
Despite the stark alternatives of its title, *No Wood, No Kingdom* presents an extraordinarily varied political ecology of the nascent English/British Atlantic, composed of Great Britain, Ireland, Virginia, Bermuda, and Barbados. To an extent that defies synthesis, conflicts over wood arose in every context, so “political ecology—ideas and practices governing the definition and use of natural resources” (p. 4)—was more political than ecological.

What was “wood”? It could be types of spaces such as royal forests, parklands, hunting grounds, and insurgents’ refuges. It could be a raw material for commercial and industrial purposes: bark, pipe/barrel staves, charcoal, naval stores of ships’ timbers and tar, and mulberry leaves for silkworms. It could define rural landscapes: windbreaks, boundary trees, and hedges. It could be a commodity: cedar, mahogany, and dyewoods. It provided domestic subsistence: household fuel, coppice, thatch, lumber, fruit, and common rights to windfalls.

In England royal forests predominated. Surveyors were supposed to protect hunting grounds and enhance the forests’ beauty. But they were also supposed to produce income for the Crown, which often called for “disafforestation” (alienating royal forests), while, contradictorily, they had to maintain the forests’ sustainability and allow for common rights to gather household supplies. In the country at large woods were threatened by enclosure, industrial depletion, and erosion. England’s woods could sustainably grow about one cubic meter per person per year, one of the lowest ratios in northern Europe. Wood’s scarcity was taken for granted.

Ireland had no royal forests, but it had lots of woods. The main theme was deforestation: to deprive unruly Irish “woodkerns” (p. 62) of their synonymous refuges, and to promote English plantations. Individual planters enjoyed practically unregulated use of their woodlands, which were primarily considered as wasteland; state purposes such as royal revenues and naval stores had no priority. Deforestation provided one-time profits from naval timbers, pipe staves, and charcoal. Thereafter, land’s enduring value lay in agriculture, for which deforestation was a precondition, with minor exceptions for hunting and pasturage.

Virginia’s promoters initially promised that its abundant woods would alleviate English scarcity. But timber from Virginia raised weaker commercial expectations than dreams of mulberry trees and silkworms. Gigantic ironworks were another failed project, despite the availability of waterpower, bog iron,
limestone, and hardwoods for charcoal. After the 1622 insurgency, deforestation became a priority: lands were granted with the aim of depriving Indigenous groups of hunting grounds and refuge.

Bermuda had the most successful political ecology with trees. On discovery it was covered with mangroves, cedars, and palmettos. Native cedars were a luxury commodity for furniture. Orchards of citrus fruits provided a subtropical export. Colonial regulations sought to maintain these staples against the threat of wholesale deforestation for tobacco. Cedar exports required the governor’s warrant, and trees suited for timber could not be felled for firewood. Palmettos had such importance for domestic purposes of construction, sustenance, and windbreaks that colonists individually had interests to maintain them.

Barbados was entirely wooded upon colonization, but there trees were to be removed as quickly as possible in order to open land up for tobacco farms and then sugar plantations. Richard Ligon, in *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657), was exceptional in his admiration of the island’s beautiful forests, and perhaps a bit nostalgic over their diminution. Otherwise, the preservation of forests for timber, dyewoods, and firewood received little public attention. Deeds attested to their value at the level of individual plantations: “colonists had wood not forests” (p. 183). The political ecology of wood on Barbados involved trade with New England, where regulations protected its quality and efficient supply.

Insofar as there was a British Atlantic or imperial political ecology regarding woods, its nexus was in New England, with its exports of timber, naval stores, pipe staves, and ships themselves. “Caribbean demand,” not “fears of domestic scarcity,” was the driving force for “the changed landscape of wood in the English Atlantic” (p. 232).

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