

REVIEW: THE COCONUT

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IN this monograph, the author gives a somewhat unusual account of the coconut palm in condensed form. He first discusses the conflicting theories regarding the method of dispersal of the crop in the equatorial belt and concludes that "by far the most active agent in spreading the coconut palm must have been man. Inland every tree owes its existence to man; on the coast most of them." He thus dismisses the time-honoured fallacy that ocean currents were the principal means of dispersal of coconuts throughout the tropics.

With regard to the original home of the coconut and after reviewing the available evidence he concludes that the coconut palm is probably of Malayo-Polynesian origin and that the fruit was carried from there by man to the Pacific coast of Panama long before the discovery of America by Columbus, after which its dispersal about the Atlantic coasts was due to European seamen and merchant explorers.

He assesses the total world acreage under coconuts as being not less than 10 million acres, carrying 500 million palms with an annual production of about three million tons of coconut oil. This he calculates is sufficient to provide a fat ration of 40 lbs. per head per annum to 7 per cent. of the world's population.

Of the total world production of coconut oil, he considers that roughly half is consumed, mostly domestically, in countries of origin and the other half,—the exportable surplus enters world trade. It seems probable that this assessment of the position is now out of date; actually in 1951, only a little more than a third of the estimated total world production was exported from coconut-producing countries. The position is deteriorating because of the increase in population in these countries. India, formerly the leading coconut-producing country, now consumes all its own production and has instead become a considerable nett importer of coconuts and coconut products as the total production is equivalent now to only 10 nuts per head per annum whereas the corresponding figure for Ceylon is 300 nuts per head per annum.

He concludes that "the importance of the coconut palm both in the external and internal economy of producing countries has been increasingly realised and research on agricultural and technological improvement is being actively pursued in India, Ceylon, Indonesia, the Philippines and elsewhere." By the application in all coconut growing countries of existing technical information and by research on local problems, he considers that the world's fat supplies could be increased by several hundred thousand tons.

This, however, is not enough; human reproduction is outstripping production. In Ceylon if the present rate of population increase is maintained, the population will double itself in the next 30 years. This means that if the exports of coconuts and coconut products are to be maintained, if the domestic consumption of coconuts is to be maintained at its present level and if in other words, the standard of living is to be maintained, it will be also necessary to double the present crop of coconuts and produce two nuts where only one is obtained today.

The Ceylon Government is fully alive to the seriousness of the situation. The Coconut Rehabilitation Project and the establishment of the Isolated Seed Garden for the production of pedigree seed nuts will provide the answer. Together they will probably represent the main contribution of this country to world stability in return for aid received under the Colombo Plan Scheme for Technical Co-operation.