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► **To cite this version:**

Sébastien Poublanc. Water issues in the archives of the French royal forestry administration (16th-18th centuries). Territory, Society, and Technology. Proceedings of the France-Japan Research Cooperation Meeting, 2, 2013. halshs-01137219

HAL Id: halshs-01137219

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01137219>

Submitted on 30 Mar 2015

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Water issues in the archives of the French royal forestry administration (16th- 18th centuries).

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My research topic is "The sylvan king: Southern society and forests during the Modern Era". My archives also deal with water management since the Forestry administration took control over the maintenance of the environment. The royal administration "*Eaux et Forêts*" was created by Philip IV the Fair during the Thirteenth Century. While it was mainly dedicated to forest conservation, it also had a civil and criminal jurisdiction on the aquifer.

During the Seventeenth Century a major reform was implemented in order to strengthen and clarify the respective authority of the various forestry departments—called *grandes maîtrises des Eaux et Forêts*.



Figure 1. Ressort de la grande maîtrise des Eaux et Forêts de Toulouse en 1666.

This reform was known as the Great Reformation and part of its archives concerned the water jurisdiction¹.

¹ A detailed description of this archives is available online ; Poulanc, Sébastien (2013) L'usage de l'archive comme fondement du pouvoir monarchique : la forêt de papier de la réformation de Froidour (1666-1673), *Les Cahiers de Framespa. Nouveaux champs de l'histoire sociale*, n°13, <http://framespa.revues.org/>

The main reformer, Louis de Froidour, established numerous regulations to:

- clear river beds (with the aim of facilitating the supply of cities through watercourses);
- protect fish resources from overfishing in the ponds of the Lower Languedoc area;

These regulations were designed both to protect populations and to allow a good and healthy exploitation of the forests, thus behaving like good fathers—“en bons pères de famille.”

1 - Developing river systems

The river system specifically drew the attention of the Commissioners reformers. Indeed, the secondary road network was underdeveloped and was highly unsuitable for the transport of materials as large as logs. The waterway thus became the main communication channel to transport the goods and resources to the main economic centers. The transportation took the form of timber rafting (Figure 2) or log driving (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Radeliers ou carrassiers (timber rafting), Aude, 1906.

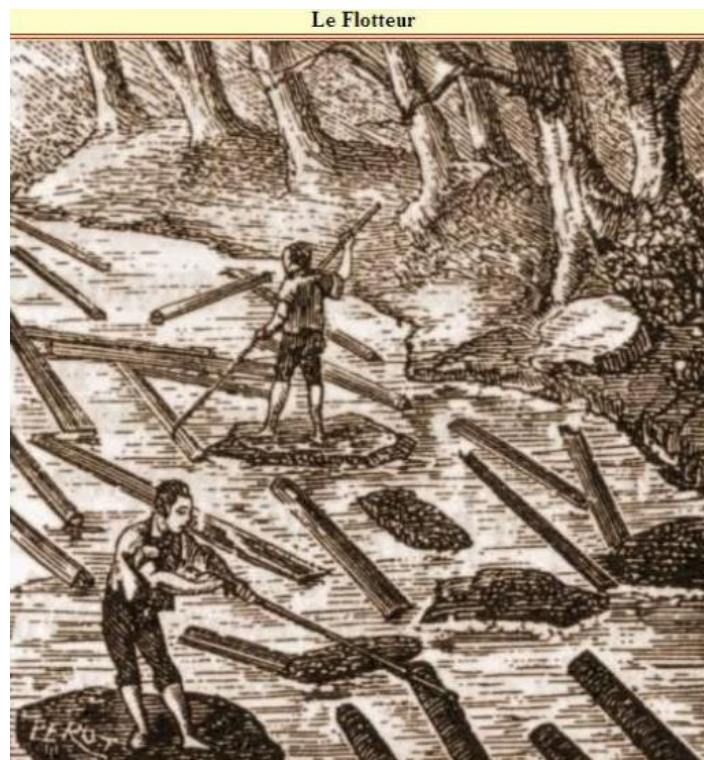


Figure 3. Lâcher à buches perdues (log driving), no place, no date.

