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Caroline Ford, *Natural Interests: The Contest over Environment in Modern France*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. x + 281 pp. Maps, table, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-6740-4590-3.

Review by Diana K. Davis, University of California at Davis.

This is a notable book that reads beautifully and is well documented. *Natural Interests* adds to the growing literature on French and European environmental history, as well as global environmental history. In seven substantial chapters, a useful introduction, and conclusion, Caroline Ford makes the case for a French environmental consciousness that is far older than the post-World War II era. Several interesting illustrations and two maps accompany the text. One of the book's many strengths is the way it gathers previously disparate historical information and notions about the environment in France into a single coherent text that spans nearly one and a half centuries.

Chapters one and two emphasize the importance of forests in the French environmental imaginary in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ford chooses a detailed discussion of a few figures as a way to convey what were becoming more mainstream ideas about the environment in France by the early nineteenth century. Chapter one explores a lesser-known nineteenth-century engineer and geographer, François-Antoine Rauch, and his emphasis on the state's duty to protect forests to maintain a "civilized" climate. Chapter two broadens to consider three well-known figures in the debates about deforestation and reforestation, namely Jean-Baptiste Rougier de la Bergerie, Alexandre Moreau de Jonnès and Antoine-César Becquerel. As has been noted by authors such as Tamara Whited, among others, these nineteenth-century discussions and debates ultimately resulted in significant legislation being promulgated, governing reforestation and "regrassing" of mountainous regions in France and some of its colonial territories.

Detailed information about floods in France is provided in Chapter three. This chapter expands what is primarily a focus on elite views of the environment in much of the rest of the book to include some views 'from below' in the form of popular photography, various forms of writing, painting and theater. It makes very clear, with extensive documentation, the great extent of many floods in France from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth and the frequency with which they occurred.

In one of the most innovative sections in the book, Chapter four analyzes the importance of nostalgia and heritage to environmental thinking and nascent environmental protection. With a primary focus on the forest of Fontainebleau, Ford argues that this forest was the first to be conceived of as a natural museum of sorts and that this, among other drivers including art and tourism, facilitated its eventual designation as an "artistic reserve" with certain protections in 1861. With this chapter, she articulates one of her main arguments in the book, that much environmental consciousness and legislation in France from this time forward was motivated by aesthetic concerns more than by strictly environmental or ecological concerns.

Chapter five brings together some well known material on the international and institutional history of nature protection and the origins of national parks while aiming to demonstrate the importance of France to these international debates and decisions. A more comparative approach would have strengthened her claim that France led the charge on the internationalization of “nature protection.” Chapter six is a lightly revised version of Ford’s 2008 article on the environmental “anxieties” of empire in French Algeria. As with Chapter five, a more comparative approach to the Algerian material would have made more persuasive Ford’s assertion that the environmental “anxieties” in French Algeria were in some ways unique.

Chapter seven takes a very different course than the rest of the book and addresses the urban environment in France with a focus on Paris. It covers some well-known material such as Hausmannization but also some new material on the French digestion of the mostly British idea of the “garden city.” The battle to increase green space and parks in Paris over the course of the long nineteenth century is placed in an interesting conversation with the adoption of a somewhat modified form of the garden city for French suburbs.

As a geographer trained to “think big,” I found the book’s limited time period to be somewhat constraining as there is ample evidence of “environmental consciousness” well before the French Revolution going back to at least the seventeenth century. Ford nods to this early in the book, but it is not discussed further and could be fruitfully explored in the future. Bringing the implications of this story into the present would have been quite helpful. I also found it curious that some of the recent research by Noelle Plack, among others, questioning the environmental impact of the Revolution, specifically undermining the received wisdom of significant deforestation, was not discussed. Moreover, a greater engagement with the material results of “reforestation,” nature protection, and the development of national parks, especially but not only in the colonial context, would have strengthened the book. The silence here regarding the very negative impacts on poor, local populations that have been extensively documented by scholars such as Roderick Neumann, among many others, seems to reinforce the elite frame of reference of Ford’s book. The relentless and curious emphasis on “anxiety” that permeates the entire book may be due in part to this frame of reference that gives voice primarily to those in positions of power, with the exception of Chapter three. The deeply problematic outcomes of this kind of culturally conditioned anxiety have been amply illustrated in the literature, and discussion of this would have improved Ford’s volume.[1]

Ford’s book does succeed admirably in showing that French environmental consciousness and policy/legislation long predates the post-World War II era where it is so often located. Furthermore, her suggestion that some of the motivations leading to environmental protection in France were more emotional than scientific is persuasive. But this should also function as a warning. More than two centuries of “anxiety” over deforestation leading to climate change, as recent research has demonstrated, has led to a great deal of questionable “reforestation” that has exacerbated warming in Europe rather than ameliorated it.[2] The seventeen illustrations add much to the book, but it would have benefitted further from maps showing both the extent of forested areas and the main rivers of France, as well as the spatial extent of some of the largest floods like that of 1856. A generation of scholars from history as well as environmentally interested disciplines including geography, sociology, and environmental studies will profit from this lovely book.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, Derek Gregory, “(Post)Colonialism and the Production of nature,” in Noel Castree and Bruce Braun eds., *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 84-111.

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[2] See Kim Naudts, Yiyang Chen, Matthew J. McGrath et. al., “Europe’s Forest Management did not Mitigate Climate Warming,” *Science* 351.6273 (2016): 225-258.

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