

Notes and News

The Increasing Destruction of Spanish Forests

The serious problems of increasing ecological deterioration is being aggravated by a further form of destruction of natural resources, causing enormous short- and long-term losses: forest fires. It is the areas in the country faced with the problem of encroaching desert that are most subject to fires. In the last fifteen years forest fires increased in number by 225 per cent. Thousands of hectares are burned down every year. Since 1970 there have been over 25,000 fires, and hundreds of thousands of hectares have disappeared which no effort of replanting will ever be able to replace, since many years must pass before the forest grows again, during which time more fires break out. It is estimated that for every thousand hectares that are replanted, 25,000 more go up in flames. The experts have gone so far as to say that the fire which consumes the Spanish forests will end up by transforming the country into a desert. It is today a notorious fact that eight of the thirteen natural regions of Spain are suffering the consequences of an advanced process of desertization.

Man is the cause of 95 per cent of the fires which break out every year. While it is true that on occasions the harm is done indirectly as the result of forestry work, the burning of stubble, sparks from machines or railway locomotives, etc. in other cases a casual action that need never have happened brings about the catastrophe. (Spanish Government Information Service).

Growing Fuelwood Shortage

Millions of families in the rural areas of Africa and Asia are now reduced to eating most of their meals cold, according to a recent study by the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation, and there is evidence in some countries of a shift in small farm planting to foods that can be eaten raw.

The reason is a mounting shortage of wood, which is the basic fuel for both cooking and heating in most of the developing countries, even in the cities. This "poor man's energy crisis" has only recently begun to receive official attention but it is a growing problem that is not going to go away. It is mostly met with in predominantly agricultural areas where populations are growing and scattered trees and small patches of woodland are the sole source of firewood.

Fuel collectors in these areas have often reduced tree cover to less than one per cent of total land area. Tree losses on this scale invite soil erosion from wind and water.

Total fuelwood consumption in the developing countries, although hard to measure accurately, may be close to 1,300 million cubic metres a year and is growing. Fuelwood demand, the FAO study estimates, could climb by another 40% in the next 15 years.

The human burden of wood scarcity falls most heavily on the women of poor families in the rural areas. When wood sources near to home are exhausted, they must walk further and further for each day's supply. But at least the wood is free.

The use of alternative fuels is usually too costly for most of the rural poor. In parts of Asia where scavenging is no longer possible, as much as 10% of pitifully small family incomes may be spent on charcoal. Rich country interest in such exotic substitutes as solar energy, the report says, is totally divorced from today's realities for the majority of the world's poor.

There are many possible responses to the fuelwood problem, the report says, but none of them are easy. The main opportunity for substitution lies in the urban areas, where higher incomes generally permit use of alternative fuels. Yet there are many factors that inhibit the use of alternative fuels, even in urban areas. Cheap and poorly made cooking units using kerosene or butane are often dangerous. Much cooking in Africa involves simmering in a large metal pot for long periods of time, and for this a wood or charcoal fire is more suitable than a butane or kerosene stove. Habit is also a factor — a campaign in Mauritania to encourage the switch from charcoal to kerosene, a cheaper fuel there, has had little success.

The only long-term solution is planting more trees. Village level wood-lots and major reforestation programmes are already part of the development plans of many countries. (FAO, Rome).

I who have seen the world's forest die

From Srinagar to Katmandu, the Himalayas, a short time ago covered with mossy forests, offer today to the eye of an airborne traveller, the spectacle of a bleak collection of ridges, hot and ravined. The lumbermen who supply India with furnace timber have passed by there. Their industry has already transformed the mountains of Lebanon, of Iran and of Pakistan into deserts. Soon the Himalayas, a verdant Switzerland, will become a burning Hoggar. I have also seen again the Ivory Coast where I remember travelling in 1952 under an uninterrupted canopy of trees for hundreds of kilometres from Abidjan to Bouaké or to Abengourou.

This forest, the largest in West Africa, no longer exists except for scraps, pompously referred to as "classified forest". It is hardly surprising that with this enormous vegetative sponge cut down, rainfall evaporates or percolates impoverishing the rain climate to the north, where the desert advances by several kilometres per year. One day, no doubt, at the turn of the century, the desert will arrive at the shores of the Gulf of Guinea. One cannot see how it can be stopped. Local catastrophe? No, worldwide! The dessication is spreading. The northern hemisphere will be unable to keep its green colour under the inflamed airstream coming from the deserts of the south, from Africa and Asia to Europe, from Mexico and South America to the U.S. But who speaks to you of it? Who cries for help, besides some specialists? None of our leaders has uttered a word about it to you. But, who then are these heads of state who fathom the future backwards?

Philippe de Baleine, *Le Figaro*, Paris.
Translated by John L. Buckley.

Wood Chip Fuel could replace 2M. tons of Oil in Sweden

Drastic increases in oil prices have resulted in a much greater use of timber as fuel in Sweden and this development could have a disruptive effect on other national priorities unless resourceful planning and controls are resorted to, according to a joint report from the National Boards of industry and of forestry.

On the one hand it is imperative that Sweden's heavy dependence on imported energy should be reduced, while on the other the country's forest industry sector must be guaranteed access to the 75 million cubic metres of timber it requires, the boards say. But studies show that Sweden's forests could yield sufficient combustible material — in the form of thinning waste and small-size birch — to replace up to two million tons of oil.

A nationwide information campaign on forest raw materials as fuel has accordingly been started up and the boards further recommend that a draft agreement be worked out to facilitate the creation of an efficient market for wood chip fuel. Regional wood chip fuel companies — with representatives of forest industry, forest owners, and consumers — could be set up in due course and the state should consider giving subsidies to district heating plants to enable them to acquire chip-boilers. At the same time the forest industry sector must learn to increase its felling rate, especially as regards thinning, and to employ new techniques that facilitate the use of forest energy resources.

Swedish International Press Bureau

International Symposium on Air Pollution and Forests

An international symposium on "Effects of Air Pollutants on Mediterranean and Temperate Forest Ecosystems" will be held June 22 — 28, 1980, in Riverside, California, U.S.A. The conference will focus on major areas of research in forest air pollution, including the effects of air pollutants on tree growth, on species composition of forest stands, and on forest wildlife, insect pests, and tree diseases. The effects of acid precipitation and heavy metals on forests, and the emission of nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, and other natural pollutants from forests, will also be discussed. One of the major purposes of the conference will be to examine progress that has been made in integrating data from diverse, highly specialised studies into ecosystem-level analyses.

European Wildlife Conservation Year

Tara Mines Limited, in cooperation with the Council of Europe, have produced a beautiful 1980 calendar and poster series on the theme of wildlife conservation. The calendar features typical European species most of which are found in Ireland and several of which have become endangered in recent times. They include birds such as the kingfisher, threatened by river pollution and drainage operations, the badger often mistakenly regarded as a pest of domestic stock and game birds and the peregrine falcon seriously reduced in numbers through the use of persistent pesticides. It is good to see the Forest and Wildlife Service featured amongst those contributing to this fine production.

Members on the Move

Our congratulations to two of our members who are shortly moving to new positions.

Professor Frank Convery, School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina who is returning to Ireland to take up a position in the Economic and Social Institute and Dr Peter Savill who is leaving the Forest Service in Belfast for the position of Lecturer in Silviculture in the Department of Forestry at Oxford.

Congratulations also to Professor Larry Roche, head of the Department of Forestry and Wood Science, University College of North Wales, Bangor, who has been elected President of the International Union of Societies of Foresters.