

Seeing the Forest for the Trees:  
Reflections on the Sustainable Forestry Narratives of France

by

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## Abstract

Sustainability is often accused of being a modern buzzword, an accusation that masks the significance of the concept in human culture. Using environmental hermeneutics, this paper explores the origins and varieties of sustainable thought in early-modern France, a history that has its roots in forestry. Two dominant narratives are identified using Martin Heidegger's concept of the standing reserve (*The Question Concerning Technology*, 1977) and Donald Worster's dichotomy of Arcadian and Imperial thinkers (*Nature's Economy: A history of ecological ideas*, 1994). These concepts illustrate two opposing visions of sustainability in France: The Imperial approach that saw the forest as a standing reserve of resources, and the Arcadian approach that had an idealistic view of *sylvo-pastoral* practices. These narratives are used to interpret forestry legislation, historic events and literary examples to paint a picture of the origins of sustainability that are unique to French culture. Through this interpretation, it was possible to identify the faults and merits of each perspective, and to judge that neither was motivated by any sort of deep ecology. The paper concludes with the assertion that given the implications of the French enlightenment on Western society, a better understanding of the history of sustainable thinking in France can provide insights to a more sustainable future.

Keywords: Sustainability, Early-modern history, France, Forestry, Colbertism, Arcadia, Sylviculture, Donald Worster, Martin Heidegger, Jean Giono

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### **Statement of the problem:**

Sustainability is a very nuanced term, so much so that it is often accused of being little more than a buzzword. In 1987, the Brundtland Report was released and created the most widely agreed-upon definition of *sustainable development*. Sustainability was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”; and while effective in providing a clear and concise definition, this understanding of sustainability fails to acknowledge the varied experiences and expressions of sustainability that are in practice today (“Report”, 1987). Is “sustainability” simply a pragmatic approach to the depletion of natural resources, an answer to an existential question for future generations? Or can it be a way of interpreting the natural world that is unique to individual cultures due to their history? This thesis explores the role forests and forestry have played in shaping the concept of sustainability in France from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to provide insight into the different perspectives on sustainable forestry in France since the Enlightenment, and how this history of sustainable thinking is connected to the shared heritage of French identity. Using environmental hermeneutics as a tool to interpret the various forestry narratives, I aim to engage with a number of historic and literary examples that illuminate the conceptual difference between sustainability as a means of reserving resources for future exploitation compared to

sustainability as a way preserving the natural world for the sake of its intrinsic value to a common identity. I do this by utilising Martin Heidegger's philosophical essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, which identifies the issues of seeing the natural world as a standing reserve (1977). In addition to this concept, I explore Donald Worster's dichotomy of Arcadian and Imperialist approaches to conservation (Worster, 1994). I apply these concepts by exploring key pieces of sustainable forestry policy in France, the relationship between the forest and the peasantry, the case of Fontainebleau Forest, and finally the literary example of Paul Giono's *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* (1954). I do not intend to come to any essentialist or positivist conclusions on sustainable forestry, instead the purpose of this study is to explore how the intersections of history, culture and policy work together to form a sustainability narrative that is unique to France.

### **Definitions:**

Throughout the course of this thesis I use many French words that are included with their English translations in-text, but there is one translation that I would like to highlight in particular. There are two words used to talk about sustainability in French, the less-popular *soutenabilité* (appropriated from the verb *soutenir* meaning "to fortify, to hold up") and the preferred *durabilité* meaning "durability". However, when talking about sustainability in French, *la soutenabilité* is considered to be an anglicized term and *la durabilité* is most commonly used as a means to differentiate from the English term (Grober, 2010). In addition to this, *la durabilité* implies that the French concept of sustainability values a world that endures, fixed and even unchanged rather than one that is continuously supported. As this thesis is written in English, the word sustainability will

be used most often instead of *la durabilité*, but it is important to note this lexical difference as it suggests a slightly different perspective on sustainability that is unique to French-speakers. Other notable definitions to include are the words *sylva*, *sylviculture* and *sylvo-pastoral*. *Sylva* and its derivative are used in French to talk about forest and forestry, and *sylvo-pastoral* describes the ancient link between the forest and agriculture.

Environmental hermeneutics is the interpretive framework I follow throughout the course of this thesis. Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation, that is to say that every fact only has meaning in relation to other facts, and helps with understanding the consequences of humanity's interaction with the world (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, & Utlser, 2014). Therefore, the emerging field of environmental hermeneutics poses an ontological framework for exploring the different cultural interpretations of sustainability. Environmental hermeneutics is "a philosophical stance which understands how the inevitability of what [Hans George] Gadamer called our 'hermeneutical consciousness' informs our relationship with environments" (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, & Utlser, 2014). Gadamer's concept of "hermeneutical consciousness" is a self-awareness of the way our history shapes the way we understand and interpret a situation (Malpas, 2016). Adopted for environmental questions, hermeneutical consciousness is the recognition that our comprehension of the world is affected by our history, and that by acknowledging our cultural history we can gain insights into how we interact with the environment today (Malpas, 2016). Clingerman et al. go on to write that environmental hermeneutics concentrates on the "conflicts of interpretation" that so often plague environmental issues (2014). This theory therefore lends itself to my exploration of the potentially varying understandings of sustainability in France.

**Delimitations and Limitations:**

The delimitations of this study include the fact that I am not engaging with more modern forestry narratives. Instead I choose to engage with policy and literature between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, as this thesis concerns the history and origins of sustainability in France. The limitations of this study include, but are not confined to, the fact that the bulk of this thesis is made up of interpretive work, therefore I have to make every effort to limit my personal bias. What is more, this thesis will be the first large piece of academic research that I have undertaken in my undergraduate degree which presents both a challenge as well as an opportunity for growth.

**Significance of the study:**

“Sustainability” is often at the forefront of innovative conversations about the future, conversations that are always looking ahead to a brighter and greener world. The significance of this study is to illuminate that the concept of sustainability is not necessarily a new one, and that despite the perceived failings of the past it has always been in our best interest to value a resilient environment. By examining the subtleties in the way the landscape has shaped the cultural history of France we can adopt the lessons of the past into our conversations about the future.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Landscape and French Identity

Considering the French counterpart to sustainability, *la durabilité*, intuitively something that is durable implies a kind of hardness and immovability that is different from being sustained. This leads to the exploration of France's relationship with its borders, and the perceived persistence of boundary. In Peter Sahlin's 1990 paper "Natural frontiers revisited: France's Boundaries Since the Seventeenth Century", he explores the legacy of natural frontiers on French national identity. The notion that France's borders were somehow "natural" has been largely rejected by historians, but Sahlin argues that while the natural frontiers of the country may not have been true, the concept drove foreign policy and is embedded in the French national identity. In 1698, the French crown built what is now called "the iron frontier", a double line of fortresses that encircled France in an effort to enforce the perceived natural frontiers of the Alps, Pyrennées, Rhine and the Atlantic. This driving force created an identity of "a shared language, a common history and a bounded, delimited territory" (Sahlins, 1990). It is interesting to note that the word *Sylva* actually means mountain in Latin, and a mountain was often considered a natural border (Bechmann, 1990). According to Roland Bechmann in his book *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*, the use of *Sylva* for forest signifies that the forest can delineate a border and provide a natural defense (1990). Understanding a certain French sense of a hard, defined landscape lends itself to interpreting the perspective of *la durabilité* in France.

