The Economy of New Caledonia*

By

John Wesley COULTER**

The economy of New Caledonia is in a precarious condition. Economic problems preoccupy the minds of leaders in that territory, in business, in the local legislature, and those in France who are responsible for the development of her territories overseas. The standard of living is based on the production of minerals of which one, nickel, is by far the most important. World competition for markets much nearer the sources of supply than are those of New Caledonia makes the future of mining in that far flung island of France uncertain.

Situated 12,500 miles from the mother country, between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Equator, in the south-west Pacific, New Caledonia is part of a large group of archipelagoes which geographers call Melanesia. The archipelago is made up of three elements, La Grande-Terre (The Big Island), the Loyalty Islands and the Chesterfield Islands. New Caledonia is by far the largest; it is also the most densely populated and the richest. The island is 230 miles long and averages about 28 miles wide; its area is 6,533 square miles. It is surrounded by a great barrier reef from five to ten miles offshore, between which there is a lagoon good for fishing and safe for navigation. The Big Island includes the Isle of Pines on the south and on the north the Belep archipelago and the Entrecasteaux reefs.

The Loyalty Islands, parallel to New Caledonia about 60 miles to the east, include Maré, Lifou and Ouvea, the three more important. All together they have an area of about 770 square miles. The Chesterfield Islands about 250 miles west, in the Coral Sea, are coral formations, uninhabited.

The dominant feature of the location of New Caledonia (until the development of aviation) is its isolation. It is not only far from France but also 6000 miles from the United States, about 4400 miles from Japan, 1000 miles from New Zealand, and 900 miles from Australia.

The Natural Environment***

The island is very mountainous, with a succession of ranges all the way from the north to the south, many of them over 3000 feet; lesser chains project from the main ranges. The highlands on the east are near the coast, those on the west farther back. The east coast is rocky and the

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* This article is based on field work in New Caledonia and other archipelagoes in the South Pacific from June to September, 1960. The work was made possible by a grant in aid from the Association of American Geographers combined with one from the Graduate School of the University of Cincinnati. The main part of the study will be published elsewhere. The author acknowledges assistance from Jacques Barrau, chief of the Economic Development Section of the South Pacific Commission both in the field work, and in assembling the data for the maps showing natural vegetation and land use. The maps of coffee, coconuts and cattle are by courtesy of the editor of the Revue Agricole de la Nouvelle Calédonie.

** Emeritus Professor, University of Cincinnati.

ocean has invaded the estuaries of the rivers; in contrast the west side has a coastal plain the ocean border of which is marshy with many mangrove swamps. The barrier reef all around is interrupted at the mouths of the rivers, for the corals cannot live in fresh or muddy water; so there are passes through which ships can enter the lagoon. These are more numerous on the east than on the west.

Although New Caledonia is situated within the tropics, the nature of the relief and the direction of the dominant winds have markedly affected the climate. February is the warmest month with maximum temperatures of about 90°F, and August the least warm with the higher temperatures 83° or 84°. As in all lands in these latitudes, the difference between the longest and shortest days in the year is only about an hour.

The relief has an important effect on precipitation. The east coast, exposed to the trade winds, receives twice as much rainfall as the west coast. (Fig. 1) At Yaté, in the south east, it rains on 200 days a year for a total of about 120 inches. The west coast, sheltered by the mountains, does not get more than 40 inches. Summer is the rainy season, especially March; September and November are the drier months. Heavy rains from time to time cause serious floods along the rivers, many of which are intrenched in deep valleys. Nearly all of them flow in east-west or west-east directions from the crests of the mountains to the ocean.

The author in the field identified four groups of natural vegetation (Fig. 2): the true forest exemplified by the *kaori* and other resinous trees, by tree ferns and palms and, along the coast, banian, santal and an indigenous species of pine tree. Savanna or long grass is the most widespread on the island; it is really park land, for an endemic tree, the *niaouli* is scattered all through it. Thickets of lantana and guava have also developed on the grassland. The area classified as mining has a vegetation of maquis or chapparal,—a stunted growth of gaiac, iron wood and ferns. Mangrove grows thickly in swamp land at the mouths of rivers.

