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Forestry in Communist China

by

S. D. RICHARDSON

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Pp. xvi, 237, \$6.95

Communist China includes one-fourteenth of the total land area of the world and nearly one-fourth of the world's population. Despite the obvious importance of the region, information concerning the status of the forest resources and resource management policies has been extremely fragmentary, inconsistent, and nearly impossible to place in perspective. Thus, special interest must be attached to any careful survey of the current situation.

Dr. Richardson is director of research for the New Zealand Forest Service. His own research specialization is in studies of the physiology of forest trees. This is reflected in the emphasis on biological phases of forestry in the book. He is also, however, a skilled and highly systematic observer who is keenly aware of the economic, administrative, and social relationships of forestry.

Dr. Richardson's study might be likened to the first probings with a flashlight in a great area of darkness. Compared to the immensity of the region and the complexities of the Chinese culture and economy, this book can only be considered as a sketch of forestry in Communist China—but it is a highly perceptive and informative sketch of very real usefulness in any analysis of world timber trends. The study is based on a six week tour of forest regions in China in 1963 plus careful review of the literature, including a number of translations not generally available.

The popular conception of China as a region of extreme timber shortage is valid, particularly in the zones of high population concentration. The Food and Agriculture Organization has estimated that China, with about 23 per cent of the world's population, has only 2½ per cent of the accessible forest area. Nonetheless, as Dr. Richardson stresses, "China's flora is among the richest in the world, including more than 5,000 woody species in almost 700 genera; moreover . . . the natural forest extends in an unbroken sequence of communities from tropical rain forest in the south to montane-boreal coniferous forest in the northeast." There remain some ex-

tensive areas of virgin forest, the continued existence of which reflects problems of access. Some 60 per cent of the timber volume is in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia.

In considering the functions of forest resources in the economic development of the region, Dr. Richardson places particular stress on the role of forestry in soil and water conservation as related to agricultural productivity, and on the role of timber in communications and industrial development. The argument that the shortage of suitable timber for railroad cross-ties may be an important limiting factor on the development of transportation and industrialization is an interesting hypothesis, which unfortunately is not developed in much detail. The critical importance of this use of wood may seem surprising in contemporary America, where ties represent a minor and declining use of timber. Its relevance, however, is more readily apparent if considered from the earlier stage in our history when the railroads were being pushed across the Great Plains. In view of this hypothesis, it is surprising that Dr. Richardson found wood preservation studies to be an area of particular weakness in Chinese forestry research.

The soil and water conservation efforts are reported more fully. China has embarked on resource development through erosion control, bank protection, sand stabilization, and shelterbelts on a wholly unprecedented scale. The Chinese claim to have established 30 million water conservancy projects and to have planted approximately 75 million acres of protective forests in a 15 year period. No quantitative evaluation of such claims is attempted, but Dr. Richardson concludes that failures in the plantations set out have been widespread. He reviews the economic and the organizational contributions to these failures, but concludes that the biological problems inherent in the extremely difficult sites for such programs are likely to prove the most intractable.

Dr. Richardson summarizes the shifting organizational structures and fluctuating policies under which the forestry program has been developed by the communist government in completely realistic, but not unsympathetic, fashion. He shows a wry awareness that problems of conflicting policies, overlapping agency jurisdictions, and sharp discrepancies between pronouncements and practices are not limited to the communist system.

Dr. Richardson writes in an easy, readable style, and thirty-two pages of photographs contribute effectively to the impressions

gained from the book. The decision to express all areas and volumes in metric terms plus the usage of British rather than American forestry terminology may at times give pause to a U.S. audience, but has the virtue of consistency with the practice in the numerous international forest resource studies published by the Food and Agriculture Organization.

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