

https://dspace.org/

An interesting social experiment: White labour forestry settlement programme in South Africa, 1917-1938

Roach, Tom

1989-05-15
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9682

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm MAY 1989

Title: An Interesting Social Experiment: White Labour Forestry Settlement Programme in South Africa 1917-1938.

by: Tom Roach

No. 253

"An Interesting Social Experiment"[1]

The White Labour Forest Settlement Programme of 1917-1938.

by

Thomas R. Roach

Department of Geography, Wits.

Over seventy years ago, South Africa's Department of Forestry started a large scale tree planting programme. The scheme involved the establishment of communities of poor whites in areas suitable for afforestation. The residents of the settlements were recruited from amongst the nation's unemployed and dispossessed. The first settlements were founded in the Cape in 1917 and the final settlement was built in northeastern Transvaal during 1934. For locations, see figure 1. Up to 1938, the settlements were operated by the Department of Forestry in conjunction with other government Departments, notably the Department of White Labour, the Department of Labour and the Department of Labour and Social Welfare. In 1938, control over the settlements was passed to the Department of Social Welfare. At the same time, the planting programme in which the settlers were taking part effectively came to an end. Basic details about the settlements are given in table 1.

---

1. CAD FOR 400 E230/F1/2 White Labour Forestry Settlement, Weza: General, clipping, A.I. Ferraz, "Weza Settlement - 1, A Community in the Forests," Natal Advertiser (16 January 1937).

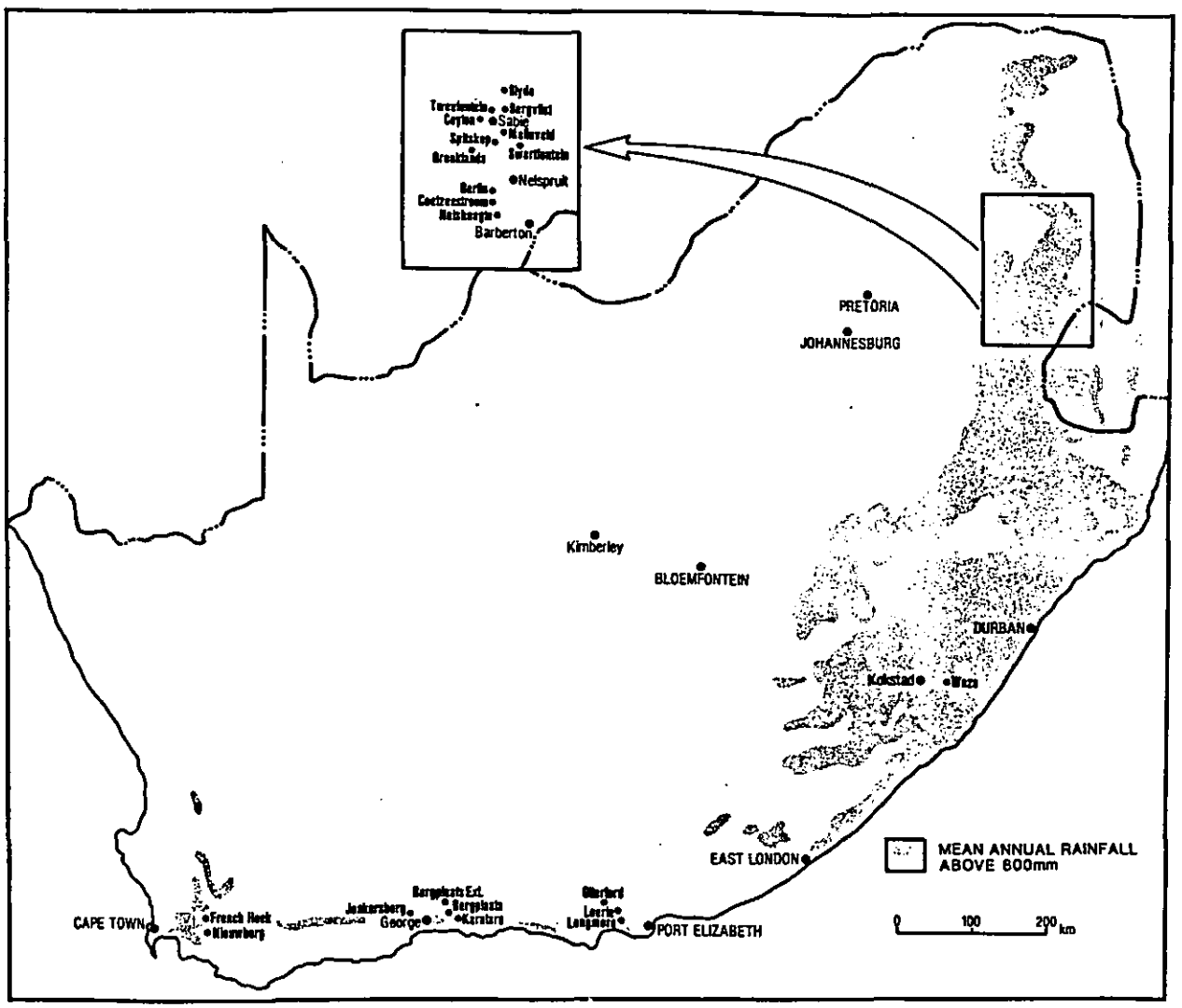

Fig. 1: Map Showing the Location of the Settlements in Relation to Annual Rainfall over 800mm

Table: 1

Settlements Constructed for the Programme

Settlement	Date	Capacity	Location
French Hoek	1917	120 families	Franschhoek, Cape
Jonkersberg	1917	160 families	West of George, Cape
Loerie	1919	100 men only	North of Loerie, Cape
Bergplaats	1922	99 families	East of George, Cape
Karatara	1922	150 families	East of George, Cape
Otterford	1922	194 families	North-west of Loerie
Berlin	1922	105 families	South of Elandshoek, Tvl.
Weza	1923	120 families	East of Kokstad, Natal
Nieuwberg	1925	50 families	North of Grabouw, Cape
Coetzeestroom	1929	100 families	South of Elandshoek, Tvl.
Tweefontein	1929	125 families	Sabie, Transvaal
Ceylon	1929	120 families	Sabie, Transvaal
Bergplaats Ext.	1931	50 families	N. of Bergplaats, Cape
Longmore	1931	50 families	West of Uitenhage, Cape
Blyde	1931	100 families	North of Graskop, Tvl.
Spitzkop	1931	100 families	S-E of Sabie, Tvl.
Swartfontein	1931	25 families	East of Sabie, Tvl.
Witklip	1931	25 families	South of Sabie, Tvl.
Brooklands	1932	100 families	S-W of Sabie, Tvl.
Bergvliet	1932	80 families	Malieveld, Tvl.
Malieveld	1932	19 families	S-E of Sabie, Tvl.
Nelshoogte	1934	100 families	S-W of Barberton, Tvl.

