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"Toiling in Paradise: Knowledge Acquisition in the Context of Colonial Agriculture in Brazil's Atlantic Forest"

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Four centuries of colonial extraction lead to severe ecological degradation of the forests and soils of the Atlantic region of Brazil. After an overview of the history of colonial plantation agriculture, we discuss the knowledge developed in this context. Over the course of time, several agricultural manuals were published for or in the colony. Landowners recommended agricultural techniques developed for European temperate climates, but also included their local experience. Indigenous knowledge about cultivation was not suitable for the extractive colonial system and therefore played little role in colonial agriculture. Based on agricultural manuals published in Brazil over a period of more than two centuries, we discuss the management of soil fertility and the relationship between agricultural practices and forest stands. The process of acquisition and distribution of agronomic knowledge by Brazilian authors was slow during the colonial period. The strongest point in common among the authors was their concern with the preservation of forests. Their soil classification systems show clear evidence of indigenous influence. The agricultural manuals have not been studied explicitly as sources for the environmental history of Brazil. Therefore, we studied some of the particular ecological circumstances of their writing. The Atlantic forest does gain substantial nutrients from rainwater, a fact the authors allude to in their recommendations. At least one author developed plant indicators using native species. Although written in a colonial context, Brazilian agronomic literature was full of recommendations for a sustainable use of Brazil's biodiversity, and argued against the devastation wrought by colonial exploitation.

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