Considering how the French identity is shaped by the landscape is key to interpreting the French approach to sustainability, and that history is deeply intertwined

with forestry. Ulrich Grober, a German writer specializing in the history of the concept has written extensively about the roots of sustainability (in a European context) lying in the history and understanding of forestry. Grober argues that sustainability is a concept that has been alive for over 200 years, starting with the German Hans Carl von Carlowitz publishing the *Sylvicultura oeconomica* in 1713 that planned the sustainable management of forests (Grober, 2012). Grober stresses that Carl von Carlowitz was the first to use the term “sustainable yield”, and that sustainability as we know it today is really a semantic modification and extension of this term (Grober, 2007). Historian Jeremy Caradonna, who specialises in the French Enlightenment and the history of sustainability, refers to and interacts with Grober’s work many times in his book *Sustainability: A History* (2014). Caradonna goes further into the historical significance of France’s Jean-Baptiste Colbert and England’s John Evelyn. In England, Evelyn, a prominent figure in the seventeenth century intellectual community and founding member of the Royal Society, wrote the *Sylva* in 1664 as a plea to the elite to replant the nation’s forests. Alternatively, as King Louis XIV’s Minister of Finances, Colbert was responsible for the 1669 *Ordonnance sur le fait des eaux et forêts*, a piece of legislation that was adopted across Europe for the management of forests (Caradonna, 2014). The difference between the two men lies in the way they achieved the sustainable management of forests in their country, with Colbert taking a bureaucratic approach and starting from the top down, and Evelyn working to mobilize his peer group (Grober, 2007).

In Donald Worster’s book *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* he writes about the conflicting interpretations of nature during the eighteenth century and defines the thinkers as being either Arcadians or Imperialists. The Arcadians were characterised by

a desire for “an apparent tolerance between man and nature” that was achieved by a peasant lifestyle in the countryside (Worster, 1994). This desire for a bucolic coexistence with nature was motivated by the rise of industrialization in Europe, with Arcadian ecological thinkers dreaming of “reanimating man’s loyalties to the earth” (Worster, 1994). Worster explains that this is an idealistic and privileged perspective held by those who had the means to escape to the idyllic countryside, and was far removed from the poor who subsisted off the monotonous labour of peasant life. Alternatively, the Imperial thinkers of the Enlightenment did not seek coexistence with nature, but instead sought to control and categorise the natural world (Worster, 1994). The emergence of the Imperial perspective is related to Christianity as it rejected pagan animism and denied the natural world a soul. Thus, free from emotional distraction, Western science could adopt a rational objectivity to its study of ecology (Worster, 1994). This objectivity allowed the domination of nature to be modern man’s ultimate goal. This “exercise of reason” motivated the perspective that modern society was entitled to manipulate nature’s production to accumulate wealth for the human economy (Worster, 1994). If we apply this dichotomous view of the eighteenth century to the French politician Jean-Baptiste Colbert, we can conclude that he was an Imperialist whose effective conservation strategies were motivated by maintaining future timber reserves for the French crown (Caradonna, 2014).

The sustainability of forests emerged from need rather than a sudden surge of concern for a healthy environment. Jeremy Caradonna writes: “The forest was life-sustaining, and because of the immediate relationship that pre-industrialized people had to the natural system, it was relatively easy to recognise its value and the effects of misuse” (2014). Forests were the fuel that heated homes and built empires, and coupled with a

growing population (in France, the population ballooned from 20 million in 1700 to 28 million in the 1790s) deforestation became a serious threat to everyday life in France and helped give birth to Western concepts of sustainability (Caradonna, 2014).

### **The Colonial Link**

France's colonial history can provide insights into its unique perspective on sustainability. Richard Grove, in his book *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (1996) describes colonialism as being one of the factors in today's environmentalism. It was more apparent for European settlers to see the impact their forestry was having on the natural world where they invaded, as the destruction was swift rather than over thousands of years like in Europe (Grove, 1996). Therefore, policies were introduced to reforest and sustainably manage the forests in the colonies. These processes influenced environmental thinking that continues today (Grove, 1996). Frédéric Thomas writes about the influence of French colonial environmentalism in French Indochina, specifically in regards to forestry. The irony of this history is that in pre-settler times, the forests were sustainably managed by indigenous populations and it wasn't until French colonists noticed that there was no more commercial wood available that they began thinking about sustainability in the region (Thomas, 2009).

The island of Hispaniola, with its clear deforested divide between Haiti and the Dominican Republic begs the question of whether or not the legacy of Spanish and French colonialism influenced the forests of the island. In a paper published by Laura Jaramillo and Cemille Sancak in 2009, they conclude that it was policies post-1960 rather than

differences between French and Spanish colonialism that made the difference so apparent. The extractive nature of the Europeans was equal on both sides of the border, and there was no significant difference between Spanish and French colonial rule in regards to deforestation (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001).

As for the Canadian perspective, Hodgins, Benidickson and Gillis write extensively about the adoption of European ideals of conservation in their paper “The Ontario and Québec Experiments in Forest Reserves 1883-1930” (1982). The need for this effort of conservation was due in part to the agrarian French settlers, as agriculture in the Canadian shield was marginal at best. Faced with the choice of either moving westward to the prairies or clear the forest to begin homesteading, a French Roman Catholic “colonization movement” was born (Hodgins, Benidickson, Gillis, 1982). This movement quickly logged or burnt large areas of forest to clear land for their settlements, and this movement coupled with logging and the myth of the limitless pine of the “broken country” began to take its toll on the land (Hodgins, Benidickson, Gillis, 1982). Thus, during the late nineteenth century, it became clear that the valuable asset of pine in the Canadian Shield (large expanse of land that encircles the Hudson Bay, from the northern United States to the Arctic Ocean) was not in fact, limitless.

The forest was considered part of the crown or public domain, and management was a provincial responsibility rather than a federal one. Thus, faced with shrinking woodlands and struggling lumber mills suffering from a decline in log quality and quantity, the conservationist ideas popular in Europe were welcomed in the province of Québec (Hodgins, Benidickson, Gillis, 1982). The province began to set up a network of forest

reserves before World War I, an effort that was supported by governing bodies as well as the electorate. The reserves provided improved forest fire security and watershed protection, but as Hodgins, Benidickson and Gillis stress: "Above all, the system was intended to conserve existing stands of timber, thus promising the forest industries a more dependable supply of raw materials and the provincial governments a steady source of revenue" (1982).

The treatment of the forests of the colonies, from the reckless exploitation for the mercantilist economy (also called Colbertism) of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to the sudden surge for conservation of forest assets, dovetails with the French Imperial view of the forest. The colonies were considered economic assets to the crown, and the strategy was particularly Imperialist since there was no poetic Arcadian feeling of a shared pastoral history. George Grant eloquently writes of this phenomenon in a Canadian context in his essay *Technology and Empire* (1963):

That conquering relation has left its mark within us. When we go into the Rockies we may have some sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what we did. There can be nothing immemorial for us except the environment as object. (p. 482-483).

The objective Imperial view of the landscape has festered into a sense of "homelessness" in North America, where the homogeneity of the modern world has stripped colonial North America of its ability to find any attachment, and therefore any value, in the natural world (Grant, 1963).

## Interpreting Culture

Simon Schama's book *Landscape and Memory* explores how the relationship between humanity and the earth has shaped the Western experience, tracking the myths of the forest through history and highlighting the importance of the forest, rock and sky in the collective European experience (1995). His extensive research into the significance of forests has been a guiding text throughout my research, particularly into the case of Fontainebleau Forest and the Arcadian principles that lie within its winding trails.

