

**Martin Bemmann**

**“Damaged vegetation” and “dying forests”: on the construction of an environmental problem in Germany 1893-1970.**

What is an environmental problem? What causes a society to become interested in the consequences of its interactions with the “natural environment”? What causes phenomena which for a long time were perceived as only affecting individuals to suddenly become “environmental problems” with repercussions for the whole of society?

Those are the questions I will concern myself with in this project. Using the public debates about damage to forests caused by air pollution in the period 1893-1970, I will show why and how the perception of this phenomenon as a problem underwent a shift. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, forest pollution was viewed primarily as damage to property which could be compensated financially. Accordingly, there were a number of cases heard between plaintiff and polluter, mostly under private law. Those not directly affected were seldom involved in the debate. After 1970, and in particular during the 1980s, the same phenomenon was perceived by contemporary society primarily as an environmental problem, with consequences that could potentially affect the whole of society. It was sometimes even seen as part of the general “ecological crisis” threatening the entire globe. The interpretation of forest pollution had completely changed. A problem of this magnitude could no longer be settled under private law; it concerned the whole of society, indeed, the whole of humanity.

Previous studies concerned with the cause of this “ecological revolution” around 1970 limit themselves mainly to developments that took place after 1945 and analyze the shifting activities of contemporary players. This project has a different focus; it will examine how the portrayal of pollution damage to forests changed. As a starting point, it adopts the position that problems do not simply exist: rather, they are the result of societal communication processes. Over time, boundary conditions, communication networks and ideological positions in society alter, and with them the way that particular phenomena are interpreted. Differing views of a problem lead to different ways of resolving it.

The beginning of the period I have set for my analysis is marked by a trial which became famous outside forestry and legal circles. For probably the first time in German history, forest pollution was a topic in the national newspapers over a longer period of time - a taste of the publicity to come. I will show how the awareness of the problem changed using a series of case studies from the 1890s, from the years around 1910, the 1920s, from the early 1940s, and finally the 1960s. The end of the period is set by a conference of experts in which the participants explicitly distanced themselves from earlier interpretations of forest pollution and adopted the new “ecological position”.

The focus on a relatively limited discourse, which for the most part took place in books, journals and conferences in the legal and academic sectors and scarcely made it into a more public sphere, makes it possible to make a relatively detailed sketch of the shift in the problem awareness and establish the defining factors. Perceptions did not shift because of an “objective” sudden increase in the amount of forest pollution during this period, nor because of new findings by experts in the field. Rather, the shift occurred because the public perception of forests changed during the course of the twentieth century, for which a range of economic, social, political and ideological developments was responsible. An environmental problem is here shown to be a construct necessitating particular interpretative “capacities” within society.