

# FOOD PRODUCTION ON COCONUT ESTATES \*

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COCONUT estates, in common with other plantation crops (except rubber) are required by law to devote one-tenth of their acreage to food production. Quite apart from the fact that this is generally not agriculturally feasible, every rupee that can be spared today should be used, not for the extraneous purpose of minor food production, but for rebuilding this ageing and depreciating vital national asset. The authorities appear to have lost sight of the fact that coconut itself is a food which forms an important and integral part of the dietary of the people of this country. It is very shortsighted policy to prejudice the good management of coconut estates in order to produce third-rate foods.

Coconut and food crops are mostly surface feeders. If food crops, particularly root crops, are grown under coconuts, competition for the available soil nutrients has to be corrected by the application of additional plant foods in the form of fertilizers or manures. In this connection, it is noteworthy that manioc under coconut thrives best in the manure circles.

It is apparent therefore that if efficient yields are to be obtained there must be uneconomic extra applications of manure, otherwise both crops will suffer. In other words, you have to apply expensive manure to obtain a cheap food crop, like manioc.

The compulsion to grow food on coconut estates operates directly against accepted methods of cultivation. Many planters complain that the necessity for clean weeding large areas, (which is inevitable in the raising of food crops) exposes the estate to the unpredictable dangers of soil erosion. Denudation of our soils has been rightly described as "Creeping death," as not only are its effects confined to the land, but also to the population it supports. One effect of the decline in arable cultivation is the lowering of human morale. The under-nourished peasant becomes listless and apathetic and tends to accept as a necessary evil the low standard of living imposed on him by an unprofitable and declining agriculture.

There is increasing evidence in the coconut areas of this country of impoverishment of soil, resulting in the main crop being sacrificed through this cultivation of subsidiary crops. The industry today is faced with stark necessity of employing all its resources to keep coconut alive and a stage has been reached when replanting must take place on an increasingly large scale if the yield from coconuts is to be maintained at a level proportional to the growing needs of the population and of the dependant industries.

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\*Address given by Chairman, Kurunegala Planters' Association, on April 24th, 1954.

The industry already pays a multiplicity of huge taxes to Government. First of all there is Income Tax. In 1953 revenue from the coconut industry in direct taxation, excluding many millions in excise duties on toddy and arrack, aggregated Rs. 32,700,000. In addition there are, village taxes, and there is this further obligation to produce food or to commute such obligation by a further tax. The crops so grown are not purchased by Government at a guaranteed price; instead estate owners are compelled to sell the produce of this subsidiary industry to their labourers below market price, clearly proving the enforcement of still further taxation on an industry whose existence is threatened by a steady reduction each year due to senility.

Contrast the advantages accruing to those who invest their capital in industrial ventures. They are placed in the enviable and privileged position of not being required to make any contribution whatever towards food production, and their labourers are supplied with rice and flour by the Government at subsidised rates. The effect of such unwise and unjust discrimination falls very harshly on those who have invested their capital in agriculture, which for over one hundred years has carried this country on its shoulders.

The state of the coconut industry today is such, that if present conditions are allowed to continue, and if prices were to decline, then yields also will decline. This will mean decreasing revenue, and so the main object of this short-sighted legislation will be completely defeated. What is justified in time of war is not in time of peace, and this misguided piece of legislation should now be rescinded.

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