The key piece of French fiction that I analyze is Jean Giono's 1953 short novel and parable *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* [*The Man Who Planted Trees*]. To use Worster's terms, Giono was a typical Arcadian seeking a humble existence within the natural world. In a 1957 letter, Giono discusses the importance of the novel in his own words. First, he clears up the common myth that the protagonist Elzéard is a real person and then goes on to say "*le but était de faire aimer l'arbre ou plus exactement faire aimer à planter des arbres / the goal was to make people love trees, or more exactly to make people love planting trees*" (Giono, 1957). He goes on to plead that we begin "*une politique de l'arbre / a tree policy*", urging conservation in a way that is similar to John Evelyn in his *Sylva*.

Collette Trout and Dirk Visser write extensively on the large body of work of Jean Giono, and interpret *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* as more of a conservative piece of literature rather than one about conservation (2006). They argue that Giono is a writer engaged in the consequences of the industrial revolution which causes him great despair. His writing and outlook are influenced by Thoreau, motivated by a desire to live simply and idealising the peasant villages of his childhood (Trout & Visser, 2006). They go on to argue

that if he were a true conservationist, Giono would take issue with the villagers returning to the regrown forest to farm, as really it is no longer unspoiled nature (Trout & Visser, 2006). Kathy Comfort disagrees with this interpretation however, arguing that Trout and Visser oversimplify the meaning of the text and minimize the influence the protagonist Elzéard Bouffier has had in regards to environmentalism (2011). In her paper, Comfort analyzes this “deceptively simple” tale with multiple interpretations as a folktale, fable or “a conservationist *nouvelle à these*” (2011). Giono uses Provençal folklore, tree symbolism and Catholic tradition to weave a story that resonates with French readers young and old (Comfort, 2011).

Finally, in order to accurately interpret the French relationship with forests I explored the many possible meaning trees and forests can mean in myth and literature. First, according to *Le Dictionnaire des Symboles*, forests represent a sanctuary to our natural state of being (Berlewi, Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1973). There is an interesting link to be made to a study done that looks at the recent popularity of small leisure woodlots in contemporary France, where many have woodlots simply for the enjoyment of their friends and families (“*c’est le bois de plaisance*”) (Didier & Philippe, 2003). Trees are rife with symbolism as well, generally agreed to be interpreted as a symbol for life; perpetually in evolution, deeply connected to the earth while still reaching up to the heavens (Berlewi, Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1973).

Yves Bonnefoy, in his *Dictionnaire des Mythologies* repeats this, writing that although the Germanic peoples have a history of myth and legend that is muddled with outside influence, the natural environment (particularly the dramatic change of seasons)

has shaped their identity more than anything (1982). What better symbol of this seasonal change, of life and death, of earth and sky, than the forest? (Bonney, 1982).

## **Conclusion**

The history of sustainability from a Western perspective has long-standing connections to forestry. In France, policies were adopted that considered the three pillars of sustainability, though perhaps inadvertently, in order to conserve future forest reserves. While motivated by a need for natural resources, efforts to protect forests were not without concern for social well-being and a greater appreciation for the delicacy of natural systems. These perspectives were transplanted to the forests in the colonies, where forests were continually protected as a reserve for future exploitation for the economic development of France. To use Worster's terms, while these are typically Imperial approaches to sustainability, when we consider the artistic representations of forests it is clear that there is a decidedly more Arcadian feeling to valuing woodlands in France. It is in the multifaceted interactions of these opposing approaches that we begin to better understand the narrative of forests in French cultural identity.

## Chapter 3: Methods

This study explores the role forests play in the cultural history of sustainability in France. In order to do this, I use environmental hermeneutics as framework to interpret the meaning of forests in French history. Environmental hermeneutics studies the different meanings of the environment for individual perceivers, and this meaning lies in exploring the interpretations of the environment within narratives (van Buren, 2014). These narratives are found in historical and literary texts, as well as the fine arts. There are three inseparable elements in environmental hermeneutic study: the biophysical environment (also called the referent), its meaning or sense (the interpretation), and the carrier of this meaning (the narrative) (van Buren, 2014).

Interpretation in environmental hermeneutics follows Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutic arc" (van Buren, 2014). This means that one begins by studying the referent, which in the context of this study would be forests in France. The next step is to interpret the narratives of the referent (novels, forestry policy, law) by "arcing" back to the referent and grounding the interpretation in the real world. In the context of my study, I have chosen two dichotomies to explore the different meanings forests have in France.

### **Heidegger: The Standing Reserve**

In Martin Heidegger's philosophical essay, *The Question Regarding Technology* he states that the essence of technology in the modern sense is "enframing" (*gestell*), which is to say that technology categorizes and exposes the world to us (Heidegger, 1977). In regards to the natural world, Heidegger argues that technology challenges nature with "the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such"

(Heidegger, 1977). This challenge reduces the natural world to a “standing reserve”, a storehouse for energy waiting to be exploited by humans (Heidegger, 1977). Heidegger concludes that the threat of technology is that reducing the world to a standing reserve will prevent us from “experiencing the call of a more primal truth” (Heidegger, 1977). He offers that an answer to the threat of technology lies in the fine arts. He writes that the arts are akin to technology in revealing the truth about the world, while still being fundamentally different. Therefore, Heidegger’s argument justifies looking at different artistic representations of forests that reveal a more “primal truth”, or valuing the natural world beyond the standing reserve.

### **Worster: Arcadians and Imperialists**

Donald Worster’s dichotomy of Imperialists and Arcadians pairs well with Heidegger’s questioning. The Imperialists saw the natural world as something to control and have complete dominion over, and the Imperial goal throughout history was to subjugate nature to be on reserve for the human economy. On the contrary, the Arcadian ideal of simple coexistence with nature mimics Heidegger’s desire for a revealing of a more primal truth. While seemingly opposite ideals, both groups used the emerging field of knowledge about the natural world to promote policies that aimed to protect and sustain the natural environment; and are therefore significant to the hermeneutic consciousness of French sustainability.

### **Tracing Understanding Through the Forest**

Following the structure of analysis of the hermeneutical arc, I begin by identifying forests in France as my referent. Then, having chosen Heidegger’s standing reserve/primal

truth and Worster's Arcadian/Imperialist dichotomies as my interpretive frameworks, I trace the different interpretations of forests throughout history.

First, I look at the Imperial and standing reserve narrative. This includes key pieces of forestry policy in France, including Jean Baptiste Colbert's *Ordonnance sur le fait des eaux et forêts* (1669) and the *Code Forestier* (1821), the importance of oak to the state and the divide of forestry and agriculture. In order to follow the hermeneutical arc, I examine the consequences of these policies on the forest and the people who interacted with it.

Second, to focus on the opposite side of the dichotomy that considers the Arcadian way of thinking as well as Heidegger's argument against the standing reserve, I interpret three forest narratives. Continuing on from the implications of the divide of agriculture and forestry, I examine the influence of the peasantry on the collective identity of France which informs the value the forest had to French people living in early modernity. Then I consider the case of Fontainebleau Forest, considered a milestone in France's history of conservation, and how this forest was celebrated as an "Arcadia for the people" (Schama, 1995). Finally, I interpret the short French novel *L'homme qui plantait des arbres*, written in 1953 by Paul Giono. This is a decidedly Arcadian story that aims to teach people to value the forest for more than just timber, and brings a greater understanding of Heidegger's concept of a "primal truth". In order to interpret this text, I will be looking for examples of the forest being anthropomorphized to reflect Arcadian values or lack thereof (simplicity, coexistence with nature, peasantry) and references to technology that echo Heidegger's concerns.

