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"Green Colonialism and Forest Policies in South India, 1800-1900"

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British colonial rule and its impact on the environment of the Indian sub-continent has made for a fascinating historical research subject over the last three decades. While exploitation of forests and the socio-economic impact of the process on tribal and other forest-dependent communities are well documented, the role of scientific discourse in facilitating the hegemonic control of the colonial state over forests had not been adequately treated in the existing literature. This article looks at the history of colonial forest policies in South India to argue that initially British destroyed most the accessible forests by logging them for ship-building, railways and the requirements of the military and public works departments. When the sustainability of the wood supply emerged as a problem, desiccationist ideas began to be systematically propagated. The desiccationist discourse branded forest utilisation by the natives as the main culprit for deforestation and the consequent reduction of the water flow of some rivers in South India. This alarmist discourse facilitated the control of the colonial state over most of the forests in South India by establishing a rhetoric of the preservation of forests as a means to save the environment and irrigation as prerequisites for the well-being of the agrarian economy. This article illustrates how desiccationist fears were used to justify the colonial state's monopolistic control over the forests of South India.

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