

that kauri-gum is a unique article among gums, inasmuch as it has good qualities not found among other gums; but it stands unique also in this respect, that it is the only product which has been practically allowed to be abstracted from Crown lands without being paid for.

5. The persons engaged in procuring the gum from the soil may be divided into three classes, namely: the diggers proper, who entirely depend for a living upon the gum; the settlers, who, as a rule, only occasionally work on the gumfields to supplement their earnings from the land; and the Maoris, who take to gum-digging only when their crops prove a failure or their stock of provisions gets exhausted. The mode of working is invariably that with spear and spade, and, except in the case of the Austrians, regarding whom particulars will be given in a subsequent part of this report, there is no combination of labour, but every man works for himself.

6. For digging gum on Crown lands a license-fee of 5s. has been charged in years past. The collection of this fee was left to the several County Councils. These, however, with one exception—that of the Hobson County Council—abandoned the collection, as they found that the cost of doing so amounted to as much, and in some cases to more, than the sums collected; moreover, the Collector of the Hobson County, in his evidence, after enumerating the many difficulties he had to encounter in trying to obtain payment of this fee, expressed his opinion that the revenue derivable therefrom was not worth collection.

7. For the right to dig gum on private lands or on Native lands various systems of charges are in vogue. In most cases payment of a fee ranging from £1 to £7 10s. per annum is the condition of being permitted to dig gum; but, in the case of those holders of private lands who are storekeepers, the usual arrangement is that the gum-digger working on such lands must sell his gum and obtain his provisions or stores from these storekeepers. A great deal of gum-digging is carried on upon lands owned by absentees but administered by agents in the colony, and your Commissioners have been urged to recommend the Government to acquire these lands by repurchase, for the benefit of the industry. It is a matter to be deplored that these gum-lands have ever been parted with; but, seeing that they are now being worked for gum, we cannot perceive the necessity of the country incurring a large expenditure for the purpose of simply enabling a few hundred diggers to obtain gum therefrom without paying an annual fee to the agent of the absentee. Wherever these absentee lands contain a fair proportion of cultivable land fit for settlement, we are, however, of opinion that Government should avail itself of the opportunity given of obtaining it for that purpose at a reasonable cost per acre, and so give the diggers employed thereabout the opportunity of establishing a permanent home for themselves. There are also other lands owned by non-residents, from which gum-diggers have removed and are removing quantities of gum, apparently under the idea that non-interference in the past constitutes a right under which they can help themselves to the gum and sell it to the storekeeper.

8. The great drawback to settlement in most parts of the country north of Auckland is the scattered nature of the really good settlement-lands. Generally speaking the good land is in the valleys, and is of comparatively small extent: 5,000 acres here, then a stretch of perhaps ten miles of poor pipeclay gum-lands, next, 6,000 acres of fair settlement-lands, and again a stretch of fifteen miles of pipeclay lands, and so on: thus necessitating many miles of roads to connect the various settlements. The first requirement for successful settlement, next to good quality of soil, is the road communication, and this is kept in the worst possible state through the damage and mischief done to the roads by the gum-traffic. The state of these roads in winter time is bad beyond description. The Kauri-gum Industry Inquiry Commission that reported in 1893 stated as follows:—

The present desperate condition of the northern roads is due chiefly to the gum traffic, including under that term the cartage of stores to the fields, as well as of gum from them. Other causes, such as, in some parts, the cartage of timber, have their share in the mischief, but the gum is chiefly responsible. In the Maori parts of the district the surface of the ground which is supposed to indicate a line of road is reduced to a state scarcely describable, by the use of bullock-drays, which, in proportion as they destroy the roads, require the services of a more numerous team of bullocks, and by this means the mischief is continually augmented. Some particulars relating to this subject may be found in various parts of the evidence; but it would be very difficult to pen any description which would enable the state of the roads to be realised. It is sufficient to say that their condition is now such as to render nugatory any prospect for future settlement which the North might otherwise have; that it largely increases the cost of carriage, and so renders living much more onerous to the gum-digger as well as the settler; that it wears out and destroys to a lamentable extent the live-stock, to say nothing of the men engaged in the work of conveyance; that the county authorities and Road Boards have no adequate means of improving it, but are obliged to leave it a permanent and hopeless impediment to the progress and prosperity of the country.