## Chapter 4: The Imperial Standing Reserve

### 4.1 Jean Baptiste Colbert: The Imperial Reform of 1669

Jean Baptiste Colbert was the French Minister of Finance under the Sun King Louis XIV, a finicky bureaucrat who ushered in a sweeping reform of French forestry policy in typical Imperial fashion. The *Ordonnance sur les Eaux et Forêts* of 1669 was a two-hundred-page document drafted by Colbert that aimed to create a standing reserve of timber for the King indefinitely. The 500-article document was considered “the bible of French forestry, until, and even beyond the Revolution” and was an attempt to manage the forests of the nation sustainably (Schama, 1995). Motivated by shrinking woodlands and a previous administration that was purely symbolic, Colbert regulated and controlled French forests with the future in mind.

Colbert famously stated “*La France périra faute de bois*” - “France will perish for lack of wood”, and spearheaded a forestry reform that was the first effort of what we now consider sustainable forestry management in France (Grober, 2012). Colbert had a vision of France as the first industrialized nation in Europe, and forestry was at the centre of his diverse drive for modernisation (Grober, 2012). Timber was essential to Colbert’s vision, as it was vital not only as a building material but also a revenue stream. Colbert saw that the previous forestry system, while imposing and stringent on paper, was little more than a flimsy justification for the interests of the noble families (Schama, 1995). Where the forests of Fontainebleau and Compiègne were protected for the royal hunt, elsewhere the oak and beech woods were being felled by the forestry officers (*maîtres*) charged to protect them (Schama, 1995). This corruption along with a rural population who felt that they had

traditional rights to the forest created a classic early example of a tragedy of the commons. Paul Bamford succinctly writes, “Rural inhabitants, industry, cities and towns, and the navy, composed classes of forest users whose role in the preservation of forest resources, where this existed at all, was distinctly secondary to their interest in forest exploitation” (1955). Where each stakeholder, acting in their own self-interest, felt they had a right to the forests in some capacity and the existing forest administration lacked teeth, the timber reserves of France were being depleted rapidly. Thus, Jean Baptiste Colbert charged himself, in true Imperial fashion, with the duty of bringing order back to the woods. This sentiment is reflected in the document, with the *Ordonnance* stating that “good and wise regulations” will “repair this almost irremediable, universal and inveterate disorder” (Grober, 2012). Following his French Cartesian heritage, Colbert sought to organise and regulate the forest from the greatest hardwoods to the smallest acorns.

Colbert believed that the royal forest lands were being degraded by the rural populations and the *maîtres* illegally and without consequence, and began a swift reassertion of state power (Schama, 1995). Just prior to the *Ordonnance*, Colbert initiated a violent inquisition into the state of the nation’s forests. With a team of inquisitors made up of his own peers and even relatives, Colbert discovered that his concerns were well-founded. Most *maîtres* were found guilty of looting the King’s woods and were condemned to public flogging and in some instances, even death. Colbert’s tyrannical approach to reclaiming the woods was accepted in the era of absolutist authority of the first Bourbon monarchy (Schama, 1995). As for the peasants living in the woods, it was in the *Ordonnance* that Colbert exerted his control. The document is full of small, seemingly odd details that aim to subjugate the rural population, such as requiring all animals wear a bell so that

illegal strays could be identified. However, the sweeping decree that one quarter of all communal woods were to be on reserve for the King was the most devastating to the peasants, making it almost impossible for them to maintain their livelihoods (Schama, 1995). Colbert was the archetypal Imperialist, believing that nature must be controlled and methodically regulated, and existed solely to serve and enrich the state.

Colbert's *Ordonnance sur les Eaux et Forêts* had three main objectives: to restore income to the treasury from the royal forests, to dispel the fear of a timber shortage and to ensure that there would be wood for shipbuilding (Grober, 2012). This crisis largely concerned old-growth forests, as there were no management plans in place and trees were not given sufficient time to mature before they were cut down (Grober, 2012). This caused Colbert a tremendous amount of anxiety on behalf of the Sun King, and the *Ordonnance* was an effort to replenish the reserve of timber for the future, stating "the fruits will be passed on to posterity" ("*faire passer les fruits à la postérité*"). This was the beginning of what we can consider sustainable forestry management in France, as it considered both the present needs for timber as well as the needs of the future.

Essentially, the document divided the forests into two parts: *taillis composé* that was grown for regular harvesting and *la grande futaie*, great stands of timber that were planted in succession to create a reserve of old-growth forests (Schama, 1995). The regeneration of old-growth forests (*futaie*) was implemented by declaring that once an area was harvested a certain number of mature trees were to be left behind. The *taillis* was established by reserving one quarter of every area of coppice forest (trees that have been periodically cut back to encourage new growth) for timber. Furthermore, forest grazing was greatly

reduced, clearings were reforested and the market for selling timber was reorganised (Grober, 2012). A language which anticipates that of Heidegger's standing reserve is woven throughout the document, particularly the verb *retenir* (to retain, or set aside), illustrating that the highly detailed and specific *Ordonnance* was considering the long-term benefits of *le bon ménage*, managing the forest sustainably.

Unfortunately, after Colbert's death in 1683 the document became little more than a bureaucratic symbol, much like the previous administration that Colbert so vengefully dismantled. The *Ordonnance* did initially meet its goal of increasing the royal income from forests within a decade, but eventually was unsuccessful in its efforts of maintaining the standing reserve (Grober, 2012). The constant warfare between forestry officers and the peasant class weakened the effectiveness of the reform, with peasants cutting into the King's *quart* in order to survive through the "little ice age" at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Schama, 1995). Moreover, rapidly increasing industrial activities in Europe meant that the regulations were often ignored by officials who were seduced by the increased profits of selling the King's timber reserves to the mills and forges of neighboring nations (Schama, 1995). At the ignition of the Revolution in 1789, despite Colbert's efforts, there was less woodland in France than in 1669 (Grober, 2012).

Jean Baptiste Colbert introduced a typically Imperial forestry reform in his *Ordonnance*, as the document subjugated the forests of France to suit the needs of King Louis XIV. While ultimately unsuccessful, his efforts did create a vision of the forest as a standing reserve that needed to be protected "*à perpétuité*" for future exploitation. Evidently this was not motivated by any sort of deep ecology or concern for a healthy

ecosystem, but nevertheless an early foray into the three pillars of sustainability. The *Ordonnance sur les Eaux et Forêts* of 1669 linked the well-being of the nation to the well-being of its forests, and aimed to maintain the standing reserve of timber for France indefinitely.

## 4.2 Jean Baptiste Colbert and the Standing Naval Reserve

Colbert's policies favored aggressive state intervention in industry, and saw mercantilism as the future of France's economy. So much so in fact, that mercantilism and Colbertism are used interchangeably discussing his legacy (Finon, 1996). Colbertism and the 1669 *Ordonnance* was a utilitarian method of maximizing production and increasing the standing reserve of timber in France. The French economy in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was completely dependent on wood, considering that cheap charcoal was the energy supply of the factories and the flow of trade relied on a strong merchant navy. A merchant navy was essential to protect French ships from competitors and in 1661, France was lagging behind its English and Dutch competitors (Grober, 2012). Thus, in 1661 when the *Conseil du Roi* complained that France "hitherto replete with fine large forests, is today so deforested that timber for the repair of ships is not easily found" Colbert was thrust into drafting his *Ordonnance* (Bamford, 1955). Oak played a significant role in this policy, as it took two thousand of the slow-growing trees to build a ship that met the French navy's stringent standards (Schama, 1995).

In the introduction of the *Ordonnance* it states that "French forests would henceforth provide for all the needs of private citizens and the necessities of war," but in application the latter was clearly favoured (Bamford, 1955). The *Ordonnance* reserved all suitable trees (primarily oak and beech) for the navy, and trees were marked with the arms of the King to signify that they were on reserve for naval use. This reserve included all trees ten leagues from the sea and two leagues from navigable rivers, in addition to a lien placed on all wood cut in the royal forests (Bamford, 1955). These regulations were strictly

enforced, and merchant shipbuilders suffered for it. Although the navy and trade were supposed to go hand in hand, with naval fleets defending merchants against enemy ships, the Bourbon navy was poorly funded and could do little to defend its merchants (Bamford, 1954). Colbert's management of the forest was detrimental to French trade, as the stands of timber available for merchant shipbuilding were too far from navigable rivers and the sea to justify the transportation costs.

