In 1778 a petition was sent to Versailles from the village of Bégaar in southwestern France. As people who described themselves as "all attached to the land," the villagers sought to update Louis XVI's minister of finances about their involvement in a long-running wrangle over ownership and exploitation of their communal forest. This dispute had already given rise to a host of petitions, inspections, and litigation, not to mention the fines, imprisonments, and outbreaks of collective violence. The village's main opponent was the neighboring town of Tartas, but this many-sided conflict reached to the highest ranks of government and society. In restating their claim to the woodlands in their parish, the petitioners described their land "as a large forest of old-growth oak trees, commonly called [the Forest of] Saumage, which they had always managed with great care for the construction needs of the royal navy."

Such statements cannot be taken at face value, of course. Whether deliberately or not, this document overstated the village's resources: the forest in question was claimed to cover

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1 My thanks to Paul Cohen for his commentary on this paper; I am also grateful for the questions and observations of various participants of the Western Society for French History, especially J. B. Shank.

1 Archives Nationales, Q1 420: Domaines, Département des Landes, Eaux et forêts. [anon.], "Mémoire des habitants de Bégaar," (s.d.) [c. 1778]. Aspects of this dispute are summarized in Jean-Gilbert Bourras, La Querelle des vacants en Aquitaine (Biarritz: J & D Editions, 1995), esp. 137-41 and 175-9.
12,000 *arpents* (about 6,000 hectares), although regional forestry officials reported in 1764 that it amounted to only 343 *arpents*.²

Nonetheless the villagers' statement about their cooperation with the navy looks at first glance like confirmation of a central tenet in Hilton L. Root's *Peasants and King in Burgundy* (1987), a much-cited study that challenged many prevailing wisdoms about the foundations of French "absolutism" and the nature of rural grievances in 1789.³ Historians had long debated the nature of France's absolute monarchy between 1661 and 1789. Some felt that the French Old Regime had a "social" basis, although opinions were divided. Scholars such as Roland Mousnier insisted that the rule of Louis XIV and his successors transformed France's monarchy by promoting bourgeois professionals, entrepreneurs, and, above all, office-holders.⁴ Others like David Parker argued that the French Old Regime differed from its predecessors only in being richer and more powerful, since all Louis' policies entrenched the position and values of the "traditional" aristocracy.⁵ Root's multi-faceted interpretation offered a new perspective summed up in the subtitle of his book: the "agrarian foundations of French absolutism." Using evidence from the provincial administration of Burgundy, Root argued that the Old Regime managed to extend its authority by preserving and promoting the communal institutions and collective property rights of French peasants. According to Root, this relationship between the crown and rural communities was mutually advantageous. He also argued that while the relationship between state and villages ensured the Old

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² Archives départementales de la Gironde [hereafter ADG], 8B 540: Eaux et Forêts de Guyenne. Dossiers relatifs aux bois de diverses communautés, Tartas-Bégar: Procès-verbal de visite (9-15 Sept. 1764).
Regime's success, it contained the seeds of disaster – not merely its political demise in the Revolution of 1789, but a long-term legacy of economic stagnation for France.

In the two decades since Root's book, however, historians have developed some important new ways of thinking about the formation and operation of early modern states. Among them are scholars who have examined the origins of government attempts at "resource management." Their work starts from the premise that centralizing states were interested in finding ways to enhance their control not only over their subjects, but also over their territories' non-human resources.

The relationship between political systems and environmental policies looms large in today's headlines as we pursue a global conversation about climate change, its likely effects, and how best to respond to them. Paul R. Josephson, a prominent historian of the twentieth century, recently posed the question: What forms of modern state are best placed to develop and implement policies that put a priority on maintaining biodiversity and ensuring environmental sustainability?6 Historians of the early modern period have tended to turn the question around. Rather than inquiring into the kinds of state structure that are best suited to safeguarding the environment, they ask how government policies to monitor, regulate, and exploit their territories' natural resources may have contributed to the enhancement and expansion of central authority. Recent studies of Renaissance Venice and early modern Württemberg suggest that investigating the formulation and implementation of forest policies offers a crucial means to understand the origins of the modern state.7

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This paper aims to apply these insights to the nature of state authority in Old Regime France by drawing on research into the activities of the forest administration – the Eaux et Forêts – and officials of the royal navy in the southwestern province of the Guyenne (Aquitaine) in the period 1730-1790. The Bordeaux-based foresters encountered great difficulties in regulating the exploitation of privately-owned woodlands in areas like the Périgord, but communal forests seemed to offer an easier target for official intervention. The evidence from inspection reports drawn up by forestry officials and the requisition orders made by naval shipwrights suggest that the tensions, conflicts, and deprivation experienced by the villagers of Bégaar were by no means unique.

