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"Degrading Land: An Environmental History Perspective of the Cape Verde Islands"

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The sources discussed in this paper provide evidence of catastrophic degradation of the land and vegetation of these islands: from a dry but 'well-wooded' savanna with 'great quantity of grass', and 'streamlets of water' at the time of colonisation to a near desert landscape today, especially at the lower altitudes. A major cause of this degradation, perhaps indirect but still decisive, may have been a political and economic system that permitted an appallingly shortsighted exploitation of the land. The major direct mechanism of this process was probably overexploitation of the vegetation-cover by people and their goats. Despite the evidence for human causes behind this ecological disaster, the possibility cannot be excluded that there has also been a change in climate purely due to physical causes. If, however, the first colonisers had been conscious of the fragility of the ecosystem they came to occupy, these islands could still have profited from the advantages of a dry savanna with trees and a continuous grass cover, as do the Bermudas, which have remained a 'terrestrial paradise' thanks to the protection of the cedar forests since their first settlement in 1622. The reason why the 'fortunate' islands of Cape Verde should be reafforested thus becomes evident. All rights reserved. © 1996 The White Horse Press

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