British Tree Management in Lesotho

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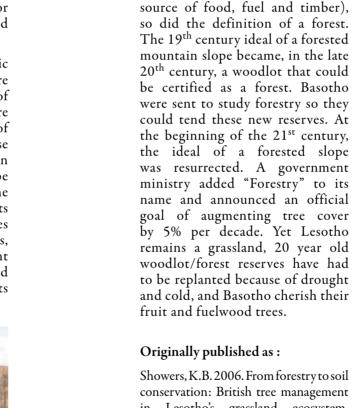
have colonial independent governments sponsored tree planting campaigns in a southern African grassland for more than a hundred years, despite high mortality rates? And how have local residents responded to this tree planting? Pollen analysis shows that the Kingdom of Lesotho has been grassland for the 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 trees as sources of fruit, fuel and 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 species to be planted, the purpose representatives of scientific forestry reached the British Cape Colony to of such planting. A 1908 Cape the south. Because of widespread regional concern about drought, rationality of Basotho (residents the belief in the ability of all trees to of Lesotho) choices of tree species induce rainfall, and the preference and village planting locations, for any tree over grass vegetation, while criticising government tree planting was considered to be plans for mass-afforestation and both morally and environmentally the establishment of woodlots

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 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 of the planting, and the location Forester's report commented on the



conservation: British tree management in Lesotho's grassland ecosystem. Conservation and Society 4(1):1-35.

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,

planted trees for domestic use.

As official justification for tree

planting changed (afforestation,

soil protection, soil restoration,

and

propagated, protected,

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