A New State Forestry for the First Global Age

Crown and Forests, Redefined

In 1496, King Fernando of Aragón (r.1479–1516) and Queen Isabel of Castile (r.1474–1504) issued a decree (pragmática) in Burgos on the "Conservation of forests and plantations for the common good of the people." This decree exemplifies key elements of the crown's role in forest regulation for most of the medieval period. Like monarchs before them, Fernando and Isabel had the difficult task of balancing the interests of local municipalities, artisans, and herders who all sought to use the limited resources of the forest, as well as cultivators who extended arable land at the expense of woodlands and pastures. The pragmatic ordered the protection of large trees used by citizens for firewood, tools, and construction. People could cut off branches, but not to the extent that would prevent new growth. The document remarked on the particular value of oak trees, which produced acorns for foraging pigs, and the monarchs aimed to protect forests used by herders who sought shelter and forage for their animals in the winter. Anyone wishing to cut down such valuable and useful trees required special license. As the title of the document suggests, the general purpose was to protect the common interests of the people. The monarchs decreed, "And if some of these cities, towns, and locales think that something else would be more agreeable, send us a report of it to our Council." The monarchs then went on to state that they aimed to understand conditions fully in order to be of service to the needs of the common good. “It is not our intention to impede” what was best for users of the forests. The Reyes Católicos (Catholic Monarchs), as Isabel and Fernando were styled, relied on their representatives in major towns, the corregidores, and local judges to ensure that such conservation occurred. In a reign concerned primarily with internal order and security after years of civil war, their chief aim in forest matters was to allow different social groups reliable access to valuable forest resources. People needed fuel,
building supplies, food, and shelter, all of which existed, generally for little cost, in the forest. If the towns had the initiative to suggest better ways of meeting the needs of their citizens, the monarchs at least expressed their willingness to listen.

A century later, the traditional role of the crown in forest affairs had changed dramatically, the result of new realities that were unimaginable in 1496. A real cédula (royal dispatch)\textsuperscript{3} from 1597 was drafted by a new figure in the administration, a Superintendent of Forests and Plantations, named Hernando de la Riva Herrera. The king appointed the superintendent, who worked specifically for the crown’s interests. The superintendents were the first state officials in Spain responsible for forest control, and their job was to enforce forest legislation and to procure timber for the navy. Riva Herrera and other superintendents initially worked only in Spain’s well-forested northern regions. Once there, the superintendents either replaced local municipal officials in overseeing forest stewardship practices, or closely observed their behavior. The cédula of 1597 said nothing about the defense of the common good, nor did the king offer an audience with representatives of the town to discuss best practices. Mostly, the document discussed the need to punish those who destroyed trees without license. Rather than the corregidores or local judges being the authorities resolving forest conservation conflicts, the cédula stated that the ultimate authority lay with the Council of War in Madrid.

In the time between these two royal regulations, the crown had redefined its relationship with forest resources, shifting from its traditional role of defending against municipal common law abuses to a position of increasingly centralized control over timber access. During the first half of the sixteenth century, the crown began treating forests as manageable sites of extraction for the shipbuilding industry to supply naval arsenals, which helped to ensure Spanish strength in transoceanic defense, colonialism, trade, and migration. Changes in forest regulation led to new understandings of the monarchy’s geography, the extension of royal authority to more local levels, and the reshaping of crown and local relations. Shipbuilding had long been important to the coastal regions of Spain, but the demand for more and larger vessels, shaped by conditions both internal and external to the Iberian Peninsula, affected the crown’s resource management

\textsuperscript{3} Guillermo Muñoz Goyanes, Crónica sobre bosques y montes de la Península Hispánica (Madrid: Fundación Conde del Valle de Salazar, 1983), 107. A real cédula was a royal dispatch that, from the reign of Juan II of Castile (r.1406–1454), monarchs issued to apply to public and private authorities regarding matters of justice and government. See Enrique Martínez Ruiz, dir., Diccionario de historia moderna de España, vol. II: La administración (Madrid: Ediciones Istmo, 2007), 83.