Today, South Africa, including the Bantustans, is nearly independent of outside sources for forest products such as sawn timber, wood pulp, paper, and many of the chemical derivatives of wood and cellulose. Practically all this material comes from trees grown in plantations. Currently, a total of 1 181 608 hectares are under cultivation of which 780 650 hectares, sixty-six percent, are privately owned. In 1987, some two hundred thousand people were employed in the forestry and timber

industries of South Africa. Ninety percent of these employees were unskilled workers. Practically all employees, ninety-five percent, are African, thirty percent are women. Prior to the start of the settlement programme, the Union's Department of Forestry had planted approximately 14 000 hectares of woodland in addition to the 7 300 hectares afforested by the two British colonies in the years between 1880 and 1910. In the ensuing two decades, the Department planted some 100 760 hectares, about 26% of the afforested area owned by the government in 1987. This large and important industry got its start from the social experiment described in this paper.

The Ideas Behind the Programme

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the White Labour Forest Settlements are the sources of the ideas behind the programme. These sources, for both the programme and forestry techniques, are overseas, specifically Europe and North America. They are important because the government's policy with regard to poor whites was based upon them. In effect, the ideas discussed below helped the government define the problem, identify the people whose behavior it wished to change and provide a remedy.

The Agrarian Myth and the Back to the Land Movement

Most of the land afforested by the South African Department of Forestry in the 1920s and 1930s was planted by the inhabitants of the white labour settlements. The settlement idea has two sources. The first source are the hamlets found in the heavily forested interior of Germany. Many of these communities were created by monasteries during the Middle Ages. Inhabitants made their living by farming and working in the surrounding forests. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this lifestyle became romanticized as part of the rise of the "agrarian myth." The myth is the more recent and influential source of ideas for the suitability of labour colonies for solving social problems.

According to Richard Hofstadter the agrarian myth can be traced to sources in pre-industrial Europe.[2] During the eighteenth century, it was a phenomenon of the upper classes who romanticized their agricultural origins. By the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, the agrarian myth had migrated to North America and become a "mass creed."[3] This attitude was so pervading that politicians, whatever their backgrounds and real

---

2. Richard Hofstadter, The Age Of Reform, From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 23-26. Note, for example, the following lines from Dryden's translation of Horace quoted by Richard Hofstadter in his discussion of the agrarian myth:

> How happy in his low degree,
> How rich in humble poverty, is he,
> Who leads a quiet country life,
> Discharged of business, void of strife,
> And from the griping scrivener free?
> Thus, ere the seeds of vice were sown,
> Lived men in better ages born,
> Who plough'd with oxen of their own,
> Their small paternal field of corn.

3. Ibid, 28.

attitude towards agriculturalists, felt bound to make an appropriate obeisance. Noting that the myth was a complex idea which defied exact definition, Hofstadter considered that its component parts formed a "clear pattern." The farmer was seen as being an "incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy, happy human being." Because he lived close to nature, his life was "believed to have a wholesomeness and integrity impossible for the depraved populations of the cities."[4]

The agrarian myth has been remarkably long-lived and has spawned associated ideas and movements. One such is the "back to the land movement." This movement was an urban response to the increasingly negative social conditions found in the cities of North America during the late nineteenth century. It has had a history of being an almost universal panacea to urban social ills such as overcrowding, unemployment and increasing crime. Its origins can be found in the suburbanization movement which was a reaction to overcrowding in cities and the growth of the social gospel idea.[5] In its most romantic form, the movement predicted that those suffering from the stresses, strains and disappointments of city life would enjoy good health and a satisfying life if they returned to the country and lived essentially as subsistence farmers.[6] Practically, the back to the land movement was seen by members of the urbanized upper classes, as being a particularly suitable solution to chronic urban

---

4. Ibid, 24.

5. Scott Donaldson, "City and Country Marriage Proposals," in Richard M. Abrams and Lawrence W. Levine (eds), The Shaping of Twentieth Century America (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 49-67.

6. Ibid, 56-58.

unemployment.

These ideas, which originated in Europe were certainly attractive to North Americans who applied them to their own conditions.[7] This was done to the extent that it can be argued that both the agrarian myth and the back to the land movement reached their full degree of development in North America. Both the myth and the movement emphasized the role of hard open-air work as a cure for social ills such as slothfulness and lack of entrepreneurship. What is of interest to this study is that these same European sources and the same types of comparison were being made in South Africa by South Africans and had been since before the First World War. These comparisons were made specifically with reference to the various labour colony ideas being tried out in the Union.

Labour Colonies

In South Africa, moving the poor white back to the land in organized colonies, farming high yielding, irrigated land was advocated as a cure for the "spirit of slothfulness" that had "come over the poor white [whose] object in life was more to exist than to live." The problem with South Africa, according to this commentator, was that it was a country where "the satisfying of the purely animal cravings and necessities of life, is easier to

---

7. See, Richard T. Ely, "Conservation and Economic Theory," in Richard T. Ely, Ralph H. Hess, Charles K. Leith and Thomas Nixon Carver (eds), The Foundations of National Prosperity (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), 64-9.

maintain than in almost any other country and consequently the initiative to labour is at a minimum."[8] This quotation is from an address by F.E. Kanthack, the Director of Irrigation for the Cape Colony, to the First South African Irrigation Congress held in Cape Town in 1909. The Congress was a direct copy of the first United States Irrigation Congress, held some years earlier, the report of which Kanthack had read and which had inspired him to approach the Prime Minister of the Cape, J.X. Merriman, with the idea of organizing a similar meeting.

