

Extracts from Vincent Report of 1887

In the Tenth Progress Report of the Royal Commission on State Forests and Timber Reserves, published in 1900, there are passages quoted from an 1887 report by Vincent (a Conservator of the Indian Forests Service) about Victoria's Forests. This is the report that the Government declined to publish, and which has still not been found in complete form during the research for this website.

Some thirteen years ago Mr. Vincent, a Conservator on the Indian Forests staff, was intrusted by the Government then in power in Victoria with the duty of examining and reporting on our chief timber areas. He appears to have made a painstaking inspection of some of the best reserves, and he prepared a valuable report on the working of the forests, from which we cite the following passages:-

"The terms on which licences are issued here are chiefly to blame for the waste and destruction which have gone on everywhere. The working of forests by issuing licences or permits is, of course, nothing new, having been tried, and in turn abandoned, in nearly every British dependency; but elsewhere the licences are only issued for cutting a certain number of trees and the removal of the produce. In Victoria the licence-holder has virtually the right to cut as many trees as he chooses, to remove them or abandon them; he has the right to range in the forest at will during the currency of his licence. Little restriction is shown in the number issued. Those for sawmills are issued freely, provided the proposed site of the mill is not too close to that of another man, and work is allowed to go on all over the forest as if the sole object of Government was to get rid of all the wood as rapidly as possible, and there were no such thing as a future. The splitters' licences are issued to all comers by the local receiver of revenue, who rarely consults the local forest officer as to whether a licence should be given, or informs him of the licences issued. Looked at from either the stand-point of the revenue collector or that of the forest conservator, the licence arrangements appear equally bad, and I do not think that anyone could have seriously intended them as a protection to the forest, or to the revenue. Their effect on the forest is quite beyond my powers to describe properly, and I can only repeat that fully three-fourths of the standing timber-of the trunks, not of the branches - has been wasted.

The following facts speak for themselves:

- 1. The number of sawmills is increasing, while none of the older millers are going out of it.*
- 2. The mills are able to pay much higher prices for timber cut in New South Wales, and they are most anxious to get it.*

The fact of their complaining of hard times, and of their demanding further concessions, implies nothing. It costs nothing to form a deputation and to address the Minister with arguments, which everyone acquainted with the subject, knows to be preposterous and false, whilst as experience shows, it often leads to something.

At present public interests suffer to benefit only a few individuals who are engaged in timber work, and who take advantage of the incomplete state of the law. The forests can only receive proper treatment when regarded from the stand-point of a large national property, which we are bound to maintain in a state of unimpaired productiveness for the benefit of the present and future generations.

The reason why operations do not pay here is that the State does not receive a fair royalty on the wood cut. The royalty, instead of being a fixed proportion on the sale value (say, 10 to 25 per cent ..), is, as I have shown, a nominal charge only. In addition, nothing is paid for the gross waste of wood which does not occur elsewhere, steps being taken to utilize it all. I am convinced that forest operations ought to pay here extremely well. The growth and vitality of the eucalyptus are most remarkable. I know of no other country where the work intelligently conducted can be done so cheaply. It is only necessary to levy a fair charge on the produce removed to provide funds ample for all the operations, and to produce before long considerable net revenue."
