

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST COPRA CUTTING.

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It is remarkable that, despite the continued discussion of coco-nut planting in all its branches, from the planting of the seed nut to the drying, inspecting and marketing of copra, there is one stage of the industry that has received very little attention. I refer to the preparation of the green meat for drying or, as we term it, copra cutting.

The present system (except among those few who have adopted the "Ceylon Drier") is, indeed, practically taken for granted, and it is not generally realized that we have unwittingly adopted what is merely a slovenly native method: a method that is a relic of the days when the European was a trader and collector rather than the planter and producer. It is a method unknown anywhere but in the South Seas and it is, I suggest, the main reason why the copra from those parts has been relegated to its lowly position on the world's markets.

The co-operative efforts of planters and copra inspectors have raised the price of Rabaul Hot Air copra to an average of about 20s. above that bedrock price, but we are still a very long way down the list. In brief, Rabaul Hot Air, the best of the "cut" copras, is still below the worst sun or hot air dried copra produced from the half nut. Below (it must be emphasized) copra produced in countries where the industry is almost entirely in the hands of natives.

Fully 90 per cent. of the copra shipped from this Territory is produced under direct European supervision which is a far larger proportion than elsewhere. We have the advantages of good driers, a high standard of plantation management, and a sound system of inspection. If *all* the stages of production were brought up to date there is no reason why our copra should not rank among the leaders.

There are three outstanding reasons why the "half nut system" produces better copra.

No sweating of copra in bags. Under present conditions a large amount of copra reaches the drier in a hot, slimy state. Half nuts can be placed on the drier as soon as broken.

No sweating in the drier. Hot air can circulate through loosely piled half nuts better than through even a thin layer of cut copra.

Elimination of dust and small pieces. A constant cause of complaint by buyers.

In addition to the improvement in quality, there are these further advantages.

No loss in the field. Under the present system this loss probably varies from over 5 per cent. to 2 per cent., according to the efficiency of the cutters and the strictness of their supervision. But some waste always occurs—the excellent condition of the plantation pigs (and of the kanaka pigs from villages adjoining) testifies to this.

Less loss in the drier. This is least in hot air driers with moveable trays, but even there is probably as much as 2 per cent. On smoke driers and those types of kilns where the copra is trampled on and turned with shovels it is undoubtedly very much larger. There is also an appreciable loss in the form of dust and sweepings when bagging.

(Careful and impartial tests under plantation conditions would be necessary to form an accurate estimate of the total avoidable waste caused by copra cutting. The writer's own experiments and observations have convinced him that the average is in excess of 5 per cent. Nor can this percentage be considered petty since it represents, on an average year's total production, about 3,000 tons - a very worthwhile saving.)

Better fuel. Any manager, whether employing kilns or smoke driers, who has suffered one wet season is eloquent on the difficulties and delays caused by sodden husks.

Less soil exhaustion. Husks are a wasteful and inefficient fuel but (without the shell) form a useful mulch and a valuable source of humus.

Fewer mosquitoes. Every half husk, with shell attached, is a potential mosquito breeder. Without the shell they are harmless.

It is realized that a change from the existing method will involve some difficulties, particularly in the initial stages. No attempt to alter the methods and habits of our conservative minded labour is ever easy, but it is felt that the benefits outlined above will well repay the trouble.

There would no doubt be a slight increase in the cost of production at the outset, but this should gradually disappear as the labourers become more adept.

Except for the saving of waste before mentioned, the financial benefits would not be immediately apparent: the results would be gradual as was the case when copra inspection was first instituted. Indeed it might even be necessary to class copra so prepared in a separate, higher grade. But such copra should eventually reach the price standard of Ceylon—and the stigma "South Seas" be, at last, definitely removed from copra produced in this Territory.