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![Fig. 1. Precipitation in New Caledonia](image-url)
The Economy of New Caledonia

Population

The growth of population on the island has been slow as shown by the following table, 54,400 in 1901, and 65,000 in 1956.

Table I. Population of New Caledonia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1956</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>22,750</td>
<td>22,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natives</td>
<td>29,100</td>
<td>35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other foreigners</td>
<td>2,550</td>
<td>7,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>54,400</strong></td>
<td><strong>65,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following table gives the population on December 31, 1960.

Table II. Population of New Caledonia, 1960

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europeans and others with</td>
<td>27,698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natives</td>
<td>39,222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>4,246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesians</td>
<td>3,578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hebrideans and Wallace</td>
<td>2,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islanders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahitians</td>
<td>922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Foreigners</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>78,473</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is to be noted that the growth from 1956 to 1961 has been appreciably greater than that between 1901 and 1956.

The rapid increase in recent years is due to a high birth rate and the immigration of Europeans, Vietnamese, New Hebrideans, Wallis Islanders, and Tahitians. About three years ago a large number of Vietnamese were repatriated, as a result of which there is a shortage of dependable labor in some occupations. The population is very unevenly distributed, for Nouméa, the only city, has about forty per cent of the inhabitants and sixty per cent of the Europeans.

Table III. New Caledonia Birth Rate and Death Rate, per 1000, 1960*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Europeans</th>
<th>Melanesians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth rate</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death rate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of increase</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table is indicative of a more rapid rate of increase of Melanesians than of Europeans. A local analyst predicts the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1965</th>
<th>1970</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europeans</td>
<td>30,500</td>
<td>34,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanesians</td>
<td>42,500</td>
<td>48,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The east coast has sixty per cent of the indigenous population, while the west coast has by far most of the Europeans,—about three-quarters.

The Europeans include about 1,000 colonists and their families, mostly French, who own and operate cattle ranches; some of them engage in mining on the side when the market is good. A metallurgical plant employs several hundred French and a large number of that nationality are government officials. The rest are business men, teachers, and members of other professions. The natives, Melanesians, are subsistence farmers on reservations which they leave temporarily to work on the roads, or at some other kind of unskilled labor in Nouméa, the largest town and capital of the Territory. Vietnamese and Indonesians were imported to work in the mines during World War II, and, because of the difficulty of being repatriated at that time, were allowed to remain; since then a large number and their children have been sent home. Some of the rest still work in the mines; other operate stores in Nouméa and a good many are market gardeners. The remainder of the other Pacific islanders in the Territory also came to do unskilled work,—most of them as laborers for a large, new dam; since that project was finished, the majority have drifted to Nouméa where they eke out a living in various ways.

Mining

The products of mines constitute the principal riches of New Caledonia. In 1961 they furnished 96 per cent of the exports. No other country in the world has as large an output of minerals per inhabitant as The Big Island,—about $750 in 1961. Nearly all the sub-surface contains one mineral or another. In discussing the situation with a businessman very familiar with the island he said, "It is easy to study the economy of New Caledonia. Just one big heap of ore." Metamorphic rocks in the north-east have gold, copper, zinc, lead and silver. Volcanic materials intercalated between sedimentary formations extending from Bourail to Koumac contain some copper but especially manganese. The richest mineral land in the island, classified as "mining" (Fig. 3) is the source of the nickel ore. It is peridotite, in most places altered to serpentine.

The nickel land extends over about one-third of the surface, the larger part in the south, but it is also in scattered areas in the west. Very small amounts of iron, chrome and cobalt are found in the nickel ore. Exploitation is carried on only where the peridotite is weathered and its constituent parts separated and concentrated.

