefs and not enough Indians.

The general public does not think highly of our native forest. It looks rough and is rough. It is hard to see the trees for the wood. It needs the removal of all the competing material which is retarding the good trees, which we know require more growing space than pines. A better looking forest would be more

productive, lead to more public respect, and improve the public's attitude to fire in the forest. At present they are indifferent because they regard it as just bush. On the other hand they respect the order and regularity of pine plantations.

We are committed to extensive pine monocultures, but we can neglect our hardwood only at our peril. As time goes on and hardwood becomes relatively scarcer, its value will be enhanced. Hardwood productivity must also be increased to offset loss of production from forests of insecure tenure and the constant pressure for alienation of areas of permanent forest. This is particularly important in Western Australia where country suitable for compensatory plantation development is limited by prior selection for agriculture.

I believe that our timber industry is perturbed at our apparent neglect of hardwood silviculture in favour of pine.

Our hardwoods are relatively easy and cheap to regenerate and protect. They are self pruning and capable of producing high grade knot free timber. We admit that they are not so high yielding as pine, but the fact is that they exist over wide areas and their product is still the backbone of Australian timber usage and of forestry income. We often overlook that hardwood increments and yields usually express mill log volumes, whereas pine figures refer to much other material of low actual value.

Royalties are difficult to increase much, to provide extra funds. The industry resists rises and Governments are loth to support proposals for increase. We know that the industry has not been over prosperous in recent years. It has to deal with overmature forests with a big percentage of low grade material in the trees from which it takes its logs. These trees have to be got rid of to make way for new crops.

The past butchery of our forests has helped to develop Australia in many ways and it is up to Australia as a whole, and not just the timber industry, to finance the rehabilitation.

Agriculture Departments are financed from Consolidated Revenue and agriculture is subsidised in many ways, both directly and indirectly, but hardwood forestry is supposed to be self-supporting from royalties. Had the forest been turned over to us in the condition it was in say 1850, this might have been possible. Forestry control from there on would have saved us millions of pounds and many millions of trees. The original area of the Jarrah forests was stated to be sixteen million acres. It is now little more than six million. It is no use crying over spilt milk - it is for us to point the road back.

I commend the careful study of a paper presented to the Eighth British Commonwealth Forestry Conference, 1962 (Kenya) by Professor Mark Anderson entitled - "Forestry and Land Use Policy in Scotland". He sums up as follows -

"The main theme of this article is the plea that it is reasonable that the industry of forestry should receive back from the common pool of capital and resources, built up to such a great extent at the expense of Scotland's former forest capital, sufficient means to finance the restoration of a great part, at least, of the former forest, or its equivalent, without being expected to guarantee any interest or financial return in the ordinary way, from the resources so employed. It is claimed that the aim of afforestation projects is not merely to "make money" for some undeclared purpose, but simply to create or rather re-create in most cases, fully-graded forests by a legitimate raiding of the existing industrial resources, a practice not unknown in the world of big business."

I believe we should seek more funds for the rehabilitation of hardwood forests as well as establishment of pine.

Such expenditures would have a decentralising effect and be an encouragement to the hardwood sawmilling industry concerning its future. Without confidence in the future supply of logs we cannot expect the timber industry to invest in better and more efficient plants.

We also need employment for the sons of our present employees to stop the drift to the cities. Once we lose the rural forest labour force, we will not get it back.

If labour is scarce for such an expansion of work, immigration, especially of Italians, should be encouraged with

suitable housing and facilities provided in the country.

The nature of the problem in Western Australia is indicated by the following statistics from our preliminary inventory (1960) -

Estimate of Unmarketable Timber

1. Area of State Forest and Timber Reserves from Preliminary Inventory

Total Area:	4,625,000 acres	(100%)
Areas with less than 40% stocking:	363,400 "	(8%)
Treeless Scrub and Flats:	707,800 "	(15%)

2. Area Covered by Useless or Decadent Trees

(Estimated by proportion of volume) 1,600,000 acres

3. Volume of Useless Trees

(From the preliminary forest inventory, 1960)

2,650 million cu.ft. (53,000,000 lds.)

This volume amounts to 41.5% of the gross standing volume of 6,350 million cu. ft. (127,000,000 lds.). The volume of useless trees is made up of -

Unmarketable Jarrah and Karri	1,150 million cu.ft.	(23,000,000 lds.)
Total Marri	1,450 "	" (29,000,000 ")
Wandoo suitable only for Tannin extraction	50 "	" (1,000,000 ")

Would not something similar apply in other States?

The cost of making our hardwood forests fully productive in a reasonable period is, in my opinion, beyond the capacities of the States and needs Commonwealth financial assistance as part of a National Forest Policy. The task may have to be spread over 20 to 30 years, selecting the best site qualities first, but forestry will in time be discredited if the rehabilitation of native forests is not more vigorously pursued.