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# The Politics of Conservation in France in the 19th Century

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## SUMMARY

Everything concerning the domain of nature conservation is rich in paradoxes and contradictory interests: the romantic ideal; the established scientific facts; economical and colonial interests; patriotic feelings; moral, ethical and aesthetic arguments. I will endeavour to show how French conservation policies in the 19th century interpreted these conflicts and paradoxes through three important issues: i) the protection of landscapes; ii) the protection of animal and vegetable species; and iii) nature conservation in the colonies

## I. THE PROTECTION OF LANDSCAPES

Beginning in the 1750s, the nobility and educated people started to rediscover their taste for the countryside, from which they had fled to Paris. Mme de Pompadour, Louis the fifteenth, the Duke of Orleans were all examples of this. Famous writers and poets, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Diderot, Voltaire and Delille, bought or rented properties in the country.

Up until the eve of the Revolution, this rekindling of feeling for nature was symbolically linked to Heloise. Natural beauty was praised: of the Champs Elysées, Bagatelle, St-Cloud, Bellevue, Passy, and Montmartre; of Mont Valérien and of the forest of Meudon, where the botanist Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu (1748 to 1836) and his pupils used to look for flowers. By the end of the century people were travelling as far as the French, Swiss and Italian Alps, the Vosges and the Pyrenees: their taste for the picturesque was developing. Thus the 18th century became one of viewpoints, and finished with the veritable hunting of picturesque landscapes.

The great debate on the place of man within nature then opened, based on three broad concepts and tempered by a rather extreme opposition between the notion of 'natural landscape' and 'cultural landscape':

- *Man is excluded from nature.* This was the general position adopted by naturalists and bio-geographers, as the fashion for wild landscapes developed. For the philosopher and historian Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893), for example, nature was independent of man and perfect. In the most radical polemic of certain foresters, ideology at times took pride of place over science – very far from the landscape ideal of the 18th century – and some texts are sprinkled with common scientific errors, such as wishing to prevent the pruning of trees, which was considered harmful to their development.
- *Man lives in harmony with nature.* Naturally beautiful, man even improves God's nature by his creations. In this way, nature renders homage not only to the Creator but also to the greatness of man. At the end of the 19th century, simultaneous with the development of towns, this way of thinking was marked by a return of the ideal of fusion between man and nature. The English garden city became the model of this fusion. However, this utopian ideology of the harmony of social relations and relationships in nature was out of step with the great developments in industrial growth and communications.
- *Man is undesirable, destructive and bad.* This concept resulted in the setting up of legislation aimed at preserving nature, which advocated repair, protection and conservation much more than country planning. In the name of a certain kind of patriotism, it was necessary to reforest and restore to the French landscape its ancestral topography, which respected the agro-forestry-pastoral equilibrium. In this manner, the nation's wealth, and the people's health and happiness would be restored. Only then would France be on the same level as the principal mighty economic nations, England and Germany, which were so feared and envied.

The desire to legislate started in France in the 1820s, with writers such Paul-Louis Courier (1772–1825). In 1830 François Guizot (1787–1874), at that time deputy and Minister of the interior, created the post of Inspector General of Historic Monuments (under pressure from Mérimée, who was in fact to take up this post, supported by Victor Hugo and the Count of Montalembert). Four years later a Commission for the Protection of Monuments was set up.

During the first International Congress for the Protection of Landscapes held in Paris in October 1909, the speed of technical progress was criticised, as was the destruction of landscapes by agriculture. The Society for Protection of Landscapes in France has existed since 1901, and the Society of Friends of Trees since 1891. The former has as its objective: 'to conserve sites and natural objects in their primitive beauty, to defend them against useless degradation by industry and bill-posters, and publicly denounce any act of vandalism'.<sup>1</sup>