The techniques of exploitation, which have varied throughout the years*, consist of several

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* Nickel ore was first mined in 1874, at one time New Caledonia was first in world production (Fig. 5).
operations: Scraping off a surface cover of laterite which has an iron content, taking out the nickel ore in huge "bites" with mechanical shovels (Fig. 4), breaking up some of it if necessary, sorting, and either loading it on trucks from which it is dumped into aerial trams to be taken to the coast, or carrying it all the way down in the trucks to a loading station from which it is conveyed in various ways to freighters offshore, for the inshore water is shallow.

The principal center of production of nickel ore is Thio, on the east coast, 112 miles from Nouméa (Fig. 3), where the ore is dug in tiers from open pits on a plateau. Some of it is in the form of a rocky layer, of a green or a chestnut color between lumps of peridotite; it has an average content of fifteen per cent nickel. A powdery form of the ore is also plentiful there, but with a content of only about three per cent nickel.

The sorted mineral ore, separated from sterile blocks, is hauled to the terminus of the aerial transport system on which it is carried about two miles in iron baskets down to the edge of the lagoon about 1300 feet below the mine. From there an "endless belt" rolls it offshore to drop into the hold of a freighter. Since World War II all the operations have been highly mechanized. In 1940 a worker produced about 700 pounds of ore a day whereas in 1961 he mined four tons*. Thio mine belongs to the Nickel Company, capitalised in Paris, and accounts for ninety per cent of that company's output of ore on the island and sixty per cent of the total exported. Nickel ore is produced by independent companies or miners at other centers on the island: among them Poum, Koumac, Ouaco, and Bourail (Fig. 3) from which it is sold to the Nickel Company or

exported raw to Japan. The larger establishments are Ballande, Pentecost, and Lafleur. Three factors are the more important in deciding where ore will be mined: its richness in nickel, the ease of mining, and proximity to the ocean where a loading apparatus can be set up.

The metallurgical industry is the heart of the territory. Developed largely to help meet the competition of Canada in nickel, there were originally two smelting plants, one at Thio, and the other at Doniambo Point in Nouméa. But the depression of 1930-31 compelled them to unite, joining in the Doniambo factory in Nouméa, the position of which, on the harbor, permits easy import of fuel, namely coal, coke, and oil. That plant has recently been modernised. The three sources of power, and electricity also, are used in various ways in the reduction of the ore to nickel matte and to ferro nickel. The nickel matte is a sulphate which contains 77 per cent of the metal and 23 per cent of sulphur*. The product is transported from Doniambo by sea to a refinery in Le Havre in France.

After 1956 and 1957, very good years for nickel in New Caledonia from a business standpoint, the world nickel market slackened and French refiners had the prospect of buying nickel at a lower price than that obtained from New Caledonia. It was then decided to reconstruct in a modern way the Doniambo plant and in the meanwhile the Government of France subsidized the production of that metal in the Territory.

![Diagram](image-url)

**Fig. 5. Geographic distribution of world's nickel production, 1902, 1919, 1954**

*(The Nickel Industry in Canada, p. 8)*

**Table V. World Production of Nickel, 1961**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Tons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Nickel Co., Canada</td>
<td>175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Canadian Producers</td>
<td>43,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nickel Society of France (mainly New Caledonia)</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>14,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>287,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Jean le Borgne, Géographie de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, p. 270.
** Le Rapport de la Commission Senatorial, p. 5.
World consumption of nickel amounted to some 150,000 tons in 1951 and gradually advanced to 240,000 in 1960, an average increase of eight per cent a year. The reduction of nickel ore is relatively concentrated in a dozen countries of which Canada’s output is seventy-five per cent (Fig. 5). Soviet Russia and New Caledonia together contribute some fourteen per cent.

Table VI. Consumers of Nickel, 1961*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Tons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Market Countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tables V, VI show that in 1961 production outran consumption.