The French merchant fleet was underwhelming in comparison to its Dutch and English competitors, composed of "a few thousand miserable barks" that were found almost exclusively in the areas of least competition in the Mediterranean and the colonial trades (Bamford, 1954). While the navy would sometimes sell quantities of oak that were deemed unsuitable for naval ships or docks to merchants, it was not nearly enough. Merchant shipwrights were therefore forced to either take less desirable trees (such as softwood pine) from accessible forests, or import wood from Northern Europe (Bamford, 1954). Colbert was complicit in this, stating "commercial shipbuilders are obliged to seek in Norway, and elsewhere in the North for ship timber, because the King reserves all timber in the realm" (Bamford, 1954).

The consequences of Colbertism and the *Ordonnance* spread further than just trade, as its creation of a hierarchy of trees spread and negatively effected the environment as it infiltrated the French consciousness. As deciduous hardwood trees, oak and beech were hailed as historic and valued more than the softwood evergreens both by forestry officers and artists. The romantic painter Théodore Rousseau lamented the "unaccountable quantities of northern pines that wipe out this forest's [Fontainebleau] old Gaul character

and will soon give us the severe and sad spectacle of Russian forests” (Ford, 2004). Oak had become an identifying feature of the French landscape, attributed to the nation’s cultural identity. However, considering oak is typically harvested at a hundred and fifty years old, no amount of rigid regulation or poetic anthropomorphising could protect France’s oak reserves (French Timber, n.d.). Due to the growing industrialisation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, by 1783 the French navy had depleted its reserves (Bamford, 1955). The timber masts that were available from the Pyrennées, Alsace, Auvergne and Dauphine regions were limited and of poor quality, and importing wood from North America was not cost effective. Thus, ultimately France was forced to import timber from neighboring states and the Baltic region (Bamford, 1952).

The rigidity and pedantic nature of Colbert’s forestry reform was a contributing factor to its failure. Colbert’s *Ordonnance* was a piece of legislation that disregarded non-deciduous trees, as it was designed only to replenish oak and beech. This made it an inadequate management plan for the spruce and fir of the Pyrénées, Alsace, Auvergne and Dauphine regions (Bamford, 1955). Therefore, it was actually damaging to the ecology of these regions and sparked invasions of whitewood birch that was fast growing and choked out slower growing seedlings (Bamford, 1955). Colbertism and the *Ordonnance* of 1669 failed these regions due to its fixation on oak and the inability to adapt to a diverse environment (Finon, 1996).

Colbert’s *Ordonnance*, while effective on paper, was not well suited to the diversity of the French environment or economy. Trade was considered war by other means, and the *Ordonnance* was Colbert’s attempt to prepare for war by strengthening the merchant navy

and securing France's economic future. However, ultimately this policy failed to maintain a holistic view of forestry and sought complete control over a natural system. This Imperial and rigid approach left a mark on the cultural history of France, with oak becoming both a distinguishing feature of the French landscape as well as a rarity.

### 4.3 Out of the woods: The *Code forestier* and the sylvo-pastoral divide.

Traditional agriculture in France was heavily reliant on the forest, and much of the milestone legislative efforts in forestry were an attempt to shift the rural economy away from subsistence farming. The *Code forestier* of 1827 was the next significant piece of forestry legislation following Colbert's *Ordonnance*, and returned to the tradition of policing the peasants living within the forest after years of unregulated felling after the Revolution. The influence of the *Code forestier* expanded the area of forest belonging to the state to an even greater area than pre-revolution, Colbert-managed times, as well as allocating a larger area of forest deemed to be public domain (Brosselin, 1977). It was an aggressive effort to regrow the standing reserve that had been severely depleted since the Revolution. The *Code forestier* plunged the woods into the battleground for violent resistance, but ultimately was effective in regaining valuable timber resources for the state.

The "forestry question" was a defining feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century France, driven by a population boom where the majority of the population was involved in forestry in some capacity (Boullier, 1987). The rural population consisted largely of subsistence farmers whose livelihoods were intertwined with the forest. There was no clear way to distinguish the *gens du bois* (people of the woods) and the *gens du finage* (people of the fields), as agriculture and forestry practices were indivisible at the time. Much of the population were considered both farmers and woodcutters, shepherds and colliers, and 65% of the active male population in France were a part of this rural proletariat (Boullier, 1987). In this subsistence economy, landowners would cultivate small plots of land and graze livestock in the forest surrounding them, all the while benefitting from the forest resources that were

readily available. In areas where the land was not particularly fertile, the rural people earned their livelihood by raising livestock (chiefly cows, sheep, pigs and horses), which spent eight months of the year grazing in the neighboring forest. This was the rhythm of the *forêt paysanne* since time immemorial, where *sylvo-pastoral* practices were essential for the survival of the peasantry (Boullier, 1987). This rhythm was threatened however, by strict legislative attempts to regulate and sustain the French forest for the well-being of the nation.

At the turn of the century, the forests of France were abused extensively by the peasantry who relied on the ecosystem goods and services of forests for their survival. This was due to the fact that the post-revolutionary legislation was unclear about who had the rights to the woods, and any attempts at surveillance and enforcement were insufficient (Brosselin, 1977). And so in 1827, the *Code forestier* was drafted and attempted to succeed where the *Ordonnance* of 1669 failed, by strictly enforcing policies that dismantled the traditional rights of rural people to the forest. The *Code forestier* was an effort motivated by the desire to regrow the damaged forest and to conserve what little was left of the valuable oak and European beech reserves (Brosselin, 1977).

The Orléans regime wanted the complete removal of rural residents from state lands and an end to pasture grazing in the forest. This was done by banning livestock animals from forests belonging to the crown, restricting how many livestock animals were allowed per landowner and making it very difficult to relocate to approved pasture lands (Boullier, 1987). The state further encouraged residents to follow the code by providing them with seeds and subsidies to either relocate and create pastures outside of the forest

or help with the efforts of replanting (Brosselin, 1977). Rural residents were coerced to oblige with the efforts of the state or were faced with the threat of expropriation (Brosselin, 1977).

The forest was an essential part of the traditional rural economy, and the farmers of the forest would not exit the forest without a fight. While more effective in enforcement measures than Colbert's *Ordonnance*, the reclamation of the woods was a struggle, and the process of enacting the code was extended another three years to 1830 (Boullier, 1987). This instigated the famous War of the Demoiselles, where bands of male peasants disguised as women attacked forestry officers in the Pyrénées in a type of guerilla warfare (Sahlins, 1994). From then until 1850 there was a constant battle for the woods, with everything from petitions to large-scale protests and violence against the guards sent to enforce the regulations (Boullier, 1987). The peasantry felt that their traditional way of life was being threatened, and were either apathetic unaware of the fact that the forest presented an enormous mismanaged source of wealth for France (Brosselin, 1977). Rural populations were forced to either constantly live on the edge of the law, relocate and create new pasture land for themselves or turn to a new livelihood. This led to a mass exodus of rural people and an agricultural revolution in France (Brosselin, 1977).

