

A survey of Turkish forestry

By

Prof. Dr. Faik TAVŞANOĞLU

(Istanbul)

Turkey is primarily a country based on agriculture and forests. This is determined by natural factors, such as the climate and the shape of the land. In Turkey, forests are found in the mountainous regions and agriculture takes place in the plains and the valleys.

It is only by conforming to this natural order and by perpetuating it, that we can make the best use of our land. Unfortunately, up to now, all the efforts made have been directed, consciously or unconsciously, at disrupting this order.

On the one hand, the forests in mountainous regions have been greatly depleted so as to make room there for agricultural activities and in so doing, the upper layer of fertile soil covering the ground has been left to slide away, thus making the region unsuitable for agriculture. On the other hand, this gradual shifting of the soil has started to fill the riverbeds and has thus disrupted watering and irrigation in the valleys and the plains, depriving them to a large extent of their former fertility.

Because of all this, the recovery of agriculture in Turkey has entered a difficult and complicated phase, while many forests have been completely lost. Another consequence has been that the supply of fuel in many villages and towns has, since a good many years, become one of the thorniest of Turkish problems.

This is why the forestry question has been, for a long time, one of the outstanding social problems of Turkey. During the period of the Republic, the importance of this problem was at first clearly recognised, efforts were made to improve the forests, European and Turkish experts were asked to study all the subjects connected with forestry. Their reports were taken into account in preparing the Forest Bill which was enacted some ten years ago.

But although ten years have elapsed since the adoption of this Bill, the solution of the whole problem is still far from being reached. This

is because the application of the Forest Bill in practice, as has been the fate of many other laws, has not been true to the spirit of the law, and our forest policy has continued to be directed at the immediate and maximum exploitation of forests. The clauses in the new Bill concerning the direct exploitation of forests and the revenue to be derived from them have been applied in full, while the clauses of great social value, connected with the preservation and the development of forests, have been completely neglected.

It is significant that as far back as 1938, the first year of the Bill's application, some of its important clauses were modified for political reasons and with a view to a more intensive exploitation. Thus, contrary to what was believed at the time, it appeared that the new Bill was not founded on fixed principles and that, if need be, its provisions could be relaxed.

Of the two important conditions at the basis of scientific forestry, namely, the exact determination of frontier forests and the establishment of forest maps, the first was taken up half-heartedly and up to now, the frontiers of only 3 million of hectares of forests have been determined and registered. But, because of lack of land and poor fertility of the soil, peasants living in the forest regions have continuously ignored and are still ignoring the ownership rights of the State in the forests. Thus they are cutting down trees, opening new ground for cultivation in the forests and sending unwatched animals to graze in the forest, etc. The courts are overwhelmed with lawsuits arising out of these matters, and the end of the whole thing seems to be bound up to the final disappearance of all forests. This becomes clear if one considers that the clauses providing for the removal of villages in and around the forests to other places suitable to normal agriculture have remained a dead letter and that there is no sign of any intention of applying them. As to the task of establishing forest maps, this has not even been tackled so far, because, apart from the fact that it involves large expenditures, the frontiers of forests are changing and are narrowing everyday.

The question of pastures and grazing has also not been settled in any way. The clause providing that no animals which are a danger to trees, such as goats and camels, can enter the forests has long been forgotten. There was an attempt at reviving it, but owing to the partly faked outcry which followed this, vague official declarations were made to the effect that the parts of forests open to grazing animals would be determined, that these would consist partly of grown forests and partly of bushland. Since then, this matter has received no further attention.

Planting of new trees inside and outside forests has never been carried further than a purely symbolic stage. No forests have been declared a closed area as a precautionary measure against the dangers of landslides, inundations or avalanches.

Again no progress has been made in the planting of trees in villages or municipal precincts and in spreading a love for trees among the younger generation. The trees planted during the symbolic tree festivals held every year, have all been lost owing to neglect.

The exploitation of forests has not proceeded according to scientific forestry methods. This has been left entirely to private contractors with no aim other than their own profit.

The Bill providing for the nationalisation of forests has not, in practice, yielded the expected results. Just before the Bill was passed, private owners of forests have tried to save what they could by burning their forests or by cutting them down, and turning them into open fields and have thus managed to keep their property. Here or there, forests which passed into the neglectful hands of the State have fallen victim to the greedy appetite of a small profiteering clique.

On the other hand, the cutting of trees proceeded at an intensified pace throughout the war till the present day. Timber for military and civil buildings, for poles used in telegraph and telephone communications and wood for heating purposes as well as the requirements of the İzmit paper and the Büyükdere match factory, originally to be provided from outside sources, were all met from such forests as existed within Turkey.

The demand for wooden bars and poles arising out of the increasing activity of the railways and out of the daily augmenting needs of the coal-mines have also been met by squeezing further the already hard-pressed national forests.

It can be seen that, while, since the adoption of the Forest Bill, no serious steps have been taken to preserve, improve and develop the forests, all throughout this period, the destructive and ruinous exploitation of forests has continued to take place.

Many foreign and Turkish experts have contributed reports and articles containing suggestions for changing the present state of forestry in Turkey. These can be summarised as follows:

1. While, on one hand, exploitation of forests should proceed along reasonable lines and according to scientific principles, the forests should also be finally separated from agricultural land and the ownership rights of the state over the forests should be acknowledged.

2. Forests situated on steep ground where there are dangers of inundations, landslides and avalanches, should be finally declared closed areas.

3. In conformity to the interrelated clauses of the Forest and Land bills, the villages in and around the forests should be moved to places suitable for agriculture and the villagers involved in this transfer should be helped to set up new agricultural enterprises.

4. The clauses of the Forest Bill concerning grazing should be put into practice.

5. The Fuel Bill should also be strictly applied and the heating of towns with more than 2000 inhabitants should be provided from the following sources: coal, anthracite, gas and electricity.

6. The public should be encouraged to plant and grow more trees. Every facility must be given in this respect and subsidies paid to those who are successful.

7. The afforestation by the State, of places which have been denuded of trees, inside and outside the remaining forests should start immediately. In this respect, priority should be given to districts where there exist dangers of avalanches, inundations and landslides.

There is no doubt that the improvement of existing forests and the afforestation of new districts are difficult and costly operations. On the other side, the resources of the country are scanty. However, this state of affairs should not be the reason for a continuation of the present passive and indifferent attitude towards forestry problems. This question should be brought under a long term development plan and the first steps should at least be taken towards the implementation of this program.

It is learnt that the scope of the 5 year agricultural development program based on Marshall Aid funds will extend to the forests. We surmise from this that the government appears to be taking at last, a more constructive approach to forestry questions and hope that this will prove to be the beginning of a planned solution of the problem.