By far the greater part of the nickel ore in New Caledonia has a small nickel content, only about three per cent. An agreement of purchase has been worked out with Japan which buys raw ore. In 1961 that country imported about one million tons from New Caledonia with an average content of 3.137 per cent of nickel. It was in part for stockpiling; in 1962 Japan’s import was estimated at only 600,000 tons. The market there, therefore, can not be very dependable.

* Le Rapport de la Commission Senatorial, p. 5.
Japan maintains it cannot afford to go on paying the current price for nickel ore and foresees large imports from Canada and South Africa (See Fig. 6). The problem of New Caledonia, therefore, is to reduce the cost of producing ore with a content of three per cent.

Among other minerals produced in New Caledonia, chromite and iron stand first. Chrome ore is mined only at Tiebaghi near Koumac (Fig. 3), the amount in 1961, 36,662 tons compared with 39,160 in 1960 and 43,965 in 1959. Its metal content was about 51.45 per cent with a ratio of chrome to iron as three to eighteen. Exports went to France and Australia, 22,098 tons in 1961, 39,160 in 1960, and 43,965 in 1959. The export then in 1961 was appreciably less than the production.

The following table gives the proportions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tons</th>
<th>Metal Content</th>
<th>Ratio Chrome to Iron</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>16,509</td>
<td>51.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>5,589</td>
<td>51.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total and average</td>
<td>22,098</td>
<td>51.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The principal difficulty at Tiebaghi is the high cost of production including the freight charge to world markets compared with those of other countries.

Iron ore is produced only at Prony at the extreme south of the island. The following table shows the production and the amount exported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production, tons</th>
<th>Export, tons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>277,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>276,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>286,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The exports went exclusively to Australia and it seems probable that the market there will continue for some time.

Sources of power for mining, heating and lighting in New Caledonia are not numerous or rich. Coal is found in sedimentary formations on the west coast and a total of 77,000 tons were produced in the period from 1924 to 1930. But a careful study showed that there are no really exploitable reserves. Coal is imported from Australia. A search for petroleum has discovered nothing. However the lower courses of a number of rivers might be used to generate electricity.

A dam at Yaté (Fig. 3) on the Yaté River is the best site for developing electric energy and that is the only place at present where such power is available. Building the first dam there was begun in 1914 and finished in 1927; it could produce sixty million kilowatts an hour, but the amount varied according to the volume of water in the river. Rapid rise and fall is an unfortu-
nate feature of all rivers in New Caledonia. A new and larger dam begun in 1955 is now finished
and can produce 360 million kilowatts an hour. Ninety per cent goes to the smelter at Doniambo
and ten per cent to the city of Nouméa for lighting. Several other power sites have been surveyed
and it is believed that one of them, at Ouaiemé in the north east could be developed, but whether
or not it would be a profitable undertaking is open to question.

Agriculture*

Agriculture in New Caledonia is a long second to mining. On the Big Island, farm land con-
stitutes only 25,000 acres out of a total of 4,139,000, less than one per cent; on the other islands,
the area cultivated is about 17,300 acres out of a total of 495,000 or about 3.5 per cent. Of the
total cultivated some 15,000 acres are worked by European colonists, nearly all French, and all on
the Big Island, and 27,000 acres by Melanesians. The latter farm 10,000 acres on the Big Island
and 17,000 on the other islands most of which are in the Loyalty group. The agricultural activities
in the territory furnish only a small part of its needs. Coconuts occupy about forty-five per cent
of the cultivated land, coffee thirty-three per cent and maize (corn) seven per cent. Mechanization
of agriculture is outstanding.

There is one tractor for every 37 acres cultivated as compared with France, where the average
is one tractor for every 60 acres**.