The first, most successful, and longest lasting agricultural labour colony in South Africa was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church at Kakamas on the banks of the Orange River, west of Upington in the northern Cape. This colony, started in 1894, was based directly on the ideas of Pastor von Bodelschwingh of Wilhelmsdorf in Germany.[9] This settlement was considered to be a success by the public and politicians of the day because it appeared to be able to place poor whites on smallholdings and train them to work without the help of African labour. Kakamas was considered successful in breaking its poor white participants of a number of other bad habits. These included, trekking, herding, relying upon casual day-labour for income and the withholding of children (especially girls) from school. Kakamas was promoted by the Dutch Reformed Church, which organized and ran the operation up to the Second World War, as a shining example of

---

8. Cape of Good Hope, Proceedings of the First South African Irrigation Congress (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1909), 26, 32-34.

9. B.P. Marchand, "Labour Colony Irrigation Settlements," in Cape of Good Hope, Irrigation Congress, 41-46.

how to solve the problems of the poor white.[10] Because of this, it had a strong influence upon the White Labour Forestry Settlement programme.

The notion of combining a settlement or colony with a specific task can be traced back to a similar idea, that of settlement colonies, dating from the Middle Ages, specifically the eighth century.[11] Basically, labour colonies are direct expressions of the myth grafted onto the settlement colony idea. The expectation of the advocates of the colonies was that they would help solve the growing sociological problems of the lower classes living in cities. Great emphasis was placed on the healing effect that disciplined open air work would have upon indolence, alcoholism, and a host of social ills including crime. The idea seems to have first appeared in Germany during the nineteenth century where one of its early disciples was the aforementioned Pastor von Bodelschwingh.[12]

At about the same time as the labour colony idea was being developed in Northern Germany, Denmark was developing an intensive social welfare programme. Although it was largely state run, the churches had their own programmes. Of interest is the "Peoples High School" programme developed by Bishop Grundlvig.

---

10. For example, see the praise given to the settlement by the Cape's ex-premier, John X. Merriman, in the House of Assembly debate on the report of the Select Committee on Conditions of European Employment as reported in South Africa, House of Assembly, Debates of the Third Session of the First Parliament (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1913), 3096. Also, "Farming and Optimism," Star (10 July, 1914): 8.

11. Hans-Jurgen Nitz, "The Church as Colonist: the Benedictine Abbey of Lorsch and Planned Waldhufen Colonization in the Odenwald," Journal of Historical Geography 9, 2(1983): 105-26.

12. Marchand, "Labour Colony Settlements": 41.

This programme aimed at increasing the cultural awareness of the Danish rural working class, (roughly comparable as a social group to the South African poor whites) thus making them more resistant to imported ideas.[13] The high school idea can therefore, be seen as part of the general objective of maintaining the existing social organization of Denmark while introducing some changes considered suitable but not too controversial by the ruling classes.

The labour colony idea arrived in the Afrikaans speaking community of South Africa directly through the Dutch Reformed Church. This happened in the years immediately before the start of the Anglo-Boer War when the Church carried out research on how best to provide for increasing numbers of white farm families forced to abandon their farms as a result of drought and Rindepest epidemics amongst their stock. The research culminated in the establishment of the aforementioned agricultural labour colony at Kakamas. The ideas were also spread within the English speaking community. Here the medium of transmission was more indirect. Denmark's social service programme became so well known in Europe that it attracted the attention of the British writer, H. Rider Haggard, who is discussed next. Many aspects of the Danish programme were also copied by the American branch of the Salvation Army Church and this too became a channel through which the ideas reached South Africa.

Following on from the financial success of his adventure

---

13. J.I. Marais, Bishop Grundlvig and the People's High School in Denmark (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1911). Fore a critical discussion, see David Levine, "Conservatism and Tradition in Danish Social Welfare Legislation, 1890-1933: A Comparative View," Comparative Studies in Society and History 20(1978): 54-69.

novels set in Africa, Rider Haggard became interested in the plight of the rural poor in England. In 1901-1902, he toured England at his own expense and used the material he had gathered to write a criticism of the situation in rural areas entitled Rural England.[14] The book was a success and the author was requested to undertake a Commission to the United States to investigate the rural labour colonies established by the Salvation Army. This resulted in a British Government Blue Book and a popular work entitled The Poor and the Land.[15] Haggard was then appointed to the British Royal Commission on Coastal Erosion and Afforestation, a body which was a precursor to the Forestry Commission. At the same time, he produced, at the request of the British Salvation Army, a report on their social work in the United Kingdom and, at his own expense, visited Denmark. This later visit was recorded in the book Rural Denmark and its Lessons which emphasized Denmark's systems of agricultural co-operatives, smallholdings and the People's High Schools.[16]

Rider Haggard came to South Africa during the period this series of books was being published. The visit occurred during 1913-1914 when he was a member of the Dominions Royal Commission on Natural Resources. He also returned to South Africa in early 1916 on behalf of the Empire Land Settlement Committee of

---

14. H. Rider Haggard, Rural England (London: Longman's Green, 1903); Peter B. Ellis, H. Rider Haggard: A Voice from the Infinite (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 160-62; Morton Cohen, Rider Haggard: His Life and Works (London: Hutchinson of London, 1960), 170-73.

15. H. Rider Haggard, The Poor and the Land (London: Longman's Green and Co., 1905); Ellis, Rider Haggard, 169-72.

16. H. Rider Haggard, Rural Denmark and its Lessons (London: Longman's Green And Co., 1913); Cohen, Rider Haggard, 246-50, 259-62; Ellis, Rider Haggard, 189, 192-95.

the Royal Colonial Institute.[17] In these visits, he did not hesitate to promote his ideas on the utility of labour colonies as a means of solving poverty.[18] Also, Rider Haggard's books on the subject were well known to leading South African politicians of the day and were cited by John X. Merriman and Thomas Smartt in debates in the House of Assembly.[19]

In the debates of the House of Assembly, it was made plain that labour colonies included possible forestry settlements. At the same time, the type of person who might benefit from a stay in a labour colony expanded. Originally seen as being suitable for poor whites with rural backgrounds languishing in the cities, now both forestry and agriculture were considered to be ideal occupations for young men who needed to be taught the value of hard work. Young white men in South Africa, have been "taught to look upon the manual worker as belonging to a class beneath him," wrote H.E. King, the Secretary to the South African National Union. Often they were undisciplined, lazy, lacked initiative and unconsciously realized it was possible to exist in South Africa on very little. They desired "to live as

---

17. Ellis, Rider Haggard, 192-97, 221-23.

18. See, "Poor Relief," Star (4 April, 1914): 6; "Poor Relief, Town Council's Opinion," Star (29 May, 1914): 14; "East Rand Germiston Council," Star (9 June, 1914): 4.

