

NEW ZEALAND'S VANISHING FORESTS

WHAT IS THE AREA OF THE REMNANT?

FEW if any of the rising generation have ever seen New Zealand bush in its natural state, simply because very little, if any, exists. The question now asked is: What is the area of remaining forest-covered land which is in a state approaching its natural condition?

A Ministerial statement made at the Bush Conference in 1937 gave the area of remaining forest land, including scrub and land covered with second growth, as 20 million acres. What was meant by the term "forest lands" was not explained. A statement made in 1939, however, gives the forest area as 12,900,000 acres, but the further remark that it was not meant that all of this area was actually in bush, makes the whole statement valueless to anybody who desires to know the extent of the remaining bush—real bush.

In compiling such figures Ministers and others appear prone to include all scenic reserves, national parks and forest reservations as being in forest, or mainly so. This is not the case. If an accurate survey was made, the large proportions of such reservations which are not covered with bush would astonish people. Many portions of these areas have never been bush-covered and never will be unless the earth tips on its axis and thereby places New Zealand in a much warmer latitude. Even if such a catastrophe did happen some of the mountains would still rise above the possible altitude for forest growth.

So where are we? If the Minister cannot obtain accurate information, who can?

Again the question is asked: What is the remaining area of forest-covered land which is in a state approaching its natural condition? Apparently nobody knows. Are those who could supply the information deliberately avoiding a disclosure of the real position? In the meanwhile we again suggest that a total of 3,000,000 acres is probably nearer the mark than the more optimistic statements that have been made under authority.

The Minister of Lands, who is also Commissioner of Forests, is to be congratulated on his realisation of the gravity of the situation in New Zealand, in regard to soil erosion and the magnitude of the effort which should be made to save New Zealand for New Zealanders. The initial need is, however, that the public should be told the actual facts in order that they will be the better able to realise the gravity of the position and thus the more readily support any worthwhile steps—whatever the magnitude—which will have to be taken, to make any possible amends for disastrous blunders of the past in the maltreatment of forests.

Even if the claim that the remnant of native forest amounted to about twelve million acres was true, there is the official admission that the whole of the aggregate area is not bush-covered. Such a remnant is far from sufficient for the protection of agricultural and pastoral soils from disastrous erosion, due to excessive floods and for the maintenance of equable climatic conditions.

If then the top soil, which gives New Zealanders their living, is to be washed away, as the penalty for the destruction of protective forests, what is to become of all the present-day laudable efforts to improve the standard of living—social security measures, extensive road-making, and so on? Verily, when the matter is logically reasoned out, it appears that the cart is being put before the horse. The saving of the life-giving top soil is the first need, and adequate areas of native forest must be restored in places where its great water-holding equipment is essential.

A step in the right direction has been taken in the appointment of a committee which is now mapping and demarcating all lands according to the purposes for which they should have been used.

The next great need is to prohibit any further destruction of native bush on high country. Little or no effort is apparent in this direction, except the waging of a vigorous war against deer and other animals which ravage the native forests.

Such decisions as the proposed milling in Puketi forest are not reassuring.

"A home without trees is charmless; a road without trees is shadeless; a park without trees is purposeless; a country without trees is hopeless."

—Rocky Mountain Region Bulletin.