

Kieko Matteson

Masters of Their Woods: Conservation, Community, and Conflict in Revolutionary France

In early modern and modern France, wood constituted the country's most important natural resource. Fundamental to agricultural and viticultural production, military defense, domestic construction, industry, and transportation on land and sea, wood was "an absolute necessity, more than bread," as one royal administrator noted in 1791. Forests themselves were the source of myriad other benefits—pasturage, medicines, osiers, tanning bark, stable litter, small game, and more. The book manuscript I am working on at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society explores the crucial role that forest use, depletion, conflict, and control played in the formation of modern France, its attendant political struggles, and the shaping of its far-reaching conservation policies, from the landmark 1669 Forest Ordinance through Forest Code of 1827.

Focusing on the Franche-Comté, a lushly sylvan, upland region that is still among the most wooded landscapes of France, my work traces the emergence of a state-centered, autocratic approach to conservation, the suppression of customary and communal practices, and the rise of proprietary individualism against a backdrop of forest deterioration, economic change, demographic growth, and political crisis. Analyzing the characteristics and consequences of France's woodland troubles is critical not only to understanding the rural roots of France's many revolutions, from 1789 to 1848, but also to comprehending political-ecological struggles more generally, for it was in this period that the exclusionary approach to managing natural resources that still holds sway in the present took shape and became dominant.