## THE POLITICS OF CONSERVATION IN FRANCE

The Alpine Club of France, the Touring Club of France (well known for its 80,000 members at the start of the 20th century) and the Society for the Protection of Landscapes all contributed towards a landscape protection movement which included flora and fauna, but was much more interested in tourism than in scientific issues. Indeed, the naturalists who were concerned with these latter issues were rare. This movement resulted in the adoption of the first law for the protection of natural sites and monuments in April 1906. From then onwards, the picturesque became the object of legislation which took into account aesthetic criteria. Protected landscape and park sanctuaries became sacred, but elsewhere destruction and looting was justified.<sup>2</sup> The Society for the Protection of Landscape also took part in debates on the demolition of Parisian fortifications, the creation of natural forested reserves, the excesses of tourism and 'against the abuse of publicity posters'.<sup>3</sup> In the society's *Bulletin* of February 1912 one can read: 'Are toothpastes, babies' bottles, corsets and women's blouses so venerable and sacred as to impose themselves with continuous repetition everywhere the people look, simply because their wealthy manager has the means of paying, at any price, for the disfigurement of viewpoints and the dishonouring of sites?'<sup>4</sup> This text proves, if need be, the highly limited efficiency of the law passed on the twenty second of April 1910 against unaesthetic publicity posters, one year after the first International Congress for the Protection of Landscape was held in Paris.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the French principle of limiting the right to abuse landscape in the name of heritage and aesthetics was highly subjective. Even the Society for the Protection of Landscape itself recognised that: 'the landscape is a complex and delicate thing. A host of elements composes it – and not only those which are obvious to the eyes. Sight is not the only one of our senses involved in the impression produced by the landscape – hearing and the sense of smell also play their part, and almost even the sense of taste.'<sup>6</sup> Here again we find an aspiration to a global perception of landscape which is simultaneously resounding, olfactory, visual and gustatory, thus rendering more difficult the legislator's task – all this without even considering at this point the preservation of the heritage of flora or fauna.<sup>7</sup>

## II. THE PROTECTION OF SPECIES

Within local scientific societies, discussions on the protection of wild species first started in 1835, especially regarding the protection of insectivorous birds.<sup>8</sup> It had been discovered that noxious insects were increasing proportionally to the decrease in insectivorous birds,<sup>9</sup> and it therefore seemed that the preservation of 'these valuable auxiliaries to agriculture'<sup>10</sup> would be more efficient and less onerous than chemical treatments.<sup>11</sup>

The debate on the protection of useful or noxious animals worried a few naturalists: vipers, for example were generally considered as harmful. The movement for the protection of species was influenced by the work *Leçon sur les animaux utiles et nuisibles* (1882) by the German naturalist Carl Vogt. This author restored to favour most of the known insectivores: birds, bats, hedgehogs, toads, etc.

The Society for Protection of Animals came into being on the 2nd of December 1845.<sup>12</sup> The Grammont law of the 2nd of July 1850<sup>13</sup> punished by fines and imprisonment any person publicly and abusively maltreating domestic animals. In accordance with this law the Animal Protection society (which had 3,500 members at the beginning of the 20th century) had the mission of improving, by every means in its power, the lot of animals. The Society for the Protection of Animals of Nîmes (in the south of France) was founded on the 12th of May 1877 and had 1,500 members at the beginning of the 20th century. This movement spread to other areas: Lyon (1853), Pau (1858), Cannes (1877), Le-Hâvre (1880), Dunkerque and Menton (1882), Rouen (1886) and Biarritz (1890).

Compassion for suffering animals can be traced back to the 17th century. It was partly linked to industrialisation, which resulted in less call on the services of animal strength, and partly to the emergence of a new class who lived in the towns – the bourgeoisie – who did not practise hunting, but were a moral class of people who wanted to educate the masses not to devote themselves to cruel sports such as cock fighting.<sup>14</sup> In the following century, this concern also bore witness to an uneasiness that nature was not created for man.

In the campaign against bullfighting, at first the Spanish form was denounced. Unlike in the Provence bullfights, the bull was always led to death, and often the picadors' horses were torn open by the bulls' horns. These bullfights spread from the Atlantic Pyrenees to the Camargue, the Bouches-du-Rhône, and the south-west of France. They met with the favour of the monarchs (the royal couple who holidayed in Biarritz loved this entertainment), and also of Parisians, such as Theophile Gautier, who enjoyed violent exotic spectacles. Liberal support for the Grammont law was based on opposition to any sort of mass violence, especially after the events of 1848.