The efforts of the *Code forestier* were in fact fairly successful in its goal of regenerating the French forest reserve. Compared to the *Ordonnance*, the *Code forestier* was more modern in its take on *réensemencement naturel* (natural regeneration) (Grober, 2012). This was done through the "immobilisation of forest capital": which is to say that forestry land was heavily taxed (20-30% land registry tax compared to around 10% for

fields) (Brosselin, 1977). This policy illustrates that the state was willing to put land-owners at a disadvantage for the long-term well-being of the forest. Gradually clearings began to regrow, and the French standing reserve of lumber replenished. Moving forward, French forestry would follow the principles of *rendement soutenu* (sustainable yield) that would protect the standing reserve from over-exploitation (Grober, 2012).

With the arrival of the Second Empire and Bonapartist demagoguery, the battle for the woods began to simmer. The emperor relinquished the tight grip of forestry officers in the region, eager to gain the support of the rural masses (Boullier, 1987). From 1862 to 1868, areas of land that were zoned exclusively for forestry use were sold to land owners who were given free reign to cultivate the land however they saw fit (Boullier, 1987). This did not, however, undo the efforts of the *Code forestier*. France now was entering a time of privatisation, and in an ironic twist of fate the separation of forestry and agriculture was solidified. While *sylvo-pastoral* practices continued on until the 1950s, it simply was no longer the most profitable system for land owners and was gradually phased out. With the modern agricultural practices of the green revolution and greater mechanization, the forest-farm connection only occasionally surged in popularity in times of drought and war (Boullier, 1987). Despite two centuries of fighting, it was only when the *gens du bois* walked willingly out of the woods that the forest truly become separate from the farm.

## Chapter 5: Arcadian Idealism

### 5.1 The Arcadian Peasant *Patrimoine*

The Arcadian French peasant lives a simple pastoral life within the woods, cyclically grazing livestock and harvesting according to the seasons. This Arcadian peasantry was constantly in opposition to the various Imperial regimes that aimed to subjugate the rural people and claim the riches of the forest. Following the Revolution, there was a rejection of the efforts made by the Ancien Régime to manage the forest and the nation's forests again began to disappear (Schama, 1995). However, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, a movement for reforestation began that was inspired by a shift in perspective. The forest landscape began to be valued as an essential part of the heritage of the enlightened nation. France's Arcadian rural identity became a part of the *patrimoine*, the shared history that connected generation of French people to the forest.

The values of the French peasantry fit nicely into Heidegger's perspective on technology, as he does not consider peasant agriculture to be modern technology or overly demanding to nature. He writes, "the work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of grain it places the seed in the forces of growth and watches over its increase" (1977). The rural residents lived in what they considered harmony with the forest for centuries, and lived in opposition to the standing reserve that the administration had tried to establish. The *sylvo-pastoral* tradition created a distinctly Arcadian identity of a humble existence that worked in unison with the forest to support generations of French people. Various authorities since the Middle Ages had tried to break this connection, by regulating and ultimately attempting to expel peasants from the forest. A series of

grievances written in 1789 exemplify this sentiment, stating “The poor of the forest complain that although they were always entitled to go to the forest to gather dead wood for fuel, and to cut hay where timber had been felled to feed their animals, these resources have been recently forbidden to them, which reduces them to the worst state” (“*Cahier de doléances de Coury, Bailliage d’Orléans*”, Bechmann, 1990). The peasantry shared a strong identity and connection to the forest, with centuries of struggle furthering the feeling of injustice that helped fuel the Revolution. The French forest had long been the scene of pervasive warfare amongst the rural people and the absolutist regimes, and the Revolution presented an opportunity to reclaim the forest that the peasantry felt was rightfully theirs.

Immediately after the Revolution the forest was symbolic of the Ancien Régime, a painful memory of the constant battle between the *gens du bois* and the administration that attempted to subvert their existence (Mathis, 2014). After the Revolution, the authority of the *Maitres des Eaux et Forêts* collapsed and royal domains became public forests (Grober, 2012). The Revolution aimed to make the forest available to all the people of France, and so through privatisation royal forests were sold off to land owners (Schama, 1995). Privatisation was presented a movement for equality, but this actually further reduced the collective rights of the poorest rural peasants (Bechmann, 1990). Furthermore, the extension of hunting rights to all severely depleted the wild populations of game and in unison the population of livestock amongst the trees dramatically increased (Bechmann, 1990). The concept of *bon ménage*, and essentially any forestry management strategy was seen as a crass trick played by the Ancien Régime, and again the health of the forests began to suffer (Grober, 2012).

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was becoming clear that the forests of France were seriously at risk of disappearing, and in 1827 the *Code forestier* was introduced (Brosselin, 1977). History, as it has a tendency to do, was repeated, and the battle for the woods began again in earnest. Thus in the 1840s and 50s there was a feeling of disillusionment amongst the French people that eventually led to a compromise (Mathis, 2014). The legacy of the Ancien Régime and the *Code forestier* on the forest was no longer completely rejected and instead, forests began to be valued for their historic significance and a period of reforestation began. With the romantic voices of Chateaubriand and Hugo beginning to identify a French landscape that truly belonged to the French people, the forest was starting to become a basis for national identity (Mathis, 2014).

This new national identity saw the forest as an essential part of the *patrimoine*, or French heritage. The concept of *patrimoine* is built on the basis of a nation having a strong identity that is united and continuous across generations (Mathis, 2014). This new vision of nature saw the forests of France as living monuments to an enlightened heritage, and motivated conservation efforts (Mathis, 2014). Furthermore, this is an identity that links back to generations of peasants that struggled under absolutist regimes. The connection of the *patrimoine* to trees is clear in the prevalence of tree festivals in France. Tree festivals are a tradition rooted in the liberty trees erected after the Revolution that symbolically cut down Colbert's *futaie* and were raised equally in defiance as in celebration. The tradition of tree festivals continued, and involves planting a tree that acts as a physical link between the past and the present (Corvol, 1990). Planted in times of celebration, the trees were political and tied to national events that connected generations of French people, to illustrate "*le patrimoine, intact et florissant*", the patrimony, intact and flourishing (Corvol,

1990). The forests of France were not valued because they had been growing on French soil, but rather because they had been cultivated by generations of French people (Mathis, 2014). The forest fostered a sense of belonging, and a concept of identity that is distinctly Arcadian.

The generations of peasants that lived in unison with the forests of France were essential to the characteristics of the *patrimoine*, especially considering that France remained a largely rural nation until the 1930s (Mathis, 2014). Following the Revolution, what mattered most was France's history, not its natural spaces and the nation's forests suffered for it. However, once the Arcadian identity and the forest were celebrated as an essential part of the nation's history, a reforestation movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was born. The well-managed, sustainable forest was no longer tied to the riches of the King, but instead to the *patrimoine*, to the legacy of the French people who cultivated the land and grazed livestock amongst the trees. To protect and sustain the forest was to protect and sustain the *patrimoine*, the collective peasant identity of the French people.

## 5.2 The Dreamy Arcadia of Fontainebleau Forest

Fontainebleau forest, located south-east of Paris, is a vast and mysterious wilderness that has made a lasting impression on the French consciousness. Hailed as one of the best of the royal hunts for generations, its woods that were made up of valuable oak stands (44% of its approximately 18,000 hectares of terrain) were protected for the enjoyment of the upper classes (Ford, 2004). However, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Fontainebleau's mystic landscape of rock formations, gorges and ancient deciduous trees was reclaimed by the people of France as Arcadia. Initiated by an eccentric man named Claude-Francois Denecourt and a school of romantic artists, Fontainebleau forest became one of the earliest efforts of conservation in France.

