

FOREST FATE IN THE BALANCE

TEMPORARY PROFIT OR SCIENTIFIC CONSERVATION?

THE last stronghold of millable indigenous forest, the timber in the far south of the West Coast, extending down to Jackson's Bay, is now to be delivered over to the axe and saw. Those timber supplies on the West Coast North and South of the Haast River particularly the white pine, have been described in vague terms as practically inexhaustible. One timber man's opinion was, they would last for a century. Other authorities are less optimistic.

It is stated that the dairy industry requires the huge quantity of 35,000,000 feet of white pine per annum. At the present rate of consumption the forests of the South, large as they are, are not likely to last anything like a century, or even a quarter of a century.

We have frequently heard this story of so-called inexhaustible timber resources in other parts of New Zealand. We have heard it applied to the bush along the central part of the Main Trunk Railway, to the forests in the Ohura-Stratford area in North Taranaki, to the bush of the Rangitoto region in the heart of the King Country. The Government had acquired most of these lands from the Maoris, and the one thought of Government and settler and sawmiller was to get that vast apparently limitless bush down with the utmost expedition.

We know too well now, how long those forests lasted. Some were milled but most of the timber went up in smoke, with that hatred of the native bush that seems perfectly ferocious. Trees were the settlers' enemies; to the sawmiller they represented the one and only crop of timber and down it must come before the next man got hold of it.

One of the main arguments used by those who are anxious to get at the bush regardless of the future, is that there are a large number of men employed in the industry and that very considerable capital is invested in sawmill plant. It does not appear to occur to these people that labour and the users of capital engaged in milling on the "cut and get out" plan are merely going to bring about their own unemployment in the end, because at the present rate of felling, a desperate rush to get every available stick down, the native forest available for milling purposes will soon all be used up and the timber will have disappeared before the industry realises it.

Now, is that forest of the South simply to be exhausted in the wasteful old way, or is the worked area to be protected and regenerated? The young forest growth will undoubtedly provide a new timber forest in time, if it is conserved and guarded for the future.

During the last two years, the total timber taken from matured native forests is stated to have been 475,000,000 ft. This figure, divided by 10,000—the average yield per acre in New Zealand—converts the total number of feet cut into 47,500 acres. Against this, 18,790 acres of exotic seedlings have been planted, thus showing a heavy debit balance for the last two years' afforestation; a debit balance which is much increased if the many other agents of destruction are taken into account, such as plant-eating animals, clearing operations for settlement, etc.

Surely the call should be to find employment not in deforestation but in afforestation. Unofficial scientific experimentalists have shown that our trees can be cultivated successfully, and that, given the needful suitable conditions, the speed of growth exceeds that of the principal timber trees in other countries.