The society for Protection of Animals was of course highly active against this form of barbarism, which was perceived as jeopardising national unity. The society also campaigned against dogs pulling carts. First prohibited in Calvados (in Normandie) by prefectural order in 1852, dog-carts were prohibited in 25 departments by 1895. In addition, the society fought for enforcement of the rules on bird-hunting and dog theft, eulogised the horse (in whose honour it hoped to erect a statue), and distributed posters about the Grammont law. Offenders were punished: out of 31 offences during the month of July 1897, 5 were punished by

finer, and 12 out of 80 offences in August and September resulted in fines. On the 7th of October 1897 the Grammont law was invoked against a butcher's boy who was driving a cow to the slaughter-house and hitting it with a club.

It is improbable that the conferences organised with the aim of protecting birds had much effect, at a time when the Southern peasants were driven by famine to catch greater numbers of birds than usual. Nevertheless, 1892 saw the foundation of the French League of Ornithology, on the 20th October at Aix-en-Provence, under the patronage of the Ministry of Agriculture. An Ornithological Congress for the International Protection of birds useful to Agriculture was held from the 9th–11th November 1897, two years after the Paris International Convention for the Protection of Birds useful to Agriculture.

Thus in 19th century France there was a strong desire to protect certain wild animals, but purely for economic reasons rather than because of any sentimental feelings. On the other hand, campaigns against the flogging to death of horses by cart-drivers and against bad transport conditions of bovines (whose meat was consequently tainted) were motivated both by economic utility and by compassion.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning the protection of vegetable species, the prefect of the Maritime-Alps took out a decree prohibiting the uprooting of alpine plants. Associations such as the Botanical Society of Deux-Sèvres contributed toward the campaign in a small financial way, via the Touring-Club of France. In 1902 the Geographical society of Ain, in the East, reported the devastation brought about by industrialists who were gathering medicinal and ornamental plants in great quantities in the Alps.<sup>16</sup> Tourists and naturalists were also implicated, especially those who 'pull up flowers and roots, certain of their impunity'.<sup>17</sup>

There was whole panoply of tools and products for the use of naturalists, which prove the extent of the demand. The company Emile Deyrolle of Paris offered botanists eight styles of their famous green iron box, for certain plants as well as insects. Plants could also be transported in satchels which served as portable flower-presses, fungi were carried in special baskets, while fleshy fruits, berries and insects were preserved in alcohol or directly pinned on to cardboard. Deyrolle also manufactured a series of tools facilitating collecting. The publications of natural history societies show how frequent and widespread collecting was. Certain botanists even considered themselves 'plant-hunters'.<sup>18</sup> Animal and vegetable specimens were regarded in the same way that a rock fragment was: merely as samples, as representative of their group or species.

Indeed, naturalists devoted themselves to the mission of collecting the rarest species before they disappeared completely, with a view to their stocklist and also in the name of conservation. They practised a kind of botanical entomological and ornithological archaeology: claiming to be the owners and legal trustees of the flora and fauna. If certain information on the research of rare species was

only to be found within the network of a naturalists' society, this was in effect a form of preservation: although only because, for ethical reasons, plant-lovers had the right to find a species mentioned in the catalogues.

Of course, collectors were not indifferent to the issues of landscape and nature protection, but it must be said that they expressed themselves little on this subject, and kept at a distance from active movements.

### III. THE PROTECTION OF NATURE IN THE COLONIES

This desire to protect different species was also nourished by the knowledge of destruction brought about by colonisation: 'until now every time so-called civilised man has colonised a previously unhabited country, or one populated with wild natives, he has eagerly finished off everything which tempted his appetite and got rid of anything which blocked his works of expansion',<sup>19</sup> wrote one author in 1888.

Musing further on the 'rage of destruction' the same author reminds us of the extinction of certain birds (such as the *Epiornis* and the *Dinornis*) and he launches a cry of alarm to save the rhinoceros, the giraffe, the monkey, the lion, tiger and panther, the bear and types of large reptile. He then draws the reader's attention to the damage caused in France by the naturalists belonging to scientific societies, demanding that an international congress be held in order to propose methods of endangered species conservation. The author cites the example of Norway, and of Switzerland, whose chamois were protected at that date, while the Pyrenean izard was still vulnerable to the bullets of hunters. This article, like many others of the period, is full of the idea that France was behind most other nations.