19. South Africa, House of Assembly, Debates of the Third Session of the First Parliament (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1913), 3093-94; _____, Debates, Fourth Session, First Parliament, 2339; South Africa, State Library, Debates of the House of Assembly of the Union of South Africa as Reported in the Cape Times (Pretoria, State Library, 1966), vol. 1(1916), 62, 76, 102-6. See also, "Land Settlement in the Union: Future of the Returned Soldier," South African Journal of Industries 1, 5(January, 1918): 414-24.

and have the status of professionals without having the hard work," he continued.[20] These criticisms were supported by the Federated Chamber of Industries which, taking into account the wood shortages experienced during the First World War, advocated the expansion of forestry schemes carried out by returning soldiers who lacked any other skills.[21]

By 1923, the idea of forestry as an occupation for the poor and unskilled had taken on both nationalist and romantic overtones. The Rand Daily Mail opined that:

> White Labour in forestry has an aspect which in this country should never be overlooked. It is that of its value to a white race endeavouring to root themselves in a national soil which black men hitherto have scratched rather than cultivated but on which their cheapness tends to give them a monopoly...that until whites have a stake in labour on the land, the land will never truly be theirs.[22]

Forestry, the paper continued in an expansive tone, could actually give the poor white a career as a labourer with the kind of hopes and aspirations normally enjoyed by those in executive offices:

> He can go on the Government relief works and take on a navvy's job, and it will be his own fault if it does not make him more of a man as well as a navvy...That apprenticeship served he can be passed to the forestry plantations.

From there, the labourer could become a

---

20. H.E. King, "Careers for the Rising Generation," South African Journal of Industry 4, 11(December, 1921): 890-93.

21. "South African Federated Chamber of Industries: Annual Convention, Durban, 16th-18th June, 1919," South African Journal of Industries 2, 8(August, 1919): 784-95. See also, "Land Settlement in the Union."

22. "White Labour Succeeds," The Rand Daily Mail (9 October, 1923): 7.

> permanent forester with a comfortable house, large garden, fair living wage, healthy occupation...community advantages of schooling, doctoring, recreation and social intercourse.[23]

Thus both the agrarian myth and the back to the land movement played a role in the adoption and development of the white labour settlement colonies of the Department of Forestry. Both assisted in identifying the sociological problems of the poor white, identifying people who would be suitable participants in the programme and in identifying forestry as a suitable vehicle for the programme.

Ecological Imperialism

As noted above, the source of the forestry technology used in the settlements comes from overseas. Because the type of forestry practiced in South Africa involves massive alteration in the ecology and natural environment, it falls within the process known as "ecological imperialism." There are many forms of imperialism all of which might be defined as the implantation of aspects of the way of life of one group of people upon another group as part of the process of subjugation. There thus can be political and cultural imperialism and aspects of both these forms can be recognized as appearing here. It is ecological imperialism which concerns this section. This is the artificial importation of new ecological systems to an existing and viable ecology.

---

23. Ibid.

Clearly this can take many forms but we will consider here only one, voluntary importation.

Voluntary ecological imperialism has taken place all over Africa and examples of it are numerous.[24] In the instance of this paper, the example of interest concerns the importation of forestry ideas and the planting of the South African veld with imported species of trees.

Afforestation is not a process indigenous to South Africa or any other nation in the Southern Hemisphere. Practical, commercial afforestation was simultaneously developed in Europe and Japan in response to growing shortages of wood during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most sophisticated system combining all known methods was to be found in France where, in the years preceding the Revolution, coppice and standards practice was combined with sustained yield management of mature deciduous and Silver fir forests.[25]

With the industrialization of Europe, and simultaneously with Japan, these management methods were not able to supply the required quantities of woods products. Increased controls on forest access and on cutting alleviated the problem but only until the late eighteenth century. At this time, methods of

---

24. For example see: Elspeth Huxley, White Man's Country: Lord Delamere and the Making of Kenya 2 vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1935) especially vol 1, chapters 7 and 8.

25. Susan R. Jones and David L. Wigston, "The Warleigh Woods of Tamerton Foliot, Devon, UK, 1778-1914; a Study in the Decline of Sustained Wood and Timber Management," in Harold K. Steen (ed), History of Sustained-Yield Forestry: A Symposium (Santa Cruz: Forest History Society, 1984), 375-91; Heinrich Rubner, "Sustained Yield Forestry in Europe and its Crisis During the Nazi Dictatorship," in Steen, History of Sustained-Yield, 170-75; Conrad Totman, "From Exploitation to Plantation Forestry in Early Modern Japan: An Overview," in Steen, History of Sustained-Yield, 270-80.

artificially growing tree seedlings in nurseries in sufficient quantities to make planting economically feasible were developed. In addition, knowledge of market demands plus species site requirements made it possible to choose both the site and the correct species to plant. As a result, afforestation became the preferred means of forest management especially in Germany where softwood demand was highest. This process was paralleled in Japan.[26]

Within the British Empire, three large land masses afforested appreciable areas on models provided by Europe. These were India, South Africa and Australasia. In terms of time, the last area to adopt an afforestation programme was that of Australia and New Zealand. The idea that afforestation was a suitable remedy for ecological "problems" in these countries did not travel directly to each country from the Northern Hemisphere, rather it arrived via a circuitous route. The careers of a number of South African foresters demonstrate the way in which forestry and conservation ideas travelled from the Northern to the Southern Hemispheres. Like many contemporary foresters in the British Empire, several were trained at the Ecole nationale forestiere in Nancy, France. This school was prominent because it was the only school of forestry open during the nineteenth century which did not concentrate on the management of northern European pine forests. Thus, many foresters who planned careers in southern

---

26. Rubner, "Sustained-yield forestry," 171; Totman, "Exploitation to Plantation Forestry in Japan," 270-80.

27. See David E. Hutchins, "Forestry in South Africa," in W. Flint and J.D.F. Gilchrist (eds), Science in South Africa: A Handbook and Review (Cape Town: T. Maskew Miller, 1905), 398-99; Gifford Pinchot, Breaking New Ground (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), 8-16.

