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"Thomas Potts and the Forest Question: Conservation and Development in New Zealand in the 1860s"

Star, Paul

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In New Zealand in the 1860s, concern for the native environment was primarily an aspect of concern for colonial development, and conservation of native forests was primarily a counterpoint to exotic tree-planting. The advent of native forest conservation in the Colony has been traced back to a demand made in 1868 by Thomas Potts, that government consider "the present condition of the forests." This article closely examines the situation in the province where Potts lived, in the decade before the New Zealand Forests Act of 1874, to find out what sparked this kind of initiative. What Potts and others expressed in the 1860s was grounded in what they themselves experienced: forest and fire, waste and shortage, development and opportunity. By the 1870s, Potts doubted the effectiveness of legislative solutions and his response to timber shortage focused more on exotic tree-planting than on saving existing forest. This article affirms the importance, in a New Zealand context, of considering exotic plantation alongside native forest conservation. Turning to the broader picture, the evidence presented suggests that both local determinants and exotic tree-planting have been understudied by environmental historians, while aspects of conservation more readily associable with environmentalism and preservation may have been overstressed. (Text adapted from the author's abstract)

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