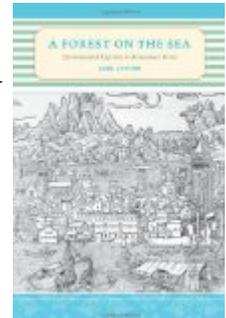




Karl Richard Appuhn. *A Forest on the Sea: Environmental Expertise in Renaissance Venice*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xi + 361 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-9261-5.



Reviewed by Ellen Arnold

Published on H-Environment (January, 2011)

Commissioned by Dolly Jørgensen (University of Stavanger)

In *A Forest on the Sea: Environmental Expertise in Renaissance Venice*, Karl Appuhn tackles an important and extremely complex task: unraveling the Venetian bureaucracy's views about timber resources and the ways that politicians, bureaucrats, and forest "experts" transformed mainland forest management in their efforts to control, regulate, and preserve trees and timber for the future well-being of the republic. This is an ambitious and thorough book that will do much to demonstrate the value of premodern environmental history to modern environmental historians. It is a fascinating study in how both real and perceived resource limits, environmental setting, and cultural values can intersect to shape environmental policy.

This book is simultaneously wide-ranging and very specific. Appuhn himself acknowledges that for a case study, this book has a broad temporal scope, covering almost 450 years (1350-1797). Yet despite this breadth, the book has a very narrow focus on the institutions, individuals, and political frameworks that dominated and shaped Venetian

forest policy. It draws on a dense and complex (but relatively small) body of sources, deals with a very specialized branch of the republican system, and, in the end, focuses on a series of individual officials in a single city-state.

Appuhn presents and evaluates the actions of several state boards and governmental agencies that directly and indirectly influenced Venetian access to and regulation of timber and firewood from the mainland. He explains the inner workings of the Venetian bureaucracy, focusing on the changing role of institutions such as the *Arsenal* (in charge of ship-building), the Council of Ten (Venice's main legislative body), and the *provveditori* (elected managers of forests, firewood, and the Arsenal). He tracks increasing government interest in and management of an extensive network of mainland forests.

As with much of the field, this forest history is limited by a focus on forests as producers of trees, rather than forests as a broader resource pool (in part because most of the Venetian officials did so).

It chronicles, evaluates, and critiques Venetian ideas about the value of trees and timber, about scarcity of tree resources, and about the ways in which trees became commodified, bureaucratized, and even conscripted into the republican agenda. Appuhn tracks the development of expert knowledge, the relationship of experts to the state, and the ways that the republic tried to project its authority and economic power over the mainland.

In addition to evaluating the goals and actions of the republican institutions, Appuhn also explores the role of individuals within the system. For example, he introduces readers to Giovanni Garzoni, one of the *provveditori* of forests. Garzoni, a “dedicated public servant” (p.183) had an “intimate knowledge of the region’s community forests” (p. 179). Garzoni advised the Council of Ten, drafted policy for the Arsenal, aggressively campaigned to punish individual nobles who stole or misappropriated forest resources, and tried to preserve traditional community use. He developed a cadastral survey of the mainland forests, designed an experimental forest to test his theories about management, and linked a great deal of his personal identity to these projects.

Chapter 5, “The Preservation and Reproduction of Bureaucratic Knowledge,” which explores how individual knowledge was turned into collective expertise by the processes of the republic, is one of the most engaging chapters (and it is perhaps the most accessible to non-specialists). This chapter will doubtless be widely read and appear in many comparative discussions; it will remind readers not only of James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1999), but also of Ken Alder’s book *The Measure of All Things* (2002). It is also connected to the theme of *A Forest on the Sea* that I suspect will have the greatest resonance with an environmental history (and history of science) readership: “the creation, reproduction, and circulation of specialized knowledge about forests and forest landscapes” (p. 296). It describes the processes

and writings of expert and novice foresters alike who created and influenced forest policy, and the mapping and informational tools that allowed knowledge of forests to be bureaucratized. Appuhn argues that republican Venice had a “preference for collective knowledge over individual knowledge” and an “unwavering belief in the superiority of concrete experience over abstract theory” (p. 197). Yet one of the most striking aspects of this chapter is that despite republican ideas about the value of corporate management, Appuhn’s detailed exposition reveals how the decisions made by Venetian politicians could be radically influenced by the ideas, beliefs, and preoccupations of individuals.

Appuhn positions his work in relation to modern environmental histories and philosophy, which will help H-Environment readers readily understand many of his main themes. This is a strength, and it does much to show that the gulf that is often perceived to exist between the modern and premodern worlds is indeed bridgeable. At several key points, for example, Appuhn compares the Venetian view of nature to Carolyn Merchant’s conclusions about continental Europe. He also draws connections between his Venetian case study and Conrad Totman’s work on Japanese forests, Keith Thomas’s *Man and the Natural World* (1996) and Scott’s arguments about the modern state. However, readers may sometimes wish these comparisons had been more deeply integrated, making the Venetian world even more accessible to non-specialists. There are also a number of important works (including works on the Mediterranean environment, cartography, and the relation between science and the state) that are listed in the bibliography for “Further Reading.” These clearly influenced Appuhn’s views of the Venetian world but they are not fully integrated into the argument or the notes for particular chapters.

One might also wish for more deeper citation and more source quotation in general. This is a

lengthy work, and sacrifices may have been necessary because of word limits. However, more documentation might have helped readers distinguish a bit more between when Appuhn is reflecting the language and contents of the sources and when he is adding analysis and concepts of his own to make the ideas more accessible to modern environmental audiences. This is particularly true for readers unfamiliar with the tone and language of Venetian documents, and the author misses opportunities to highlight the character of his sources. For example, when a case proved that officials “were correct to draw a distinction between minor infractions and real *crimes against the ecological order*” (p. 178, emphasis mine), it is hard to determine the line between the Venetians’ words and ideas and Appuhn’s modern analysis.

Appuhn’s stated purpose is to demonstrate how Venetian politics, bureaucracy, and information technology tools combined in the early modern period to develop “a unique view of the relationship between humans and the natural world that stressed the preservation of nature” (p. 9). He coins the term *managerial organicism* to describe what he argues is a “uniquely Venetian attitude” that stemmed from Venice’s distinct ecological position, republican values, and identity politics (p. 9). As these goals suggest, Appuhn’s work often displays a firm belief in Venetian exceptionalism that at times is a remarkable reminder of how much location and culture affect environmental regimes.

However, this undercurrent does at times set Venice apart too much, and in ways that can seem dismissive of the rest of Europe—Venice for example, was connected to a “secular Renaissance republican morality” rather than the more common “reformed Christian morality of improvement and divinely sanctioned rule over nature” (p. 252). Even if unintended, this type of language implies that Appuhn’s subjects are the sole premodern voice of rationality, which other scholars of the medieval period or early modern era might find

objectionable. Finally, the author might have strengthened his case for exceptionalism had his section on “Venetian Discourses in a European Context” been more fully developed (it is only four pages long).

A Forest on the Sea models how premodernists can and should employ the methods, conclusions, and even language of modern environmental history. By doing this Appuhn also makes the unique and at times disorientingly different premodern world accessible to other scholars. This book has already gained recognition as an outstanding work of European history, winning the AHA’s 2010 Herbert Baxter Adams Prize. It also deserves wide recognition as a case study of how environmental resource management regimes develop, how government institutions can project their values on environments, and the complexity of unraveling the many (collective and individual) human concerns that lie behind decisions about how to use, protect, and develop resources.

is

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Ellen Arnold. Review of Appuhn, Karl Richard. *A Forest on the Sea: Environmental Expertise in Renaissance Venice*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31223>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.