Europe, India, South Africa or Australasia, studied there.[27] Until the forestry degree programme was established at the University of Stellenbosch in 1932, South African foresters on the Department's training programme studied at Nancy, Coopers Hill in England or at Yale in the United States.

With regard to the development of forestry in South Africa, the first forester employed by the government was Joseph Storr Lister. Born in the Cape during 1852, he had family connections in India. These helped him to obtain a position as an untrained Assistant Forest Officer in the Punjab in 1869. Five years later, Lister was appointed to the position of Superintendent of the Drift Sands Plantations at the Cape, then under the control of the Cape Colony Department of Lands. Between 1875 and 1881, he established many plantations. Specifically he was responsible for introducing the Port Jackson willow (Acacia saligna) to South Africa and planting it extensively on the sand dunes near Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Besides stabilizing sand dunes, Lister established a number of other plantations, with the intention of providing wood for the railways, and founded the Tokai Arboretum at Rondebosch. Most of the trees Lister planted were of various Eucalyptus species though he is also credited with establishing the first Monterey pine (Pinus radiata) plantations in the country demonstrating both the species' ability to be

---

28. N.L. King, "Historical Sketch of the Development of Forestry in South Africa," Journal of the South African Forestry Association 1(October, 1938): 4-16; Margaret H. Lister, "Joseph Lister, the First Chief Conservator of the South African Department of Forestry," Journal of the South African Forestry Association 29(May, 1957): 10-18. The Department's experience with these plantations is described in Gordon H. Pirie, "Railway Plantations and Railway Sleepers in South Africa, 1910-1937," South African Forestry Journal 122(September, 1982): 59-62.

easily planted and its high rate of growth in South Africa.[28]

The plantations that Lister established with the intention of producing railway sleepers and locomotive fuel, were so successful that, in 1880, the government of the Cape Colony decided to create a proper Department of Forestry. Lister, who had had no formal forestry education and hardly any experience outside of the Cape, was not considered suitable at this stage in his career to head the new department. To fill this role, the government signed a ten year contract with the Comte de Vasselot de Regne, a citizen of France and a graduate of the forestry school at Nancy, France. Under the Comte's direction, Lister continued his career in the Cape civil service while the Comte organized the Department of Forestry on the French model and controlled logging operations in the indigenous forests. After the Comte's departure, Lister was successively promoted to the posts of Conservator of Forests, Eastern Conservancy (1888-1905), Chief Conservator of Forests, Cape Colony (1905-1910) and Chief Conservator of Forests for the Union, (1910-1913). Thus, by 1890, the major influences on forestry in South Africa came from France and British India. The Comte was also responsible for bringing to South Africa two other important foresters, David Hutchins and C.E. Lane-Poole. These men were instrumental in expanding this influence to Australasia.[29]

The above discussion shows that commercial forestry as practiced in the British Empire is an importation. Furthermore, the intensive kind of forestry that is practiced is adapted to certain kinds of trees. These are generally fast growing, easily

---

29. Ibid.

established species which are suitable for land where there is not too much conflict with agriculture. Most of the species are cone bearing softwoods, particularly pines. In the northern hemisphere, the paper making industry has become adapted to using these species to manufacture its products. The combination of fast growing trees with an industry little concerned with fibre quality is ideal for plantation forestry.

Profile of the Settlement Population

Between 1917 and 1934, the White Labour Forest Settlement Programme resulted in the construction of twenty-two settlements located in the heaviest rainfall areas of South Africa (see figure 1). Settlement construction has been divided into two periods, 1917 to 1925 and 1929 to 1934. The basic information about the settlements established during the first phase is given in table 1. The data on occupancy rates is summarized in table: 2.

This data covers a period of high prosperity for South Africa and hence, of low unemployment. It might be expected then that the Department of Forestry would have had difficulty in maintaining the settlements at near full capacity. In fact, the reverse is true. As can be seen from table 2, the average mode and the overall mean correspond closely at ninety-two and ninety-three percent respectively. When the data from individual settlements is examined for months when the transfer of large numbers of settlers from the afforestation programme to the farm training programme took place, numbers were made up by a larger

than normal intake of newcomers in the following months.[30] This means that the minimum rate of occupancy listed in the above table tended to occur at times when settlers transferred to farms or when more than usual were repatriated as unfit. The most obvious reason, then, for the ability of the Departments of Forestry and Labour to keep the settlements nearly full was that the programme filled a need. In other words, even though the years 1926 to 1929 were relatively prosperous ones, there were enough unemployed rural poor whites to keep the settlements full.

Table: 2

Summary of Rates of Occupancy in Six Settlements for the Period, March, 1926 to July, 1929[31]

Settlement	Percentages min	mode	mean	max
French Hoek	84	95	94	96
Jonkersberg	71	84	91	102
Bergplaats	87	100	98	102
Karatara	68	89	91	99
Berlin	68	93	91	101
Weza	79	92	91	97
Averages	76	92	93	99

Information about the length of time settlers stayed in the settlements is available from the "Register of Settlers" found

---

30. For example, see "Conditions in Afforestation Settlements," Social and Industrial Review 1 (November, 1925): 227; 2 (October, 1926): 226; 3 (June, 1927): 569; 5 (January, 1928): 26.

31. Sources: "Conditions in Afforestation Settlements," Social and Industrial Review monthly table published from 2 (June, 1926): 515 to 9 (February, 1930): 75.

at Weza, Natal. The Weza register shows that the average length of stay for the sixty-seven settlers with records showing they arrived and departed within the period covered by this study, was three years and thirty-one days.[32] The shortest stay was twenty-three days while the longest was seventeen years and thirty-two days. The rate of turn-over was such that, at Weza, there were no settlers in residence in 1938 who had arrived within the first two years of the community's founding in 1923. Furthermore, during this period, only two families returned to the settlement after leaving for other work. This data shows that there was considerable mobility within the workforce and supports the hypothesis that the settlements were not considered to be permanent homes and places of employment by the settlers. Considering this mobility, and other factors, it is estimated that approximately twenty thousand families and single men went through the programme between 1917 and 1938.[33] It must also be borne in mind, however, that many settlers stayed for a considerable period of time. Some sixteen settlers who arrived before 1939, stayed for an average of thirteen years and one hundred and sixteen days.[34]

---

32. Weza State Forest, Forestry Office Archives, "Register of Settlers, 1939-1946".

33. This a best guess based on settler's registration numbers. The highest numbers noted in the archival material were in the range 15 000 to 16 000. These numbers were assigned to settlers after the founding of the Department of Labour in 1924. As the programme existed for some seven years before 1924, the figure of 20 000 settlers appears to be reasonable. For examples see CAD Records of the Department of Social Welfare (VWN) 1352 A5/9 Distribution of Milk and Butter to Settlers: Weza, statement, "Weza Forestry Settlement," 31 December, 1938.

