

Ecology And Reclamation Of Devastated Land

Book reviews

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Ecology and Reclamation of Devastated Land. Edited by RUSSELL J. HUTNIK and GRANT DAVIS. (Gordon & Breach, London, 1973.) Volume 1, pp. 538, £15; Volume 2, pp. 504, £14.15; set £25.

The growth of world population and the desire of that population to enjoy a higher standard of living have drawn attention to the shortage of land in most advanced countries. Industrial development and better housing are removing some 50,000 acres from farms in Britain alone every year. We therefore need to use every remaining acre to its best advantage. Although most advanced countries no longer tolerate the devastation from coal tips and industrial workings that occurred in the nineteenth century, and many developers (e.g. open cast or 'strip' miners of coal) are legally under an obligation to try to restore their territory to its former beauty and productivity, such restoration is often unsuccessful. Also we still have the legacy of Victorian economic *laissez faire* in the hundreds of acres of hideous and unproductive wastes, often adjacent to areas of high population where amenities are in most need of improvement. There has been a great deal of research in recent years on the problems of restoring devastated land, and many successful schemes have been carried out. The results of these successes can be seen, for instance where coal tips have been landscaped and successfully grassed and planted with trees in County Durham in the north of England. In fact the most successful cases are so apparently-natural that, except to the expert, they will not be recognized for what they are. However, many schemes have proved so costly that authorities are reluctant to tackle their own areas, and even where funds are available scientific expertise is not always sufficient to ensure success.

The main difficulty is that almost every devastated area is unique. Those resulting from the extraction of metals such as lead, zinc, or tin may contain levels of these elements which totally prevent the normal growth of grass or trees. Some spoil from mines, or ash from power stations, may have a structure impenetrable to roots. The easiest cases are spoils which only lack nutrients, and which after fertilization support good growth. In some cases, once an initial plant cover can be encouraged, the natural processes of soil genesis ensure that the situation improves, while in others there is no depth of soil and we have the situation of the 'stony places' described in the parable, where the seed 'sprung up . . . and, because they had no root, they withered away.'

In August 1969, some 101 scientists from fourteen countries, met and discussed these problems for a fortnight in Pennsylvania, USA. Some sixty-six separate papers were read, and they are reproduced in this volume together with the discussion which followed each contribution. The costs of the conference were met by a grant from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The papers are grouped into seven sections. The first illustrates the chemical and physical problems encountered in the different types of devastated area, e.g. clay mining, toxic metal extraction, fuel ash, coal spoil. The second describes the hydro-

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