Coffee

The climate of New Caledonia allows sugar cane, coffee, cotton and other tropical crops to be
raised as well as wheat, potatoes, and other products of the middle latitudes. Coconuts, robusta
coffee and hill rice are raised on the humid east side while arabica coffee, corn, cotton and Euro-
pean vegetables are grown on the west. For a hundred years crop after crop introduced from
abroad has been tried on the island, then abandoned as unprofitable: mulberry, tobacco, vanilla,
rubber, indigo, sugar cane and cotton. Each of those products had its day, but the only one
which has surmounted all difficulties is coffee.

Coffee is the principal agricultural crop of the Big Island and a few acres are used for that
crop on Maré in the Loyalties (Fig. 7). It is raised as much by the Melanesians as by Europeans
(Fig. 8), the cultivated land for each group having about the same area. The principal centers of
production on the east side are Hienghene, Poindimie, Ponerihouen and Canala, which together
produce more than half of the coffee harvested (Fig. 7). Less important areas of coffee land are
at Houailou on the east side and on the west, Kone, La Foa, Bourail, Moindou and Gomen.

By far the greater part of the coffee is exported to Marseilles. The total production averages
about 1500 tons a year, about one-third arabica and two-thirds robusta; the latter yields twice as
much per acre as arabica. Harvesting arabica demands twice as many workers as robusta for the
berries on a tree ripen at different times. It is to be noted that world production of robusta at
present is greater than the demand. The Territory subsidises for extra prime quality farmers who
grow robusta and also those who raise arabica.

** Le Rapport de la Commission Senatorial, p. 6.
Coconuts

Coconuts are not widespread in New Caledonia. The groves of palms were conspicuous only on the east coast of the Big Island, and in the Loyalty Islands, especially on Lifou and Ouvea which together have more than half of the trees in the Territory (Fig. 9). The coco palm has many uses: wood and branches for walls and partitions of houses; fronds for baskets; the milk and meat for food for the Melanesians; and the latter especially for making copra; the dried meat contains from 60 to 65 per cent of oil which is the principal base for margarine and soap. After expressing the oil, the residue, oil-cake is good for feeding animals.

The total production of copra in New Caledonia is estimated at about 3,000 tons, three-quarters of which comes from the Loyalty Islands. This represents about one per cent of the product of the
islands of Oceania, which, all together, produce only 9 per cent of the world's output, the great producers being the Philippines and Indonesia.

The production of copra could be considerably increased, for France could take much more for oil for margarine and other uses. The yield per hectare of the palms could be improved, to give half a ton an acre, by selection of seedlings, by keeping down weeds among the palms, and by the use of better driers. However the fluctuation of world prices for copra is a deterrent, for from one year to the next, they may vary as much as fifty to sixty per cent.

Other Crops

About twenty per cent of the cultivated land is used for corn, wheat, rice, potatoes and vegetables. The areas where these crops are raised are in part due to nearness to the market but also to the nature of the soil.

The soils of New Caledonia are as various as the rocks from which they are derived with the additional fact of being heavily weathered by the climate. Within a short distance entirely different soil formations can be recognised: some evolved from the miocene formations with differences due to relief; others are very much leached; still others have traces of nickel, cobalt, chrome or manganese. Vegetation, for example the forests and grass lands, have contributed certain characteristics of the soils. The richest and most desired for agriculture are the alluvials of the river valleys.

Corn has been raised for a long time both on the west coast of the Big Island with Bourail as the greatest center, and on Maré and Lifou in the Loyalties. A hard variety called "horses tooth" (dent de cheval) with large, hard grains is grown in the vicinity of Bourail and other

* Tercinier, Les Sols de la Nouvelle-Calédonie.
places on the Big Island, and a small-grained variety in the two islands on the east. Production is irregular, depending in part on supply and demand, but it fulfills the needs of the Territory; the average is about 1,200 tons a year.

