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From Protected to Protection Forests. *Local communities and forest resources on the southern slopes of the Swiss Alps (1700-1900)*

The present dissertation aims to reconstruct the evolution of the role of forests and to understand past interactions between men and environment on the southern slope of the Swiss Alps in the period 1700-1900, paying particular attention to three study cases located in Ticino and the Mesolcina valley (Italian speaking Grisons). The proposed approach integrates dendrochronological analysis on living trees (study of tree-ring growth) and archival research in order to investigate past forest management practices and provide information about forest uses, policies and social structure of alpine communities. Three topics are specifically considered:

- a. Forest protection on a local scale
- b. Forest management and its impact
- c. Evolution of the society-forest relationship.

For centuries, ancient protected forests have played an important social and economic role for local communities. Because of their position close to settlements, the century-old stand continuity and the fact that they were often balanced between different interests and uses, ancient protected forests represent interesting indicators of change in society, reflected both in historical documents and biological archives.

Human impact on forests increased considerably between the end of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century. In this phase protection measures and forest regulations proved to be ineffective to contain abuses and mountain deforestation as a result of speculative action. In this phase alpine forests represented object of furious speculation and political debates at cantonal and national levels. Moreover, towards the middle of the century, individual forms of management came into conflict with collective ownership, leading to a process of criminalization of ancient traditional forest uses that worsened internal antagonism.

In Switzerland the transition from the century-old system of protected (banished) forests to a Federal forest policy towards 1876 symbolizes the change in the relationship between society and forest. Towards 1870, the process known as “forest transition” – i.e. the reversal in forest trends on a regional scale – also started in the study area, coinciding with the profound transformations of society and a change of perspective in forestry. Such processes also had strong repercussions on a local scale, e.g. in the implementation of stricter measures and control of forest use. In marginal areas, the decline of mountain pastoralism favored gradual forest expansion. Moreover, dendrochronological data suggest that in the three studied forests close to main settlements stand density and stand age increased, as a result of the decline of some agro-forestry uses and the decrease of the pressure of timber trades, both of which are consequences of socio-economic changes on a broader scale.

After 1870, especially in the mountains, the transfer of authority of forest management from local communities to central authorities produced several conflicts. Pastoralism represented a significant source of controversy, because it was threatened both by forest reforms and forest expansion. The local population tried to counter this situation in various ways.

The described trends are similar to those observed in other parts of the Alps. However, mechanisms, timing and implications varied considerably, depending on the historical paths and peculiarities of single communities. In view of future research, the proposed interdisciplinary approach may allow for a better understanding of the mechanisms of the forest transition process and, especially, its implications in the alpine area.

Keywords:

forest history, environmental history, dendrochronology, historical ecology, protected forests, alpine communities, forest transition, Ticino, Grisons, Switzerland, Swiss Alps.