



DEATH

THE MARGINAL COCONUT LANDS OF CEYLON

By F. C. COOKE,

Director, Coconut Research Scheme.

WHAT is "Marginal Agricultural Land"? Expressed in simple terms it is land where it is either difficult to grow a crop or impossible to produce it at a profit.

It may be that the soil, climate or topographical conditions may be unfavourable for the easy cultivation of coconuts, or else it may be that the areas of production may be so remote from markets that transport costs make it impossible to sell nuts or copra at a profit.

It does not at all follow, however, that because such an important food crop as coconuts cannot be produced at a profit that planted areas should be allowed to pass out of cultivation because the owners are unable to maintain them properly. On the contrary, the coconut areas of Ceylon are a national asset and must be maintained and made even more productive.

World population is increasing at the rate of 25 millions a year and the production of food, especially the two main cereal crops wheat and rice, is not increasing in parallel. In the case of oils and fats, the available supplies per head are now 10 per cent. less than before the war and the deficiency in the current year is expected to amount to 1,500,000 tons.



AND DISASTER

The world food situation is so serious that Governments are being faced with the necessity to subsidise the production of food. Here in Ceylon, rice is a heavily-subsidised industry, but little direct assistance has yet been given to the coconut industry. While in most areas the production of coconuts is very profitable, in some areas the margin of profit is so small that the commercial production of coconuts can only be maintained on a cut-price basis, leading to the ultimate destruction of the property.

Mr. H. S. Ismail, M.P. for Puttalam, has stated in the Press that "during the 1947-1948 drought over 25,000 trees (*i.e.*, 400 acres) died and an equal number, if not more, went out of production." This year's drought he feels "will affect the industry to a greater extent than before." This loss of palms is cumulative and in this district there are large areas which were previously under this crop which are gradually reverting to desert conditions.

There is a belief that the climate in the Chilaw-Puttalam district is changing for the worse. This is a matter for careful investigation as the records of the Meteorological Department show that drought periods have been a recurrent feature. However, this in turn raises the question of whether this district is in fact, suitable for coconuts, because if palms are to be repeatedly destroyed soon after they reach maturity, then the industry is not a suitable one for that district. A careful investigation of all the facts and a complete survey is necessary to decide whether the cultivation of coconuts is really a sound proposition or whether the land is not more suitable for annual crops.

If it is found, however, that the productivity of these marginal lands can be maintained by careful soil management and the fuller utilisation of available supplies of surface and underground water, then State assistance should be forthcoming to keep these areas in production. If the productivity of these difficult marginal areas is to be maintained and raised, it will be essential to rehabilitate the area scientifically and to call in all the scientific knowledge that is available and see *that that advice is applied*.

With the approval of Government, the Board of Management of the Coconut Research Scheme has appointed a Technical Committee to investigate all the marginal coconut lands of Ceylon and with the following terms of reference :—

1. To define the areas most severely affected by drought.
2. To ascertain if conditions are progressively worsening and why?
3. To consider whether completely derelict lands are worth reclaiming and whether deteriorating properties can be saved.
4. If so, to state if Government assistance is necessary ; what form that assistance should take and what would be the possible cost of such assistance.

The constitution of the Committee is as follows :—

Director, Coconut Research Scheme (Chairman).
Government Mineralogist (or his Nominee).
Adviser on Soil Conservation.
Soil Chemist, Coconut Research Scheme.
Planting and Advisory Officer, Coconut Research Scheme.
Acting Botanist, Coconut Research Scheme.
Assistant Planting Officer, Coconut Research Scheme.
Chemist, Coconut Research Scheme (Secretary).

The Committee has been given powers of co-optation and it is proposed to invite representatives of the Departments of Irrigation, Meteorology and Co-operation to attend future meetings. At the first meeting of this Committee, a list was prepared of the principal areas to be considered and the technical aspects of the problems of the dry areas was considered. It was decided to give detailed consideration to the Chilaw-Puttalam area first and at the next meeting to be held at Mundel on February 2nd, various people will be invited to express their views to the Committee. Anyone who wishes to give evidence on that occasion should first submit a short memorandum in any language to the Secretary of the Committee, Mr. W. R. N. Nathanael, Coconut Research Scheme, Lunuwila.

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