

# British Tree Management in Lesotho

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Why have colonial and independent governments sponsored tree planting campaigns in a southern African grassland for more than a hundred years, despite high mortality rates? And how have local residents responded to this tree planting? Pollen analysis shows that the Kingdom of Lesotho has been grassland for the last 23,000 years. Freezing winters that alternate with drought-prone summers have limited indigenous tree growth either to places sheltered from wind, or to the proximity of water sources, for instance, near streams. Early missionaries harvested most of the indigenous trees for construction and fuel, then planted non-native fruit and fuel wood trees in their domestic spaces. Even after environmental constraints were recognised, and after first thousands, and then

millions, of introduced trees died, a series of British administrators and international aid donors continued to advocate planting exotic tree species to solve a variety of perceived problems. The persistence of this activity in the face of obvious failure can only be understood by examining the beliefs held about the virtues of trees – beliefs so strong that they blinded observers to a contrary reality and alternative strategies.

Lesotho became the British Protectorate of Basutoland in 1868, shortly before the first representatives of scientific forestry reached the British Cape Colony to the south. Because of widespread regional concern about drought, the belief in the ability of all trees to induce rainfall, and the preference for any tree over grass vegetation, tree planting was considered to be both morally and environmentally

beneficial. These European-derived attitudes influenced officials in England and Basutoland (as well as regional settler societies and their governments), and persisted in various forms for generations. Arguments justifying Basutoland tree projects changed over time, and ranged from the need to afforest “denuded” hillsides, through the need for trees because of their inherent soil stabilisation capabilities, to the need for trees as sources of fruit, fuel and construction materials.

Those without mythic (or romantic) views of trees were less certain about the efficacy of generalised tree planting. They were more selective in their advocacy of species to be planted, the purpose of the planting, and the location of such planting. A 1908 Cape Forester’s report commented on the rationality of Basotho (residents of Lesotho) choices of tree species and village planting locations, while criticising government plans for mass-afforestation and the establishment of woodlots

in scarce agricultural or grazing land. This divergence of opinion between most Basotho, on the one hand, and most government and aid agency representatives, on the other, persisted throughout the 20th century, resulting in official characterisation of Basotho as disliking trees. However, while campaigns for tree planting were frequently resisted – if not sabotaged – individuals bought, propagated, protected, and planted trees for domestic use. As official justification for tree planting changed (afforestation, soil protection, soil restoration, source of food, fuel and timber), so did the definition of a forest. The 19th century ideal of a forested mountain slope became, in the late 20th century, a woodlot that could be certified as a forest. Basotho were sent to study forestry so they could tend these new reserves. At the beginning of the 21st century, the ideal of a forested slope was resurrected. A government ministry added “Forestry” to its name and announced an official goal of augmenting tree cover by 5% per decade. Yet Lesotho remains a grassland, 20 year old woodlot/forest reserves have had to be replanted because of drought and cold, and Basotho cherish their fruit and fuelwood trees.

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