Historians of French forestry have demonstrated that woodlands were a priority for Old Regime decision makers. Louis XIV’s Ordinance of Waterways and Forests (1669) was similarly indicated how enforcement of forestry regulations played a large part in integrating the Franche-Comté into France: François Vion-Delphin, "Politique forestière et rattachement de la Franche-Comté à la France (1678–1750)," in [Actes du] Symposium international d'histoire forestière. Nancy, 24–28 septembre 1979, 2 vols. (Nancy: E. N. G. R. E. F., 1982), 2:11–35; and idem, "La consommation militaire en bois franc-comtois (XVIIIe siècle)," in Forêt et guerre, ed. Andrée Corvol and Jean-Paul Amat (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1994), 117–25.


concerned not just with the crown's own woodlands but also empowered royal agents to monitor the exploitation of forests belonging to the church, rural communities, and individual landowners. During the long reign of Louis XV the legislative and administrative provisions were extended, and offices in the Eaux et Forêts became more numerous. Royal foresters set themselves the task of assessing the extent and capacity of woodlands within their jurisdiction, establishing management plans, and assuring future productivity. At the same time, the navy's demands for construction materials intensified dramatically, especially during the second half of the century when the French fleet doubled its capacity. Evidence from communal woodlands in southwestern France will allow us to clarify and assess the Old Regime's effectiveness as a resource manager.

During the eighteenth century the most detailed interest in the kingdom's forest resources was not taken by the king's ministers at Versailles, his financiers in Paris, nor even the venal office-holders of the Eaux et Forêts. Closest attention was paid by more humble men such as Pierre Train and Gilles-François Segondat. Unfortunately we do not know very much about them.

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11 "Édit portant règlement général pour les Eaux et Forêts" (1669), in Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises, ed. Isambert, Decrusy and Taillandier, 29 vols. (Paris: Belin-le-Prieur/Plon, 1821-33), 18:219-311; and Bourgenot, 131-64.
12 Bourgenot, 165-219; Badré, 80-99; and Bamford, "French Forest Legislation," 97-107.
as individuals. The most immediate sources are reports they completed, although this documentation is patchy and the information offered is sometimes incomplete.\textsuperscript{15} The extant records thus offer us only snapshots of these men's lives. The report-writers in question were eighteenth-century officials in the French king's navy: Segondat and Train were shipwrights and forest inspectors. Their more shadowy assistants -- such as Guionneau, Rénau, Laréoule, Boulaine, Bertrand, and Olivier, according to their scrawled signatures -- were foreman (contremaitre) carpenters. Part of these men's work involved traveling southwestern France in order to identify likely ship-timbers for use in the royal dockyards at Bayonne and, especially, Rochefort.

For example, in March 1778 Train and Guionneau had left their base at Rochefort and were operating about seventy kilometers southeast of Bordeaux.\textsuperscript{16} On a single day, 30 March, they visited two villages in the subdelegation of Casteljaloux, now in the department of the Lot-et-Garonne. They paid special attention to six households, all belonging to land-owning peasants (laboureurs). The six separate requisition orders netted the king's navy a total of fifteen oak trees that Train deemed suitable for construction purposes, more than half of which (eight trees) came from a single householder. The immediate result of their efforts on behalf of the navy was fifteen pieces of deciduous hardwood with a total volume of over 540 pieds cubes (or about 18.5 cubic meters).\textsuperscript{17} From the shipwrights' point of

\textsuperscript{15} ADG, 8B 806: Eaux et Forêts de Guyenne. Procès-verbaux de visite par les Commissaires de la Marine. The distribution of the surviving documents in this file is very uneven: five reports for 1765, seventeen for 1766, two for 1768, one for 1775, twenty for 1777, and fifty-two for 1778.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.: Procès-verbaux des Commissaires de la Marine (30 Mar. 1778).

\textsuperscript{17} The eighteenth-century French pied (32.484 cm) was larger than the English foot (30.480 cm) by a factor of about 1.066: Delay, \textit{Table de comparaison entre les anciennes mesures du département de la Dordogne et celles du nouveau système métrique} (Périgueux: F. Dupont, 1809), 3. In terms of volume, the pied cube (0.0343 cubic meters) was therefore larger than an English cubic foot (0.0283 cubic meters) by a factor of 1.211. Each of the

\textit{Proceedings of the Western Society for French History}
view these timbers were the most sought-after material, destined to provide the large, curved members used to frame a warship's hull. They were heavy, unwieldy, and expensive to transport, but such wood was reasonably rare.

