

*MAN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN FOREST*

A history of resource depletion

Thirgood J. V. 1981. Academic Press, London. 193pp. Price UK£12.00.

Is it possible for a book of roughly eighty thousand words to cover the story of man and his part in the depletion of the Mediterranean forest resource? Professor Thirgood makes a bold attempt but can only hope to give a broad outline of the subject. He deals with an area that contained the centres of many cultures which have contributed largely to the development of modern civilisation. Egyptian, Greek, Phoenician, Roman, Venecian and many others have been sustained by the Mediterranean lands and resources. After thousands of years of exploitation, overtaxed ecosystems are the legacy.

It is hard to visualise the original Mediterranean environment because of the past influences of Man and his livestock. For this reason, a definition of the region on the basis of vegetation types is difficult and the author suggests that a more realistic classification is through climatic/land use zonation. The reader is referred to a Food and Agriculture Organisation document for details.

If, as the author suggests, there are difficulties in visualising the original environment, it is even harder to quantify the area covered by forest or its composition through time. The literature of antiquity is employed as one source of reference but it is impossible to extract from it comprehensive quantitative data, mainly because writers of old dealt with the forest indirectly. It is often hard to give weight to their comments; for example, in the section dealing with the Lebanon, there are reports of timber shortages followed by periods of timber extractions. Did the forest recover in the mean time or were more inaccessible areas opened up? Botanists, historians, archaeologists and geographers help us to evaluate the written record; but some form of mathematical modelling techniques, based on assumptions, is perhaps the only way we shall ever be able to answer these questions. Without quantifiable data on the forest resource, I think the subtitle (a history of resource depletion) overstates the contents; however, a lucid analysis is given of the responsible agents of depletion.

The book discusses man in history rather than pre-history. It is divided into four parts, the first three deal with the overall Mediterranean basin, the Levant and Cyprus in that order. There is a certain bias towards the Central and Eastern Mediterranean but much of the discussion, limited to specific areas, applies to the entire basin. It is apparent that environmental damage has been caused largely by mismanagement associated with Man and his grazing animals, especially the free-range goat. Grazing animals have been part of the Mediterranean landscape for thousands of years but their dominance is linked to the post Classical Arab invasions. The case study-Cyprus, illustrates how the situation may be redressed and it is interesting to see, through the author's eyes, ecosystems recover under proper management.

The fourth part entitled 'the zone of tension' discusses the Mediterranean of today, restates the problems of the basin and possible solutions. It is a concise statement of the conflict the forester or land manager faces in many areas of the world: technically there are answers to problems but there is social resistance to change. Those interested in or involved with third world agro-silviculture should find this instructive.

The book is, in general, easy to read although in places a chronological order of events is not adhered to and this makes the text somewhat hard to follow. The volume is aimed, not only at those who have first hand experience of the Mediterranean zone, but at the beginner too. It succeeds in this respect and there are over 230 references cited, mostly in English, which is ample material for anyone wishing to pursue the study. Foresters should find it fascinating reading, though I imagine it would be of interest to other professionals like archaeologists, historians, biblical scholars and social scientists.

R. M. Keogh