34. Ibid. The longest resident settler, Willem Mueder, arrived early in 1930 and left in late 1956.

Family Profile

Using the same sources as above, information can be gleaned about settler ages and family composition. From the Weza register, the data from one hundred and fifty-three entries indicates that the average age of a settler on arrival was thirty-one years. The two youngest settlers were aged seventeen while the oldest was forty-nine. All settlers were married and accompanied by wives. Of these one hundred and fifty-three settlers, one hundred and twenty arrived with children. The average number of children per household was 2,6 and the maximum was eight.[35] The average size of each settler's household was five members, man, wife and three children, with one in seventy-five families having an additional adult dependent. The children tended to be young, fifty-eight percent of them under the age of seven, forty percent aged seven to seventeen years and two percent eighteen and over. This reflects the policy of the Department of Labour that the older children had to leave home once they had completed a certain level of schooling.[36]

---

35. Weza, "Register of Settlers." Two families arrived with six children and one with seven.

36. Sources: "Conditions in Afforestation Settlements," Social and Industrial Review monthly table published from 2 (June, 1926): 515 to 8 (February, 1930): 75.

Medical Situation

Medical services at the settlements were, in most instances, supervised by the local District Surgeon. These men were employees of the Department of Public Health, a division of the Department of the Interior until 1920 when it was given the status of an independent government department. Prior to this time, the District Surgeons were local doctors paid a retainer of fifty to seventy-five pounds per annum. After 1920, the network of District Surgeons expanded and they were given additional duties. At the same time, the retainer system was dropped and District Surgeons became salaried government employees with travel and overtime allowances.[37] With the creation of the White Labour Forestry Settlement Programme, supervision of the health of the settlers was added to their duties and the Surgeons were required to visit, at least once a month, the camp to which they were assigned and to be on call for emergencies.[38] Nothing is known of the kind of medical problems that the District Surgeon encountered during his regular visits to his settlement. Some material, however, has survived with reference to emergency calls. A summary of this data is presented in table 3. As can be seen, most emergency calls were to treat problems arising from infectious

---

37. South Africa, Department of Public Health, Annual Report for the Year Ending 30 June, 1925 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1926), 264.

38. See CAD FOR 183 A310/279/1 memo's Under Secretary for Lands to Chief Medical Officer of Health, 19 November, 1920, 27 November, 1920, and 8 December, 1920, for examples of correspondence making these arrangements. Also, CAD FOR 187 A310/286, memo, Chief Conservator to Secretary for Public Health, 17 May, 1922, and GES 888 525/13, list, "Medical Attendance and Sanitation at White Labour Forestry Settlements," circa 1923.

diseases with problems associated with pregnancy and childbirth second in importance. What is interesting is the number of abortions (both failed and successful) the doctor was called to

Table: 3

Summary of Emergency Calls at French Hoek

21 July, 1922 to 2 July, 1924

by Dr Frank, B. Bester, Paarl [39]

Diagnosis	Calls
Live Births	9
Post-partum problems	8
Abortions	4
Pregnancy	3
miscarriages	3
Influenza, fevers	18
Bronchitus	5
Boils, Abscess etc.	4
Pneumonia	4
Croup	4
meningitus	2
Convulsions	1
Fainting fits	1
Accidents	9
Operation	1
Deaths: heart	4
Deaths: at birth	3

treat. In addition, nine emergency calls were made to treat pneumonia and bronchitus cases, diseases which one does not

---

39. CAD FOR 325 A1032/2 Progress Reports - Poor White Relief Settlement French Hoek, "Reports of Medical Emergency Calls."

associate with the healthy, open-air life the settlers and families were supposed to lead.

In addition to his duties as doctor to the settlers, the District Surgeon was required to examine all incoming settlers and reject those who he could not describe as healthy and capable of hard manual labour. This examination appears to have taken place during the doctor's regular monthly visit and was additional to the medical examination the settler and his family had when recruited. As a result, a settler, eventually rejected as unfit, could already have spent several weeks at the settlement. During the years 1926 to 1930, the District Surgeons rejected an average of seven settlers a month (range, two to thirty-one) as unfit for the job.[40]

As can be appreciated, this rejection of men on health grounds after they had arrived led to problems, especially when they were rejected for having poor teeth. Men, dismissed for this reason, not unnaturally complained that the state of their teeth had little to do with their ability to work. In this instance, Creswell, the Minister for Labour, instructed that men with bad teeth should be taken on as long as they agreed to have the necessary dental work undertaken. The Department of Forestry, in its turn, agreed to cover the costs and deduct the amount from the men's pay at the rate of one shilling per week.[41] Although the plan can be interpreted as a crude form of socialized medicine, in

---

40. Sources: "Conditions in Afforestation Settlements," Social and Industrial Review monthly table published from 2 (June, 1926): 515 to 9 (February, 1930): 75. This figure appears to include a number of settlers who were too ill to continue working.

41. CAD FOR 186 A310/279/4, memo, Acting Secretary for Labour to Chief Conservator, "Rejection of men by District Surgeon on account of defective teeth," 25 May, 1926.

fact it was more an example of the politician's desire to solve the unemployment problem by providing work. The potential settlers, rejected for having bad teeth were right in considering their teeth had little direct effect on their work performance. What is of interest is that they had no hesitation in taking their complaint directly to the Minister of Labour with the expectation he would tell the Department of Forestry what action to take. In this they were correct.

