

A short history of forestry in South Africa

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This short review is intended to give some background to the current debate regarding the plantations at Tokai and Cecilia. More details can be found in the reference used.

The first European settlers found very little timber to establish their colonies. In fact, when Van Riebeeck arrived in 1652 he was aware of this and brought with him a supply of pine beams and planks from Norway, rafters, small joists and planks from Sweden with which the first dwellings were built. A month after he had arrived, van Riebeeck sent out an exploration party which found forests (presumably the Orankekloof forest) behind Table Mountain. On the 5th of June he went to see the forest and described it as being “full of large, tall, straight, heavy, medium and small trees, suitable the largest construction one could desire, but so far and difficult to convey that it would be less expensive to buy timber in Holland or Batavia and have it sent here, than to have it brought from this forest”. It is significant that he only later, in September of the same year found timber in the kloofs on the front face of Table Mountain. This discounts the popular belief that the slopes of Table Mountain were clothed with forests.

Van Riebeeck imported various trees to test and many of these were planted in the Companies Gardens. Contrary to popular belief it was him and not van der Stel that introduced the oak trees. In 1656 van Riebeeck reported that oaks and ash trees were thriving well and groves of oaks and ashes were thriving. It was in fact this grove that was supplying households with firewood as the settlers were not only depleting the forest, but the surrounding Fynbos was also being depleted of woody shrubs for the insatiable demand for firewood. .

Later the forests from Rondebosch to Constantia Nek which Van Riebeeck collectively called Boschheuvel (currently Bishopscourt) were discovered. These sources of timber were soon exploited and in 1658 he issued a *Placaat* forbidding burgers to fell trees in the forests. This was the first in a series of *Placaats* which did little to protect the forests and by 1660 the “nuwe lande” were being cleared for agriculture as all the timber had been cleared in that area (this the current Newlands). By 1663 exploitation began in the forests from Constantia Nek to Retreat.

In 1679 when van der Stel arrived, forests were all but depleted and he extended the Boschheuvel road into Hout Bay to exploit the Orankekloof forests. Like van Riebeeck he issued several *Placaats* in an attempt to protect the forests. His attempts to protect the forests were unsuccessful and in 1772 Thunberg wrote that “There are no forests in the vicinity of town except for small ones high up in the clefts of the mountain”.

Van der Stel was an enthusiastic tree planter and endeavoured to have more oak trees (which were the most successful of all the imported trees at the time) planted. In 1689 a *Placaat* was issued to make it obligatory for every grantee of land to plant 100 oaks per year. His son and successor Willem Adriaan van der Stel commented that many of the trees planted were stunted by the wind and the growth was poor in the sandy soils. He thus commenced a formal planting of oaks in the Newlands area where the growing conditions were more suitable.

As the sources of timber were depleted, the settlers obtained timber from the Swellendam, Riviersonderend and Grootvadersbosch forests. Exploitation then moved to the more extensive Knysna forests in 1711. The Knysna forests continued to be heavily exploited and it was only in the 1880's when the indigenous forests were placed under sound scientific management that the destruction was brought under control. In 1883 the first regulations were issued for the systematic management of the indigenous forests.

In the 1800's foresters realised that the sources of indigenous timber would soon be depleted. In 1875 J Storr Lister was appointed Superintendent of Plantations and the first small plantation of eucalypts was planted at Worcester in 1876 to provide fuel for the steam trains. In 1893 Tokai plantation was established and Cecilia and Devil's Peak followed soon after. The seed for the first plantings of *Pinus radiata* were obtained from the Companies Gardens. It is interesting to note that the Devil's Peak planting was intended to "restore the ravaged slopes" as the area was covered with deep dongas. Count de Vasselot, appointed in 1889 as Superintendent of Woods and Forests favoured the augmentation of natural timber supplies by afforestation and by 1889 the plantation area in the Cape Colony was 3 000 acres (408 ha).

Up to the World War of 1914-1918 most of the timber was imported mainly from the northern coniferous forests. During the war there was a world-wide shortage of timber due to the shipping lanes being cut off. This also seriously affected South Africa. In 1918-19, 75 hectares of *Pinus radiata* were sold from Tokai. The financial return created considerable public interest and proved that commercial plantations of exotic pines were a viable proposition. This, together with post war job creation programmes, stimulated an acceleration of afforestation. This however slowed down and very little further afforestation took place until after the Second World War. As was the case in the First World War, there was a serious shortage of timber during the war and prices boomed. This gave rise to a post war growth in the timber industry with the planting of 8 093 ha per annum. Initially forestry was only conducted by the Department of Forestry, but the boom in forestry and the release of timber from the state plantations gave rise to a growing private timber industry. Thus, over the years the role of the Department of Forestry as the prime supplier of timber began to diminish in favour of the establishment of a fully sustainable private timber industry.

During the years of expansion, many of the areas planted were unsuitable for sustainable timber production and it is these areas that are now being withdrawn from production. Tokai and Cecilia remain the most productive areas in respect of growth and timber quality in the South African timber industry and it is ironic that their original role of protecting the

indigenous timber resources of the Cape now have to make way for the conservation of Biodiversity.

In hindsight it is easy to criticize early settlers and foresters for some of their actions. Indeed, the sowing of seed *Pinus pinaster* on the mountains to improve the paucity of the Fynbos and the planting of trees in water catchments to improve water yield, although based on the best knowledge at the time, were certainly misguided, However it can be said that without the foresight of early foresters, the area currently under indigenous forests in South Africa would have been totally decimated and South Africa would have been totally dependent on diminishing sources of imported timber.

References.

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