Fifteen trees did not represent a huge amount of wood, but judging from the surviving records, the navy's cumulative claims were far from insignificant. This seems to have been particularly the case during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. In the winter of 1765-1766, for instance, Segondat was busy in and around the subdelegation of Dax. His reports show that the inspection team visited sixteen properties and filed sixteen requisition orders as a result of twenty-five days' work over a two-month period. During that time they inspected forests that were estimated to contain a total of nearly 23,000 trees. These woodlands varied greatly in extent, with owners as diverse as the Marquis de Roquépine, whose estate at Samadet was said to contain 6,000 mature trees, and Marie Lesgourges, the widow Dufour, who owned a mere 150 trees in the parish of Pouillon.

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fifteen mature trees requisitioned on 30 March 1778 thus offered the navy more than one cubic meter of timber. This figure corresponds closely to the average of twenty-eight pieds cubes (or around 0.96 cubic meter) of usable timber that was estimated as "theoretically" required from each of the 2,800 oak trees needed to build the hull of a seventy-four-gun vessel, according to the Encyclopédie méthodique de la Marine (Paris, 1783): Martine Acerra, "Marine militaire et bois de construction: essai d'évaluation (1789-1799)" in Révolution et espaces forestiers: [Actes du] Colloque des 3 et 4 juin, 1987 [du] Groupe d'histoire des forêts françaises, ed. Denis Woronoff (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988), 114.

18 ADG, 8B 806: Procès-verbaux des Commissaires de la Marine (17-18, 18, 19, 20, 30 Dec. 1765; 9-11, 15, 16-17, 18, 20-22, 23, 27 Jan. 1766; 30 Jan.-1 Feb. 1766; 3-4, 14, 15 Feb. 1766). Of the twenty-two inspection reports that survive for 1765 and 1766, only three did not deal with woodlands situated in the subdelegations of Dax, Aire [sur-l'Adour], and Bayonne (Pyrénées-Atlantiques). It is unclear whether this concentration is merely a product of the documents' survival.

19 Roquépine also owned extensive forests near Lannemezan (Hautes-Pyrénées) and in the Pays de Foix (Ariège): Coincy, Grande-maitrise de Guyenne, 9.
One report concerned a forest of at least 2,000 trees in the parish of Bégaar, although its owner was identified as the villagers' arch-enemy: the "community of the town of Tartas." Overall, Segondat marked more than 1,600 trees or just over seven per cent of the total inspected, all bound for the dockyards of Bayonne. These two months' work by the inspection team yielded the navy over 1,200 cubic meters of construction material. The total volume may not have been enough to build a ship of the line, but it would have served to construct a smaller vessel or to repair warships in need of a significant refit.20

These were timbers deemed essential for the state's military and strategic needs, and the prospect that reserves might become depleted exercised some of the greatest minds of the French Enlightenment. Historian Michel Devèze demonstrated how men as diverse as Vauban, Réaumur, and Buffon responded to repeated reports about an imminent "timber famine."21 Their suggestions were notable for two things: firstly, their general acceptance of the existence of such a "wood crisis," and secondly, their acknowledgement of the state's priorities. The knowledge of men like Vauban and Buffon (both from Burgundy) was largely confined to the forests of northern and eastern France, where woodlands of the royal domaine were prominent. On the ground in the southwest where crown forests were few, dockyard engineers like Segondat and Train saw the situation somewhat differently.

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20 At mid-century, some 9,720 pieds cubes (333 cubic meters) of timber, almost all of it oak, were required to build the hull of a thirty-gun frigate like the Renommée: [Henri-Louis] Duhamel du Monceau, Éléments de l’architecture navale, ou Traité pratique de la construction des vaisseaux, 2nd ed. (Paris: Ch.-A. Jombert, 1758; Grenoble: des 4 Seigneurs, 1970), 335.