As Richard Grove has shown, the appearance of 17th and 18th century nature preservation strategies coincided with the colonisation of tropical countries.<sup>20</sup> In the European capitals, especially in London and Paris, the idea was born that what was happening in the colonies, as colonial exploitation defiled the societies found in the new territories, foreshadowed what would happen later in the whole world. It was on the Island of Mauritius, under French authority since 1721, that the first experiment on environmental conservation were undertaken. Aesthetic, moral, philosophical, theological and economic aspects had all to be considered. The recent discovery of a relationship between deforestation and climatic changes was used to justify the 1803 prohibition on clearing trees on the upper two thirds of the mountainsides. This law followed other laws about water pollution. These warnings and conservation laws appear to be manifestations of the subconscious fear of the great colonial empires that they might have to pay the penalty of crimes against the natural environment, the last earthly paradise.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude with some reflections on the contradictions and paradoxes on which conservation policies were founded.

Legislation that was founded, albeit implicitly, on the idea that man is destructive has certain consequences for the orientations of present ecological movements. They are in contradiction to a form of neo-Darwinism which states that man, like all other species, is adapted to his environment. Between the imperialism of man fighting against the environment and the extremism of some ecological movements, a third path has yet to be found.

Paradoxically, French 19th century naturalists were not generally protectors of nature. In fact their protectionist speeches were in opposition to their collecting practices which led them to devastate certain areas, of plantlife in particular. In fact, their position was on the side of those who exclude man from nature. It was not until the end of the 19th century that some naturalists reintroduced man into the ecosystem from an ecological angle.

Contrary to what has long been believed, besides compassion for domestic animals, there was in the 19th century also a desire to protect animals for economic reasons. Ecology and economy came together, especially concerning problems linked to colonisation. Indeed, the history of nature protection shows how early are the origins of research into forms of sustainable development. Since their original foundation, ecology and economy have not always been antithetical.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Delaunay 1902, p. 323.

<sup>2</sup> The Seven Islands reserve was created in 1912, and other sites were protected such as a Roman camp in eastern France and a Celtic Camp in the Normandy province of Orne.

<sup>3</sup> *Bulletin de la société pour la Protection des Paysages*, no. 30, 15 April 1909, pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Bulletin*, *ibid.*, no. 51, February 1912, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> The second was held in Stuttgart in June 1912.

<sup>6</sup> *Bulletin*, *ibid.*, no. 58, November 1912, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Matagne 1996a, b.

<sup>8</sup> *Société d'Agriculture de l'Indre*, 1835, pp. 36-38. *Annales de la société d'Agriculture, Sciences Arts et Belles-Lettres de l'Indre-et-Loire*, 1844, p. 330.

<sup>9</sup> *Bulletin de la société des Amis des Sciences et des Arts de Rochechouart*, 1894-95, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> *Bulletin de la société d'Etude Scientifique de l'Aude*, 1892, p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> *Bulletin de la société d'Etude des Sciences de l'Aude*, 1892, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> The first Animal Protection society was founded in England in 1824 (6,000 members in 1850). The second in Dresden in 1838.

<sup>13</sup> Named after General Jacques Delmas de Grammont (1796-1862). This law was replaced in 1959 by a stricter one.

- <sup>14</sup> Thomas 1985, pp. 228-253.  
<sup>15</sup> Agulhon 1988, p. 258.  
<sup>16</sup> *Bulletin de la société de Géographie de l'Ain*, 1902, p. 123.  
<sup>17</sup> *Bulletin*, *ibid.*, p. 132.  
<sup>18</sup> *Bulletin de la société Botanique des Deux-Sèvres*, 1901, p. 208.  
<sup>19</sup> *Revue Scientifique et Littéraire du Département du Tarn*, 1888-89, p. 8.  
<sup>20</sup> Grove 1990, 1992.

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