

HEADING REPORTH(A): The theatre of nature and the world

‘Sustainability’ and ecological degradation – looking through the “royal forests”

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F. Castillo (1615-1651). Vista de la Casa de Campo. Madrid, Museo de Historia de Madrid.

It is not new that human societies have always developed in interaction with their environment. Currently, there are large debates concerning the so-called ‘New Green Deal’ and the ‘Green and Digital Transition’ (Transición Digital y Verde)². When looking at the founding concepts deployed to justify (to ‘get legit’) the new policies, there are usually argued two main reasons: climate change and environmental degradation. These are identified as the two main threats to the life of mankind in Earth.

In the last decades, human-induced environmental degradation has led to a growing consciousness on the mutual interdependence between the ‘environment’ and the human societies. In this regard, in the Western thought some events occurred that triggered deep changes concerning how the societies should relate to the environment. It is worth noting, amidst others, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, title that came out in September 1962 or the ‘Day of Earth’ first time celebrated in April 1970³.

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² https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

³ <https://www.earthday.org>.

Just two years after it was held in Stockholm the first United Nations Conference on Human Environment, in which the environment was regarded as essential for the well-being of humankind (Proclamations I and II, Report of the UNC on HE)⁴. In addition, one of the main principles of the Conference called for an economic growth in respect with the environment. That is how the ideas of sustainability and sustainable development arose (Warde 2011).

It was in this context that the field of ‘Environmental History’ emerged as an independent field, aiming to ‘study the relationship between human societies and the rest of nature on which they depended’ (McNeill & Mauldin 2012). The scholars have largely revolved around the roots of the current modern environmentalism and sustainability. Whereas there is a large on-going discussion, there is a common ground that the management of the forests (understood as a natural resource) has not only led to the development of sustainable practices, but also to the recognizing of the importance of conserving/using these natural resources in order to transmit them to the forthcoming generations. Most of these essays have tackled these elements for the British and Dutch Empires, Non-Catholic French, and German speaking regions (Bartau 2002; Grove 1992 & 1995; Radkau 2008).

Without denying these assumptions, the members of the aforementioned three research projects are seeking to unravel the material and immaterial roots of the so-called ‘modern conservationism’ (or if preferred ‘environmental consciousness’) by looking at the history of the royal sites (with special regard to the royal forests) in the Iberian Peninsula throughout Early Modern Age. The Iberian Monarchies (as might the local communities and other corporations such as Monasteries) set out sustainable yield-forestry policies to ensure the material needs of the navies without compromising the needs of future generations. In this regard, the maritime warfare did not lead to the often-claimed ecological degradation. The same was true for the management of other royal sites (i. e. forests, gardens, orchards) that were not devoted to timber supply.

Last but not least, the historical knowledge may contribute to avoid repeating the same mistakes. The conservation targets included within the ‘European Green Deal Call’⁵ might suffer from *shifting baseline syndrome* (Plummeridge & Roberts 2017). The lack for historical research on this *Call* might compromise the efforts, among other things, to preserve the biodiversity. The conservation objectives claim on the Green Call will be based on very recent ecological data and, therefore, they would not have an accurate picture on: i) the human impact on the ecosystems; ii) the true extent of biodiversity on the areas that are pretended to be protected.

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⁴ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/NL7/300/05/IMG/NL730005.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1669.

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