Welfare Services

The settlers welfare needs were the responsibility of an employee of the Department of Labour and, after 1937, the Department of Social Welfare. This official's title was "Welfare Officer." Welfare officers had been assigned to the earliest settlements, French Hoek and Jonkersberg, when they were actually employed by the Department of Mines, White Labour Department. The duties of the Welfare Officers were subject to negotiation between the two departments concerned, Forestry and the Department of Mines and Industries. As a result of these negotiations, from 1922 until the new Department of Labour took over this aspect of the programme in late 1924, the settlement Welfare Officer's duties included:

1) Keeping a register of all settlers and their dependents as well as recording births and deaths. The Welfare Officer also made

---

42. CAD FOR A310/279/2, "Mines Department: Labour Division, Duties of Welfare Officer on Forestry Settlements," 26 August, 1922, p1.

monthly returns to his supervisor.[42]

2) Making regular inspections of the dwellings, gardens and outhouses. These inspections were to be used as an excuse for the Welfare Officer to get to know the settlers and their families on a personal basis to "foster and stimulate good aspirations."[43] Further, the officer was required to visit the settlers at their place of work and inquire after their work habits. If a settler's work performance was not up to standard in the opinion of his supervisor, the officer was expected to counsel him. If no improvement was forthcoming, the Welfare Officer reported the matter to his supervisor in the Department of Mines who might, eventually, dismiss the settler.[44]

3) Similarly, the Welfare Officer was expected to inspect the school and ensure that the settlers' children were attending and making progress.[45]

4) The Welfare Officer was also required to liaise with the visiting District Surgeon, ensuring that medical records kept in the camp were in proper order. In addition, it was the duty of the Officer and his wife to ensure that settlers and their dependents got medical attention when they needed it. Obviously, this put him in conflict with the settlement's nurse.[46]

5) Lastly, the Welfare Officer and his wife had wide-ranging responsibilities for the general welfare and way of life of the settlers.

---

43. Ibid

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid, p2.

46. Ibid.

The Department of Mines considered that, "This phase of the Welfare Officer's work is of the utmost importance and here his wife should be of considerable assistance."[47] First, the couple should "encourage thrift" by "inducing" the settler to save some of his earnings for such things as "gardening, poultry development etc." The Welfare Officer should also "concern himself in assisting settlers to make purchases on the best terms."[48] His wife, "should advise and instruct the wives of settlers in the buying of foodstuffs and household requisites, in cooking and the making of clothes and buying material" usually through classes in these and other topics.[49] The Welfare Officer and his wife were also expected to organize recreational facilities and activities at their settlement.[50]

But, "above all", the welfare officer and his wife were expected to "give sympathetic help and counsel." It was "his primary duty to increase efficiency by securing the social and moral Welfare and happiness of the settlers and their families." As part of this aspect of their duties, the pair were expected to handle all "complaints, petitions and applications" from the settlers. If they could not handle the problems raised by the

---

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. For example: Andries van der Merwe, "Welfare Work on a Forestry Settlement," The Social and Industrial Review 5,2 (February, 1928): 91-4; and "Welfare Work on Forestry Settlements," The Social and Industrial Review 6, 11(November, 1928): 920-1.

settlers themselves, they were expected to forward the details to the Department of Labour Inspector to whom they were responsible.[51]

In order to give him authority over the settlers and their families in cases where they disobeyed the regulations, the Welfare Officer was supposed to be able to order the suspension from work of the offending settler. If this did not work, the Welfare Officer had the ultimate authority to recommend to his Department that the settler be dismissed.[52] The regulations in force during the period discussed here state that "while at work the settler will be under the direction of the Forester or other Forestry Officer; at other times under the Welfare Officer."[53] This division of authority, was clearly a potential source of conflict with the forester and was just one aspect of the position of the Welfare Officer which could make him and his wife unpopular with people in the community. The other aspect was of course the degree of control the Welfare Officer was supposed to have over the lives of the settlers and their families. The regulations of 1922, once again state it very clearly when they say that the Welfare Officer "has the right and is expected at all reasonable times to inspect the dwellings, gardens etc. of a settler."[54] He and his wife were expected to be the real leaders of the community and, through their example of good living as well as direct

---

51. CAD FOR 183 A310/279/2, "Mines Department: Labour Division. Camp Regulations of Forestry Settlements to be Observed by Settlers" 26 August, 1922.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

instruction, alter the way of life of the poor white settlers. It is no wonder then that interviewees recall this official as being a busybody.[55] Wives of settlers, used to the freedom implied in living in their own home however humble, would not take kindly to instructions regarding lifestyle. These could include orders to make curtains to cover windows, to ensure their children urinated and defecated only in the toilets and not in their gardens or in the forest, to sleep with windows open at night, to change their clothing before going to bed and so on.[56]

With the victory of the Pact during the 1924 election and, subsequently, with the founding of the Department of Labour, the above policy remained in effect with a greater emphasis on rehabilitation and the addition of some new responsibilities. The White Labour Department was integrated wholesale into the new Department of Labour. Its analysis of the situation was that the Department was faced with "two factors." These were,

> (1) The existence of large numbers of rural-bred unemployed who have drifted away from the land; and (2) the prevalence over the largest areas of the Union of a system of agriculture which...places the small farmer at a material disadvantage difficult for him to counter.[57]

In the eyes of the new Department, the answer to this problem was to bring about a

> ...radical alteration of farming methods and the introduction of a widespread system of peasant

---

55. For example, interview with D. Swarts.

56. Ibid. See also inspection reports.

57. "Rehabilitation of the Rural Unemployed," Official Labour Gazette 1, 2(May, 1925): 38. Note that Losperfontein was used as a place for training Welfare Officers before they were assigned to the forestry settlements. Van der Horst therefore had a direct influence upon the Officers at the settlements.

> farming operated under such methods as are to be found in Denmark, or in a different form in New Zealand, openings in large numbers would [then] offer themselves for all the present unemployed who are capable of being trained as small farmers, and whose farming under proper direction could be guided into the sphere of successful production.[58]

The objective of this aspect of the programme was very simple and is probably best expressed by the Superintendent of the welfare programme at Losperfontein Training Farm. He wrote that

> in our poor whites lie the germs which, unless eradicated, will destroy the domestic, social, religious and political order and the life of our nation.[59]

To be successful, such a programme would require that its participants be carefully selected. It was this process of selection which would become the lot of the Welfare Officer.[60] Selections were carried out by the Welfare Officer who kept careful records and used them to assess the performance and trainability of each settler in his forestry settlement. In particular, each man's ability to carry out hard manual labour and his attitude towards such work was carefully noted. The condition of his home and his wife's work habits and attitudes were also commented on.[61] The Welfare Officer had to get to know his charges in an intimate manner. Welfare work, wrote van der Horst,

---

58. Ibid; These attitudes were the same four years later. See E.J. Scholtz, "Rehabilitation Schemes of the Department of Labour," I, The Social and Industrial Review 7, 1(January, 1929): 27-33.

