

Miner-Farmer Struggles and the Rise of Conservation Practices in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1940-1961

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This paper extends existing research into farmer-miner struggles and contestation over natural resources in colonial Zimbabwe. Building on previous work, which looked at disputes between farmers and miners over timber, water, grazing rights and land degradation caused by mining operations on the mineral-rich Gold Belt during the period 1903-39, it looks at how these conflicts, both intra-class and intra-racial in nature, evolved after the Mcllwaine Report of the Commission to Enquire into the Preservation of Natural Resources of the Colony, 1939. Rather than providing a platform for the solution of the dispute, the conflict raged on for another two decades (i.e. until 1961 when a compromise Mines and Minerals Bill was enacted) despite the establishment of the Natural Resources Board (NRB) in 1941 which spent the first two decades of its existence arbitrating the conflict between the two pillars of Rhodesian economy. This paper, therefore, explores how the farmer-miner conflict unfolded beyond the Mcllwaine Commission, how the NRB, which represented the first serious attempt by the Southern Rhodesian state to institute an environmentally-conscious regime after a 40 year lethargy, came into being, and how the conflict was resolved.

The paper argues that, more than anything, the farmer-miner controversy was at the centre of the emergence of environmentalism in colonial Zimbabwe, albeit, a racially skewed process which sought to regulate the deleterious impact of both mining and farming practices on environmental resources and the physical landscape largely for the sustenance of the white settler community at the expense of the African community. The paper explores the emergence and activities of the NRB in attempting to arrest the destructive ruination of natural resources by both miners and farmers. The paper also looks at how environmental legislation on the control of natural resource exploitation such as the Forest Act No. 37 of 1949, and the Mining Timber Permit Board, established in terms of section 15 of this Act in 1950 reined in wasteful methods of resource extraction. By so doing, the paper attempts to bring into sharp relief the 'declensionist' or 'degradation' narratives, which colonial officials purposefully weaved and employed them to blame indigenous Africans for not living lightly on the land in order to justify all sorts of interventions repeatedly couched in developmental epithets. Yet, the mining and agricultural sectors of the economy, the major consumers of timber, were the major culprits who, in pursuit of their capitalist agendas, hardly demonstrated a semblance of environmental consciousness.