Corn is the only cereal raised in appreciable quantities. Irrigated rice and hill rice with a production of a few dozen tons a year are of little significance. However from 2000 to 3000 tons of rice are imported annually from Viet-Nam and Australia. The government gives rice growers a bonus to encourage them to raise it for the local market. But the danger of floods on irrigated land near the rivers is a deterrent. Farming that cereal is concentrated at Pouebo and Saint Louis Mission near Nouméa.

Some wheat is raised on the plains of Poya and Pouembout, but nearly all the flour consumed—about 4000 tons a year—is imported from Australia. The Territory consumes about 2,500 tons of potatoes a year but only 1,000 tons are grown locally. The main centers are Païta, La Foa and Bourail on the Big Island and Maré and the Isle of Pines offshore. Those imported are sold at a price appreciably lower than the cost of production of the varieties raised in the Territory.

European vegetables are raised on the west coast: beans for drying in the vicinity of Bourail, tomatoes and cauliflowers at La Foa, green beans at Gomen and Bourail, cucumbers and leeks at Moindou. Maré island supplies the market in Nouméa with cabbages, yams and various other vegetables. In the immediate vicinity of Nouméa, Tonkinese raise those mentioned and other varieties also.

Various kinds of fruit are produced in abundance: in the hot season, mangoes, avocados, papayas, pineapples and bananas; in the less hot season oranges and mandarines. Fruit trees receive little care and the author noted that oranges are commonly fed to pigs. The market for fruit is not at all organised and the Territory imports about 500 tons of fresh fruit a year.

**Grazing**

Of the land owned by Europeans ninety-nine per cent of the area is used for grazing,—nearly all for cattle (Fig. 10). Of a total of 100,000 head the natives raise between 6,000 and 7,000, many of them draft animals. About eighty per cent of the cattle are on the west coast. The original animals, methods of grazing, and even the vocabulary of stock farming were taken from Australia. The author heard the words station, stock, stockyard and stockman included in French which is the current language. Unfortunately the cattle tick was introduced during World War II and the animals have to be corralled at regular intervals for dipping (Fig. 11).

The total area used for grazing is estimated at considerably more than 1,000,000 acres. It takes an average of 10 acres to feed one animal, but the area varies according to the land used, rich flood-plain land having the greatest density. The pasture lands in general receive no care and because of their deterioration it is taking a progressively larger and larger area to feed one beast. A few stockmen have begun to clear weeds and niaouli trees, to cut the brush off their holdings, and to irrigate some dry areas by pumped water, but no regular method of improving the pasture is followed. The cattle are mostly mongrel stock descended from Hereford, Angus, Durham and Frisien; a French strain is represented by Limousine. One of the larger ranches is
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Lafleur, comprising 82,000 acres, on which there are 8,500 cattle. The Territory consumes all the fresh beef available. There is a small number of dairy cattle and two-thirds of the milk consumed and all the butter and cheese are imported mainly from France and Australia.

Horses, goats, sheep and pigs are also numbered among the livestock. Horses are used on the cattle ranches for herding. They are very popular with the Melanesians who own about two-thirds of a total 10,000. About 25,000 goats thrive in the dry areas of the Big Island and four thousand sheep on small islands offshore where they are out of reach of dogs. Pigs, raised in all parts of the Territory, are fed principally on the meat of coconuts. Their total number is about 15,000 of which two-thirds are raised by the natives.
Fishing

Fishing plays a very small role in the economy of New Caledonia, for it can be classified more in the field of sport than as a means of earning a living. The lagoon teems with mullet, a species of flounders, skate, loach, tortoises and various others. It is estimated that there are about 400 boats used mainly for fishing and some 2,000 part-time or all-time fishermen. In deep water outside the barrier reef tuna and bonita are occasionally taken, but few fishermen venture out there. About 300 tons of canned fish are imported annually.