Of course the naval inspectors' first-hand information was based largely on their own contribution to the state's persistent demands for shipbuilding materials. Beyond the resources of royal and ecclesiastical forests, the hierarchy of priorities elaborated in the 1669 Ordinance saw the crown's agents turn their attention increasingly towards communal property. Leading clergymen and religious houses enjoyed some success in frustrating the efforts of secular authorities to monitor and regulate their forests in the southwest.22 A good deal of the private woodlands in this region remained essentially outside the authority of naval inspectors and forestry officials until the last decades of the eighteenth century, and many woodland proprietors were able to find ways to evade bureaucratic intrusions.23 By contrast, the collective forest properties of many rural communities offered a somewhat easier target for agents of the central state, largely as a consequence of the profound changes affecting their social composition and economic well-being.24 In the southwest those properties were far from negligible. In 1789 a senior official of the Bordeaux Eaux et Forêts identified the province's surviving communal woodlands as crucial to its future. Particularly in the valleys of the River Adour and its tributaries, he reported, there remained "huge resources" in the hands of rural communities, representing the "germ" of richly-populated mature forests.25

23 Graham, "Greedy or Needy?" 15-6.
24 Anne Zink, Clochers et troupeaux. Les communautés rurales des Landes et du Sud-Ouest avant la Révolution (Talence: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 1997), esp. 45-94. The presence of "bourgeois" and professionals among the leaders and spokesmen of rural communities raises fundamental questions about Root's assumption that the state's authority in the countryside rested on the relationship between the crown and "peasants."
25 [Dufort], Discours du Procureur du Roi de la Maîtrise particulière des Eaux et Forêts de Guienne en forme de doléances ([Bordeaux?], 1789), 37.
In fact, inspecting and assessing communal woodlands across the Guyenne had been one of the regional forest administration's leading tasks.26 Between 1715 and 1789, the Eaux et Forêts solicited and recorded intermittent details about the woodlands belonging to at least thirty-three communities in the southwest, of which all but five were in the Landes. More than twenty of these reports were initiated during the 1750s, and most applied to communal woodlands in and around the subdelegation of Dax, especially in the Chalosse and Tursan.27 Later, when France's involvement in the American Revolutionary War brought additional pressures – as much to naval supplies as to state finances – instructions came from Versailles to gather further data about likely timber reserves in these same areas.28

Reports on communal forests compiled by and for the Bordeaux foresters, especially those conducted in the 1750s, allowed naval inspection teams to seek out the best shipbuilding timbers. When Segondat and his carpenters spent two months around Dax during the winter of 1765-1766, most of the trees they requisitioned for naval use came from the forests of substantial landowners: two titled aristocrats, an abbé, and two demoiselles.29 But the pieces they marked for the navy's use in communal woodlands were significantly larger – an average of 0.89 cubic meters each, as compared with an average of just 0.57 cubic meters for each of the 1,135 trees requisitioned from

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26 Under the Old Regime, forestry and naval officials had joint responsibility for marking trees in "public" woodlands such as state and communal forests: Henri de Coiney, Les Bois de marine sous le premier Empire (Besançon: Jacques & Demontrond, 1914), 5.
27 ADG, 8B 537; 8B 538; 8B 539; and 8B 540: Eaux et Forêts. Dossiers relatifs aux bois de diverses communautés.
28 ADG, 8B 536: Eaux et Forêts. Tableaux de renseignements demandés par le Contrôleur-Général au sujet des bois et vacants des communautés et particuliers (1783-84).
private landowners. The communal forests also contained many trees that could supply more than a single piece. To eighteenth-century shipwrights, these were desirable features indeed.

The state's agents proved to be regular visitors to communal woodlands in this region. Thus, for three days in September 1766, Segondat brought his naval carpenters back to the woodlands of Bégaar. Having requisitioned 215 trees at the time of their visit in January, this second inspection netted the royal navy an additional 400 cubic meters of construction timber. The nearby community of Mées was similarly subject to repeated visits by the naval inspectors, and the same applied to the troubled communities of Saugnac and Arzet.

The French state's interest in these areas' woodland resources remained strong. Many of the surviving reports for 1777 and 1778 reveal the persistent attention paid by the navy to these same areas: fifteen of the twenty surviving reports for 1777 and a further sixteen of the fifty-two from 1778 concerned woodlands in the jurisdictions of Dax, Bayonne, and Saint-Sever. As far as the eighteenth-century French state was concerned, woodlands that were under communal ownership made it easier for officials to assess and extract suitable timbers. Perhaps it is not surprising that rural people's concerns about communal access rights tended to coincide with antagonistic attitudes towards the Eaux et Forêts as prominent grievances on the eve of the Revolution, according to John Markoff's sample of 748 cahiers representing forty-six

31 Ibid. (23-25 Sept. 1766).
32 Ibid. (30 Dec. 1765; and 15 Feb. 1766); and ADG, 8B 52: Eaux et Forêts de Guyenne, Procédure. Suppliques et divers (1787-89), Procès-verbal de visite (26 Nov.-2 Dec. 1787). On the internal upheavals in and around Saugnac, see Archives départementales des Landes, E dép. 294 [E suppl. 1731/1]: Archives communales déposées. Commune de Saugnac-et-Cambran (1690–1789).
33 ADG, 8B 806: Procès-verbaux des Commissaires de la Marine (1777 and 1778).
bailliages across the kingdom. Markoff suggested that these issues were characteristic of "divided communities," a description that certainly fits surviving accounts about Bégaar and many other villages in the Landes.

