

A New Woodland History for Europe

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Woodland histories have been written in Europe for more than two centuries. However, much of this literature was produced within a single paradigm. Throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, there was a belief in the superiority of the recently formed “scientific” forestry, which concentrated on maximum wood production, plantations rather than natural regeneration, the elimination of multiple uses, and firm state control over forest resources. Earlier types of woodland management were seen within a degradationist narrative: uncontrolled use led to a general “timber famine,” which in turn justified the emergence of “scientific” forestry.

A paradigm shift in woodland history was pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in England. This new approach rejected simplistic views on the history of management as linear development culminating in nineteenth-century plantation forestry. Traditional management was seen as a coherent and meaningful system that produced what was needed at the time in a manner that was quite clearly conceptualized as “sustainable” by contemporaries. Forest legislation by central authorities, one of the key issues in the linear development model, was relegated to a secondary position. Along with this change in the dominant narrative, the understanding of forest environments also changed. Static views on stable vegetation gave way to new insights into the dynamic and unpredictable processes that characterize European forests in a long-time perspective.

Given the fact that this new way of looking at forests has existed for decades, it is surprising that no one has attempted to write a new woodland history for Europe. Edited volumes exist, notably Kirby and Watkins’ 2015 work, but these by their nature provide a different result to a coherent monograph, such as for example Williams’ impressive survey on global deforestation. Furthermore, both environmental history and woodland ecology moved on from their respective states in the 1980s. Isenberg’s words about a “new environmental history” that has to engage with new trends in historical scholarship strongly resonate in the history of forests as well. For example, in the past decade the state resurfaced in European woodland history but within a completely different context from earlier attempts. Control over forest resources is now seen as a powerful driver in the emergence of the modern European state, be that in German, Italian or Spanish territories. Conflicts over the same resources in revolutionary France were used to illustrate the broader issue of social conflict between central authorities and local communities. At the same time and quite unconnected to environmental historical research, various forms of traditional management were rediscovered by ecology and nature conservation as beneficial for biodiversity and are now promoted on all levels from small nature reserves to European legislation. Furthermore, woodland historical ecology has advanced by leaps and bounds since 2000. The understanding of prehistoric human impact has been transformed almost beyond recognition, and bold proposals were put forward to place the beginning of the Anthropocene into the Mesolithic. Recent advances in palynological modelling techniques made it possible to gain a solid picture of deforestation or the dynamics of various forest types for the first time on a pan-European scale.

During my stay at the Rachel Carson Center, I will work on a book that will provide an integrated and synergetic view on European woodland history. The book will rely on the results of the paradigm shift of the 1980s but will also use the new knowledge accumulated since 2000 that largely complemented and modified the woodland history of the first revisionist generation. My plan is to connect research by historical scientists with that of environmental humanists. With increasing specialization in both disciplines, the lively connections that existed in the 1980s have deteriorated, much to the detriment of interdisciplinary understanding. Another important feature of the book will be an emphasis on phenomena that emerged in the past two decades as pan-European and that can be conceptualized as the defining features of the historical relationship between people and woods on the continent. This will contrast the book with existing environmental historical research, which has usually had a regional or national focus. My book will be organized around topics, although chronology will play its necessary part. These topics will include (1) Woodland management: the pan-European framework; (2) Woodland cover: stability and change; (3) Coevolution: a new understanding of how humans and forests have influenced each other; (4) Contested resource: the place of woodland in a larger social setting; and (5) Unintended consequences: how woodland history became relevant for nature conservation.