59. E.J.J. van der Horst, "Welfare Work in Hartebeespoort Area," The Social and Industrial Review 7, 2(February, 1929): 145.

60. For a description of the complete process see Scholtz, Ibid, VII, "Rural Rehabilitation," Social and Industrial Review 7, 3(March, 1929): 226-7.

61. Scholtz, "Rural Rehabilitation," I: 33

> obtrudes itself into domestic life. Domestic life must be sound to ensure happy living conditions....Frequently we have to act as father confessor, peacemaker and adviser - a difficult task but one which contributes to the rehabilitation of these people.[62]

A great deal of emphasis was placed upon the "simple dignity of labour" as a means of "saving" the poor white from himself.[63] Sometimes it was a frustrating process. One welfare worker commented,

> Looking back on the five years of welfare work, one becomes more than ever convinced that the solution of the "poor white" problem lies in the saving of the children. Success with the older generation is the exception. Here and there the grown-ups learn to be neat and abstemious in order to save some money. After contact with them has ceased for a year or two they proceed again along the old mode of living. Very few of them keep up correspondence to say how they are progressing. The children, on the other hand, are amenable to good impressions. The disappointments of life have not yet disheartened them. They have not yet lost courage. The impressions which are being made upon them today will be lasting provided they can be separated from their home surroundings. It is astonishing to see how children will adapt themselves to better surroundings. Seeing them, one could never realize that some of them were brought up in such sad circumstances. Leave them in their surroundings and they are lost for ever. Help them and they become useful citizens.[64]

The programme did, however, have its successes. The Star reported about one family at the Losperfontein Training Farm. After several years of effort, the "trainee-settler" made a profit of a few pounds on his year's work. Although it was

---

62. van der Horst, "Welfare Work": 145.

63. "Hard Work Solves a Poor White Problem," Star 30(October, 1937): 2.

64. Andries van der Merwe, "Welfare Work on a Forestry Settlement: Experiences of a Welfare Officer," The Social and Industrial Review 5, 2(February, 1928): 94.

> pitifully small by the standards of captains of industry, this profit is the crown of victory in one of the toughest battles ever fought on the soil of Africa. The battle of a man and a woman who, first bowled over in a little Karoo irrigation failure years ago, then crushed again by fresh drought losses at Losperfontein in 1932-4, have now met all their obligations to the State and proved their ability to farm 12 morgen of land at a profit, while raising and maintaining a small family in simple decency and comfort.[65]

Perhaps this quotation says it all in the words, "simple decency and comfort."

Conclusions

The rationale for the White Labour Forest Settlement programme can be found in the politics of the day, notably the "poor white" question. The poor white farmers and the white unemployed were viewed by members of the white middle and upper classes as being a distinct threat to their existence. This, they believed, was confirmed by events surrounding the Rand strike and rebellion. Further, it was believed that the poor white group was becoming too close, socially and culturally, to the African majority. In deciding on a policy that would alleviate the poor white problem, a succession of governments from roughly 1913 on allowed themselves to be guided by ideas imported from North America and Europe. The most important of these ideas concerned the concept that the subsistence farmer and his family lived a happy, carefree and culturally rich life on his farm. Although he

---

65. "Hard Work solves a Poor White Problem": 3.

may not have much in the way of material possessions, he and his family were much better off than either the urban elite living a materially successful lifestyle or, in particular, members of the lower classes who had abandoned the land to live in cities. This ancient and pervasive concept has little relationship to reality. So persuasive has the "agrarian myth" been at various times that it has spawned a social phenomena known as the "back to the land" movement.

In South Africa, a number of politicians and the senior civil servants of at least one government department can be identified as adhering to the myth and promoting "back to the land" as a solution to the "poor white" problem. In particular this refers to one of the Prime Ministers of the Union, Jan Smuts, and his Minister of Agriculture, Thomas Smartt. The members of the Pact government also found the myth to be attractive. Unlike the government led by Smuts, which was concerned with moving poor whites back to the land, the Pact government's programme emphasized retraining rural poor whites so as to keep them in rural areas.

At the peak of its development, the forestry programme involved placing poor whites in camps and attempting to radically alter their life style. In the words of one observer, it was a "remarkable social experiment" in which afforestation took second place to the social results.[66] In many ways, it was the reverse of apartheid as we know it today. Instead of the black majority being separated from the white minority, a minority of whites were

---

66. CAD FOR 400 E230/F1/2 White Labour Forestry Settlement, Weza: General, clipping, A.I. Ferraz, "Weza Settlement - 1, A Community in the Forests," Natal Advertiser (16 January 1937).

isolated and attempts made to alter their attitudes and way of life. Members of the Department of Labour and the Department of Social Welfare considered that the welfare officers assigned to the programme had the important task of saving the "Nation" from the threat presented to it by the poor white problem.

Sociologically, the programme was not successful. Settlers rarely stayed more than five years at the settlements which meant that the rate of turn-over was high. There is evidence that the work was so hard that after eight years of employment, a settler would no longer be employable as a labourer, the only job for which they had skills. The available evidence suggests that members of the white working class used the programme as a shelter from unemployment. Many would stay in the settlement to which they had been assigned only as long as other employment opportunities were not available. The need for the programme eventually faded away as employment opportunities increased in the late 1930's. Surveys at the end of the period showed that settlers were little better off when compared with settlers resident at the beginning of the period. The programme therefore had little effect upon the well being of South Africa's poor whites.

In terms of forestry, the programme was successful. Today a significant area of South Africa is afforested and many areas first planted by the programme are on their second or third rotation. Yet, not a single settlement exists in its original format; several have been razed to the ground and planted over while the remainder are used to house Coloured and African workers and their families. The White Labour Forestry Settlement programme has indeed passed into history. It has, however, left

its mark. South Africa is richer as a result of the efforts of the thousands of poor whites who laboured to afforest the veld in the 1920s and 1930s.