

Prior to the passing of the Kauri-gum Industry Act, 1898, there was no restriction of any sort on the gum-digger, neither was there any special interest taken in his welfare, nor was there any attempt to exercise any control over the lands affected by his operations. The Act of 1898 provided for the constitution of kauri-gum districts; the setting-apart of kauri-gum reserves; authorized specified local bodies to issue gum-diggers' licenses; and made provision for small residential areas on the gum reserves. In effect the Act practically handed over the administration of the lands to the local bodies.

Since 1898 various amendments have been made of the principal Act, mainly affecting the issue of licenses, but no provision has been made up to the present time, either by Act or regulations, specifying the manner in which gum-digging should be carried on on the Crown lands, nor have any measures been taken to ensure that the land should be dealt with in such a way that it would not be deteriorated for farming purposes after all the gum had been dug out. The effect of such apathy is appalling, and the gumfields of the Crown present to-day a spectacle at once depressing and deplorable. On large areas of the flat lands and swamps holes have been dug to depths ranging from 3 ft. to 15 ft. These holes are of all sizes and shapes, and when it is considered that in some cases there are as many as two hundred of such holes to the acre it will be realized that the land which has been so treated is in its present condition almost if not altogether useless for farming purposes.

The unrestricted digging of holes by the digger which he is under no obligation to fill in does not represent the full measure of the injury done to the lands in consequence of the want of foresight and proper control in the past. The manuka and other vegetation growing on the lands has been fired year after year by the digger, and at all seasons. The consequences have been that great injury to the land has resulted. The effect of the successive fires on the shallow lands has been to destroy the humus and surface soils, while in the case of many peat flats and swamps the fires have gutted them almost to the water-level, and have not only done irreparable injury to the land, but have destroyed gum-deposits of very considerable value. It may be noted here that the well-considered opinion of the gum-digger is that this indiscriminate firing must be stopped, as much in the interests of the gum-digger as of the State.

SOME CONTRASTS IN MANAGEMENT.

He would be a most indifferent private individual who would have allowed his land to be dealt with in such a manner. If the private owner ever did allow his lands to be so injuriously dealt with he has long since acquired wisdom. The State, however, has failed to profit by experience, and the serious injury to the lands is still proceeding.

At Lower Ruakaka, near Waipu, a good illustration is afforded of the difference in management of gum lands by the private individual and by the State. There Mr. D. Bowmar has an area of gum-bearing flat land which he is now proceeding to develop, and this is how he set to work. He first thoroughly drained the land; he next let the gum-digging on a substantial royalty, the conditions of the digging contract being that the digger is required to dig the land "on a face"; or, in cases where the land is not sufficiently rich in gum to warrant such treatment, then and in any such case any holes the digger may make in the course of his operations are to be filled in, and all logs, roots, and stumps met with in the course of the excavations have to be thrown up on the surface of the ground, thus leaving the land in a suitable condition for the succeeding farming operations.

On the kauri-gum reserve adjoining, where the land is in all respects similar to Mr. Bowmar's, there are no restrictions of any sort, and the consequence is that the land has been deeply potholed all over, and so rendered to a very large extent unfit for farming purposes. The result is that on the one hand Mr. Bowmar will derive sufficient revenue from the gum in the land to pay the expenses of development, and the land will be worth not less than £10 an acre, and will be in a suitable state for farming purposes. On the other hand the State has received merely a nominal sum from the gum-digger for his annual license fee, and the land is left an almost useless wilderness.