This monumental conservation moment was spearheaded by the eccentric Claude Francois Denecourt (Mathis, 2014). Denecourt was a man of many names, *le Sylvain*, the guardian of Fontainebleau, or more succinctly, "The Man Who Invented Hiking" (Schama, 1995). In 1837 Denecourt set out into the forest on what he called *promenades*, 15km-long forays into the dense forest where he meticulously created maps of the topography, took note of the populations of wild boar and deer and painted blue arrows on trees to guide travellers through the sights of the forest (Schama, 1995). His travels were a curiosity to the royal forester, but Denecourt's project was not breaking any of the forest laws and so he was largely left to create a network through the dense woods and to draft a hiking guide (Schama, 1995). While the trails he crafted were guided and inspired by the natural beauty of the forest, Denecourt's efforts were not without reason. As a graduate of the Nancy *École Supérieure*, an institute designed to train the technocratic foresters of the future, Denecourt

followed a schematic and methodological approach to his project (Grober, 2010). It was his desire to enhance the forest by appropriating, categorizing and bringing order to the woods of Fontainebleau and in doing so, make the wilderness accessible to the people of France (Schama, 1995).

Denecourt's journeys meant that he witnessed as well as meticulously recorded the damage of forestry and hunting had on the woods. In the 1830s, the degradation of Fontainebleau forest was brought to the attention of Louis-Phillipe, the "citizen-king", by Denecourt himself as well as the Barbizon artists (Mathis, 2014). Denecourt had just made his *promenades* public and was determined to preserve the wild beauty of the forest (Schama, 1995). Of course, this aesthetic project incited the interest of the Romantic painters of the Barbizon school, and their combined efforts prompted Louis-Phillipe to ban the felling of trees in the forest in 1837 (Mathis, 2014). The argument they made was not an ecological one, but instead one based on the importance of the heritage of Fontainebleau. Denecourt was adhering to the sentiment expressed by the writer Bernardin de Saint-Pierre that "*les arbres de la patrie ont encore de plus grands attraits quand ils se lient, comme chez les anciens, avec quelque idée religieuse ou avec le souvenir de quelque grand homme*" [the trees of the mother country are even more attractive when they are associated, as in ancient times, with some religious idea or with the memory of a great man] (Pacini, 2007). The forest was protected because it was considered a living museum, a monument to the unique aesthetic identity of France (Mathis, 2014). Denecourt went so far to say that the forest was "the most precious museum of sites and landscapes France possesses", and named particularly impressive trees after historic figures (Mathis, 2014).

Denecourt and the Romantics were fashioning a new sort of Arcadia in the trails of Fontainebleau. This Arcadia still valued a simple coexistence with nature, but was far removed from the reality of the *gens du bois* who in the Pyrénées and Vosges were trapped in a seemingly never-ending battle for the forest. Instead, Denecourt's Arcadia was a Barbizon painting; shadowed and dreamy with the occasional herdsman or cow living idly amongst the trees, and it was his mission to bring it to the people of France.

The so-called "Arcadia for the people" of Fontainebleau became a popular tourist attraction for city-dwellers trapped in the drudgery of the Paris bourgeoisie, and by 1860 a hundred thousand tourists were exploring the hundred and fifty kilometres of Denecourt's marked trails every year (Schama, 1995). Fontainebleau had been the site of one of the greatest royal hunts for centuries, and so reclaiming it for all the citizens of France was a powerful gesture. Denecourt was now considered an annoyance to the foresters; where they wanted an untouched woodland, he created a tourist attraction (Schama, 1995). Nonetheless, following the decree of 1861 that protected and excluded 1, 097 hectares of forest from forestry activities for the *réserve artistique* there was little that they could do to stop the flow of tourists seeking the peace of a *promenade solitaire* (Mathis, 2014). Denecourt succeeding in subverting the Imperial state and created a public space out of the historic woodland of Fontainebleau, all the while managing to profit from his endeavor. Denecourt and his *indicateur* (guide), which included over a thousand "sites", were wildly successful and new editions of the *indicateur* were printed almost every year. Some editions catered to artists by directing them to the most picturesque sights, whereas others were decidedly more commercial and recommended certain businesses and restaurants (Schama, 1995). Essentially, Denecourt capitalized on the French people's desire to escape

from “the menace and confusion of urban life” to the felicity of Arcadia in the woods of Fontainebleau (Worster, 1994).

Fontainebleau forest is considered a milestone moment in history for conservation in France, much like its English counterpart Thirlmere and the American Yosemite national park. However, this was not the beginning of an environmental movement. Instead, the old-growth oak of Fontainebleau was preserved for its heritage and significance to French identity and the Romantic view of Arcadia. Claude-Francois Denecourt made the landscape a monument to French history and identity written in the Romantic prose of Arcadian existence, and in doing so managed to conserve one of the last standing oak forests in all of France.

### 5.3 Jean Giono's *L'homme qui plantait des arbres*

*L'homme qui plantait des arbres* [*The Man Who Planted Trees*] is a short allegorical story written in 1953 by French writer Jean Giono, and is a distinctly French tale of a stoic shepherd who replants an entire forest by hand. The novella begins in 1913 and is narrated by a young man, who upon hiking through Haute-Provence comes upon a stark and forsaken valley. He searches for water amongst the ruins of what was once a village when he meets a shepherd named Elzéard Bouffier. Elzéard is a widow, choosing to live alone and rarely speaks, and the narrator is curious about the old man. He decides to stay with the shepherd for a time and discovers that Elzéard has been working on restoring the valley, “*des landes nues et monotones*” (the naked and monotonous moors) by painstakingly planting acorns by hand (Giono, 1953). The narrator then leaves to fight in the First World War, and when he returns to the valley after the conflict he discovers that Elzéard has continued to plant trees and the acorns from his first visit have grown into saplings. The narrator decides to return every year, and is amazed by the peace and serenity that Elzéard's endeavor has brought to the valley. After forty years, Elzéard continues to plant trees as the valley has become a natural Eden, with game, flowing streams and people returning to work the newly-fertile land. The forestry authority protects the forest, mistaking Elzéard's project for a remarkable natural phenomenon. Though it is a work of fiction, Elzéard was so significant to French readers that many were convinced that he was a real person that Giono had encountered (Comfort, 2011). *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* is a significant piece of French literature that has become a conservationist legend of sorts, one that embodies the romanticism of French pastoral life.

Giono's story exemplifies the distinctly French and Arcadian relationship with the forest, by rejecting and opposing the Imperial understanding that nature exists solely to serve the state. The parable makes a moral claim that celebrates the peasant lifestyle and condemns the exploitation of the forest. Furthermore, both Giono and the character of Elzéard are artists, and exemplify the *gestell* (enframing) that Heidegger suggests reveals to us a different understanding of nature as more than simply a standing reserve (Heidegger, 1977). While Giono and his story fall neatly into the Arcadian and Heideggerian dichotomy, *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* is ultimately a purification of Arcadia, steeped in an idealistic nostalgia that does not correspond to reality. Elzéard embodies the Arcadian values of living simply and harmoniously with nature, and the narrator equates the peasant lifestyle as being more morally sound. The silent shepherd is in direct opposition to the Imperial standing reserve, whether that be in the form of the forest administration or the woodcutters who deforested the valley. The narrator says that the valley "*mourait par manque d'arbres* (died from a lack of trees)" mimicking Colbert's famous exclamation that "France will perish for lack of wood" (Giono, 1953). While the sentiment is of the same nature, Giono's tale is critical and practically mocking of the state's attempts to manage forests. The hundred thousand oak trees that Elzéard plants are significant as the species that the various Imperial forestry administrations had tried, and failed, desperately to preserve and reserve. The state is presented as ineffective and naïve to reforestation efforts. When in 1933 the forestry officer arrives he marvels at "*la première fois... une forêt pousser toute seule* (the first time a forest grew completely on its own)", and along with a deputy and a technician use "*beaucoup de paroles inutiles* (a lot of useless chatter)" before deciding to protect the "natural forest" (Giono, 1953). There is, in effect, an almost mocking

tone when considering the forestry officers, making it clear that they do not understand the reality or the value of what Elzéard has done.