The natives collect trocas shell near the reef north and east of the Big Island where they go in little sail boats, the total amounting to 500 to 600 tons a year which goes exclusively to France to make buttons. However the competition of plastic materials, and similar shell from Japan, Indonesia, and Australia have made the market for the New Caledonia product very uncertain. The export in 1958 was 259 tons, in 1959, 202, and in 1961, 164 tons. Probably the only future for a commercial fishing venture in the Territory is to make some arrangement with Japanese fishermen to catch tuna in that part of the Pacific as has been done in American Samoa and in the New Hebrides.

Native Economy

The economy of the native Melanesians in New Caledonia is largely self sufficient. Taro and yams constitute their main food. The indigenous people live for the most part in valleys in the mountains, on poor land, in hamlets and villages up out of the way of floods (Fig. 3), where all the people of a settlement are generally related, belonging to the same clan or tribe. They use local materials for small, rectangular huts: walls of bamboo laths, roofs of niaouli bark or grass and floors of tramped mud. Few aboriginal dwellings are now seen (Fig. 12). The houses in general have no chimneys and smoke escapes through paneless windows, or the door*. The author was very uncomfortable in a hut without a chimney where a chief was cooking.

Fig. 12. A native village in New Caledonia. An aboriginal native house is on the left. The others are modern native houses. (Photo by J. W. Coulter)

* Barrau, L'Agriculture Vivrière Autochtone de la Nouvelle-Calédonie.
Many of the indigenous people carry on a system of barter. For example those living near the coast on the east side exchange fish for agricultural products with those living higher up in the mountain valleys. The large number who raise coffee sell it to purchase the minimum essentials of clothes and other western goods; others earn money working on roads. There are generally several thousand in Nouméa, where they work for a few months as unskilled laborers, then go back to their tribes on the reservations until the money is spent. Many of the Vietnamese, Indonesians and other foreigners live in Nouméa, the total population of which is a little over 25,000.

The natives of New Caledonia are under the Administrator for Native Affairs. For them the Territory is divided into districts all of which are under the authority of a High Chief appointed by the government. Each district, composed of several villages or tribes, is under the authority of a “small” chief who is also nominated by the Governor. The indigenous people carry out their traditional or customary law, but it is not written and is evolving to something different by contacts with Europeans, for the younger generation in general merely pays lip service to the chiefs*.

Tourism is little developed in this part of the Pacific although the Territory is well served with air-plane facilities. An appeal to tourists would necessitate much more hotel space than is available at present, considerable improvement of roads and the building of bridges. The author crossed five rivers on the east side of the island one afternoon on barges which served automobiles on the only highway along that side. The island is a very pleasant place to live and has some advantages over Tahiti.

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* Guiart, Nouvelle-Calédonie.
The Future

The future of the Territory is closely tied to the production and export of nickel and nickel ore which directly or indirectly furnish a living for two-thirds of the total population. A continuing market in Japan will be very important if the industry could be developed to the extent of producing, say the equivalent of 25,000 tons of nickel a year, its economy would remain relatively stable. However the low content of nickel in the still huge quantity of ore available raises the problem of extracting it at a profit. The content of the reserve is generally estimated to be about three per cent.

Agriculture and grazing could be developed, but vagaries of the weather are a hazard. Floods sometimes sweep the best land, most of which is on the floors of the river valleys. The fact that agricultural products can be imported from Australia and sold at prices lower than local produce is a deterrent to any active enterprise in that field. Furthermore as well as export duties on nickel and nickel ore, customs duties on imported products constitute an important part of the local revenue. These would, therefore, decrease if agriculture were self sufficient.

In conclusion it may be stated that the people of the Territory of New Caledonia, although their standard of living may be seriously reduced by a decrease of mining, are not likely to suffer severe hardships from the point of view of clothes, food and shelter. A small amount of clothes are necessary in this everlastingly warm climate, more food could be produced locally, and the economy would likely permit the import of some lumber and galvanized iron for housing. The native population would for the most part continue indigenous types of farming. There is no prospect of industrialization for lack of raw materials and fuel.

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