In contrast to Root's characterization of an absolute state that worked hand-in-glove to sustain rural communities and their collective property, evidence from the woodlands of southwestern France suggests that the crown's interest in communal forest resources was short-sighted and self-centered. The central government's interventions also proved to be persistent. In 1789 the communal forests of the Adour region were believed to offer the crown its greatest hopes in the southwest; more than twenty years later, and despite political upheavals and international conflicts, the Napoleonic government reached an identical conclusion. Agents of the French state, whether of the Old Regime or the Empire, were part of a drawn-out struggle for first claim on the forest resources of this region. Officials and commentators worried about increasing scarcity precisely because shipbuilding was the government's primary concern in the southwest and because the navy's timber requirements were so specific. The fact that the dockyard engineers tended to seek out very large trees, which were difficult and costly to transport, encouraged the naval inspectors to concentrate on accessible resources, where "accessible" in the first instance implied proximity to waterways.

On the other hand, accessibility was equally facilitated by the nature of woodland ownership. Communal forests offered amenable targets for direct intervention by the state. When we

Markoff found that criticism of the Eaux et Forêts and concerns about communal access rights were shared features of regions that did not experience any widespread rural uprisings during the spring and summer of 1789. John Markoff, "Peasant Grievances and Peasant Insurrection: France in 1789," *Journal of Modern History* 62 (1990): 463-9.

observe that the navy's shipwrights were able to return repeatedly over several decades to communal woodlands in the valleys around the Adour, it is clear that the dockyards' demands did not completely deplete the southwest of construction timber. But the pieces marked for naval use in the Landes were significantly smaller in 1810 (averaging only 0.37 cubic meters) than the trees requisitioned in the same area two generations earlier.\footnote{"État approximatif des bois propres aux constructions navales . . . (1810)." Cited in Coincy, Bois de marine, 14. These pieces from the Landes were generally far smaller than the average volumes marked in any of the other high-demand departments.}

Perhaps the most important legacy for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the way in which, like the Old Regime, the "new regimes" that emerged with the Revolution and the Empire continued to identify collective woodland property as a prime target for state-sponsored predation. The demands of the French navy did not strip the countryside of timber trees; the shipwrights' requirements were so exacting that only a tiny proportion of the resources they surveyed actually ended in the naval dockyards.\footnote{Paul Warde estimated that shipbuilding needs represented only about one percent of early modern Europeans' demand for wood: Warde, "Fear of Wood Shortage," 40-1.} Nor should we forget that commercial shipbuilding was a major consumer of construction material, especially in the ports of Bordeaux and Bayonne whose dockyards built many of the largest merchant vessels in eighteenth-century France.\footnote{T. J. A. Le Goff and Jean Meyer, "Les constructions navales en France pendant la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle," Annales É. S. C. 26 (1971): 173–85.} Finally, the various agents of state authority were notoriously unable to coordinate their efforts; regional subdelegates were ordered in 1783 to draw up tabulated reports of collective woodlands in their jurisdictions, even though similar surveys had been carried out by the Eaux et Forêts almost thirty years earlier. By the same token, the French
The navy was widely disdained as a dilatory (and miserly) purchaser of requisitioned timber.  

Yet the decision makers of Old Regime France set out to ensure that the royal navy was supplied with its most sought-after materials. The naval shipwrights and officials of the Eaux et Forêts were empowered as the key mechanisms whereby the central state aimed to find out about the kingdom's woodland resources: the initial aim was to enhance official knowledge. At the same time, though, the navy's needs for ship timbers were very specific, particularly for large, curved pieces of deciduous hardwood. If these types of timber became increasingly rare in eighteenth-century France and imports of such materials grew, then the state's officials must have been failing as resource managers. Furthermore, in concentrating their search for such prized materials on the collective woodlands of village communities, the French crown itself may have made a long-term contribution to the "tragedy of the commons." Around the world, subsequent governments of various political hues showed no more restraint.

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