The narrator makes many moral claims about those who exploited the forest and contributed to the desertification of the valley. When what little is left of the village is described, he expresses the thought that the *bûcherons* made the valley a cruel, hard place. Giono writes, “*ce sont des endroits où on vit mal... Il y a des épidémies de suicides et nombreux cas de folies... Ils étaient sauvages, se detestaient, vivaient de chasse au piège; à peu près dans l'état physique et moral de la préhistoire* (These are places where life is hard... There are suicide epidemics and numerous cases of madness... They were savages, hateful, living off what they could trap; nearly in a prehistoric physical and moral state)” (Giono, 1953). The quiet and resourceful Elzéard counters this by nurturing the rebirth of the forest with no more than his “*simples ressources physiques et morales* (simple physical and moral resources)” (Giono, 1953). This sentiment echoes Heidegger’s rejection of mechanization and support for peasant agriculture.

Elzéard further falls into position as a compliment to Heidegger’s questioning by being presented as an artist of sorts, and he is certainly presented as such in Frédéric Back’s film adaptation of the story<sup>1</sup>. In Back’s film Elzéard dutifully considers each seed, carefully choosing which are suitable to dot the blank valley, and as the trees grow they bring colour and light to his natural canvas (Back, 1987). Heidegger argues that it is in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Academy-Award winning 1987 short was a “dream” project for Back, a French expatriate now living in Canada. Back is an environmentalist with many of his films focusing on the importance of nature to human well-being. Back wanted to make a pointedly French story resonate with viewers around the globe and was hugely successful in this regard. The public response to the film was astounding and inspired people to plant millions of trees on many continents. (Back, 2012).

fine arts that nature can be revealed to us as more than a standing reserve of resources. He writes, “once there was time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *technē* [revealing]... Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technē*. And the *poēsis* [bringing-forth] of the fine arts was also called *technē*” (Heidegger, 1977). Technology and mechanization reveal nature to us as a means to an end, a reserve of energy to exploit. Art, in contrast, reveals what Heidegger calls the “primal truth”, the grand beauty of the natural world. By presenting Elzéard as a creator, calling his efforts “*cette œuvre digne de Dieu* (this *œuvre* worthy of God)”, Giono reveals a truth that the forest has value beyond its timber, it has the power to rejuvenate a community and enrich human life (Giono, 1953).

While *L’homme qui plantait des arbres* is undeniably a beautiful ode to trees and the healing power of nature, it is important to note that it is highly anthropocentric. Giono’s writing inspires the valuation of nature beyond a reserve for our consumption, however the regrowth of the valley is in no way a rewilding or an early foray into deep ecology. The forest is regrown for man’s benefit, as farms return to the valley and a healthy vibrant community is established. This community is benefitting from the ecosystem goods and services of the forest, and presumably exploiting the forest in a similar fashion to the previous village that ushered in the desertification of the valley. Although the humble coexistence with nature of an Arcadian peasant is admirable, it is far removed from reality. In truth, the abuses of centuries of pasturing and the traditional methods of *sylviculture* created large areas of desert in the South of France. Furthermore, while abusive and elitist, the removal of peasants from the Northern forests of France for the royal hunt is partly why they are still standing today (Bechmann, 1990).

Ultimately, we must consider the Arcadian idealism and pastoral nostalgia presented in *L'homme qui plantait des arbres* with a critical eye. This does not, however, deduct from its value as a piece of literature. In it there is art that reveals a certain kind of beauty, a *hymne à la nature*. Giono crafted a story that engaged with the long and tumultuous relationship that the French people have had with forests, and urged readers to become the caretakers of their environment. It is a story that is meant to inspire, and as Giono himself writes: *Quand on se souvenait que tout était sorti des mains et de l'âme de cet homme, sans moyens techniques, on comprenait que les hommes pourraient être aussi efficaces que Dieu dans d'autres domaines que la destruction* (When we remember that all of this came from the hands and the spirit of this man, by no technical means, it was understood that man could be as powerful as God in areas other than destruction) (1953).

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout the course of this thesis, I explored two dominant approaches in the early stirrings of sustainable thought in France; one that was motivated by the state and the other by the people. The Arcadian Idealism embodied mostly by the French peasantry (but also the city-dwelling citizen in the case of Fontainebleau forest), valued the forest landscape because it was a symbol of a shared agrarian history. The Arcadian perspective is idealistic because it associates the *sylvo-pastoral* lifestyle with freedom, morality and in essence, a happier way of life. In reality, this perspective had little concern with the ecology of the forest and created a classic example of the tragedy of the commons. The peasants fought, at times literally and violently, to oppose the state controls that they perceived to be a threat their existence, but ironically the state made the only effort to protect the forest that the peasants held so dear. The state controls that exemplify the Imperial Standing Reserve were effective (though to varying degrees) in regenerating the forests of France. The Imperial top-down approach was harsh, even dictatorial, with little concern for social well-being beyond securing the economic or military future of France; but it effective and necessary when faced with the consequences of the peasantry who, when left to their own devices after the Revolution, deforested swaths of land.

Neither perspective truly discovered Heidegger's "primal truth" as each vision was unabashedly anthropocentric. This however does not mean that it was not an effort in sustainability. To reiterate, the definition of sustainability is to meet the needs of the present without sacrificing the needs of the future, a definition that requires intergenerational thinking. The Arcadian perspective valued the forest landscape because it

had been cultivated by generations of French people, and the Imperialists valued the forest landscape because it could support and strengthen the state for generations to come. This intergenerational thinking, though perhaps anthropocentric, is indicative of early sustainable thought.

As a final note, considering the age-old adage that the value of history lies in its ability to inform our future, and if I am to follow Paul Ricœur's hermeneutic arc, considerations must be made in regards to the relevance of my exploration to the current sustainability discourse. While motivated by domestic concerns, the impact of the Revolution was far-reaching and dramatically altered Western-society (Klaits & Haltzel, 1994). Thus, we are arguably living in a post-French-Revolution world, where the political and social Western world order is heavily influenced by the values of freedom, equality and reason that culminated in the Revolution (Bristow, 2010).

There are parallels to be drawn between the libertarian nature of Western culture and the damage to the French forests in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. Suddenly freed from the strict controls of the *Ordonnance*, French peasants liberally cut down the King's *grande futaie* equally in celebration as out of spite. The unregulated felling post-revolution meant that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterised by "the forestry question", and the *Code forestier* was instated to recuperate the woods. This illustrates the necessity of effective government regulation if we desire an environmentally sustainable society. Unfortunately, without top-down approaches to regulation we are doomed to repeatedly herald the tragedy of the commons. Alternatively, as the 1669 *Ordonnance* illustrates, it is not possible to have effective regulation without a holistic view of the issue. Colbert's

*Ordonnance*, though stringent and at times even violent, was ineffective as a means of sustaining the forest as it did not consider the needs of the French people nor the varying ecology of the nation. The most effective and plausible approaches to sustainability are ones that consider the many intersections of social, economic and environmental issues, and are courageous enough to emphasize and enforce the importance of a healthy environment for future generations.

Each of us has a unique interpretation of the natural world that surrounds us, one that is shaped by our values, our cultures, and our histories. The environment is the inspiration and silent observer to our poetry, our progress and our propensity for destruction. It is my hope that in continuing to better understand the influence of the natural world on our collective consciousness, we can begin to better learn to value these landscapes and help them endure.

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