In order to facilitate the delivery, the reformers listed the usable waterways and facilities so as to make them navigable. To do this, the reformers assessed the wood resources of each forest in relation to the geographical proximity of the river systems. The repetition of these studies allowed them to actually go and see the various rivers and streams, and to put them on a map. The example of the Ardèche River is emblematic of these visits. Froidour explains that:

À l'endroit du château de Meras, nous avons trouvé qu'elle se fortifie par la jonction de la rivière de Faugeac & que quoy qu'elle y soit impetueuse dans les grandes eaux, elle y est neantmoins beaucoup moins violente parce que tenant de la plaine, elle perd insensiblement, son extreme rapidite ou pour mieux dire sa fureur (...) Nous nous sommes servy du bateau que le sieur Dupuy suivant les ordres que nous luy en avons fait donner, avoit fait monter jusques audit lieu et avons employée toute la journée a descendre le long de laditte rivière jusques a son embouchure dans le Rhosne².

During the visit, the most dangerous places, for the radeliers and for the wood, were written down on a list. Thus, the same minutes indicate that:

Au dessous d'Aubenas en un endroit appellé le gourd Baudoin un tournant fort court par le moyen duquel ayant reconnu que les mats pourroient estre jettés contre les rochers contre lesquels non seulement ils pourroient estre arrestés mais aussi estre brisés³.

Each time, if the Council of State decided that the cost of the development work was compensated by the income of timber management, then the work was undertaken. In his letters, Froidour recounts the episode of a Pyrenean river where dozens of boulders were destroyed by mines :

D'autres ouvriers sont employez à nettoyer le canal de la rivière et à ranger à droite et à gauche les pierres et les cailloux pour luy faire un bord afin que pouvant contenir l'eau plus haulte, elle puisse plus commodement porter et faire descendre les mats. Il y a 200 ouvriers employez à cela, et comme la rivière est embarrassée ou traversée de quantité de rochers, il y a 30 ouvriers employez à faire des mines pour les briser afin qu'on puisse facilement porter à la droite et la gauche de la rivière et rendre son canal libre⁴.

The gain, for marine construction and refueling populations was crucial. Indeed, the plain forests were either in poor condition or located outside the major human settlements. So it was crucial to fetch wood from other areas, sometimes very far. Thus, Toulouse was supplied via the Comminges and the Lower Languedoc from the Sault's country.

Such geographical constraints required the establishment of structures dedicated to river control. They appeared sometimes very early (at the beginning of the Modern Era). Ensuring timber traffic, checking that the riverbed was not hampered by the numerous mill roads or by the devices of the fishermen, and preventing flooding... are only a few concerns among many other, that forest officers had to deal with, as the following minutes suggest :

Nous avons trouvé la rivière traversée et embarrassée de plusieurs digues de grez et cailloux faites par divers particuliers pour en divertir l'eau et faire tourner des moulins qu'ils ont basti le long d'icelle et mesme par divers pescheurs des lieux riverains pour y tendre des cliches et cavices (...) pourquoy il est necessaire de rendre ordonnance pour obliger les particuliers a oster ces empeschements⁵.

² Archives Départementales de la Haute-Garonne, 8 B 033, f°74 v.

³ *Ibid.*, f°77 v.

⁴ Castéran, Paul de. (1899) *Lettres écrites par M. de Froidour, grand maître enquêteur et général informateur des Eaux et Forêts au département de la grande maîtrise de Languedoc à M. de Hericourt, son procureur général à Toulouse et à M. de Medon, conseiller au présidial de Toulouse, publiées avec des notes par M. Paul de Casteran*, Auch, Imprimerie et lithographie G. Foix, p. 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, f°80 v.

It appears that these skills and activities led to many lawsuits between individuals and forest officers, as well as between the different components of the forest administration.

2 – Judicializing the environment

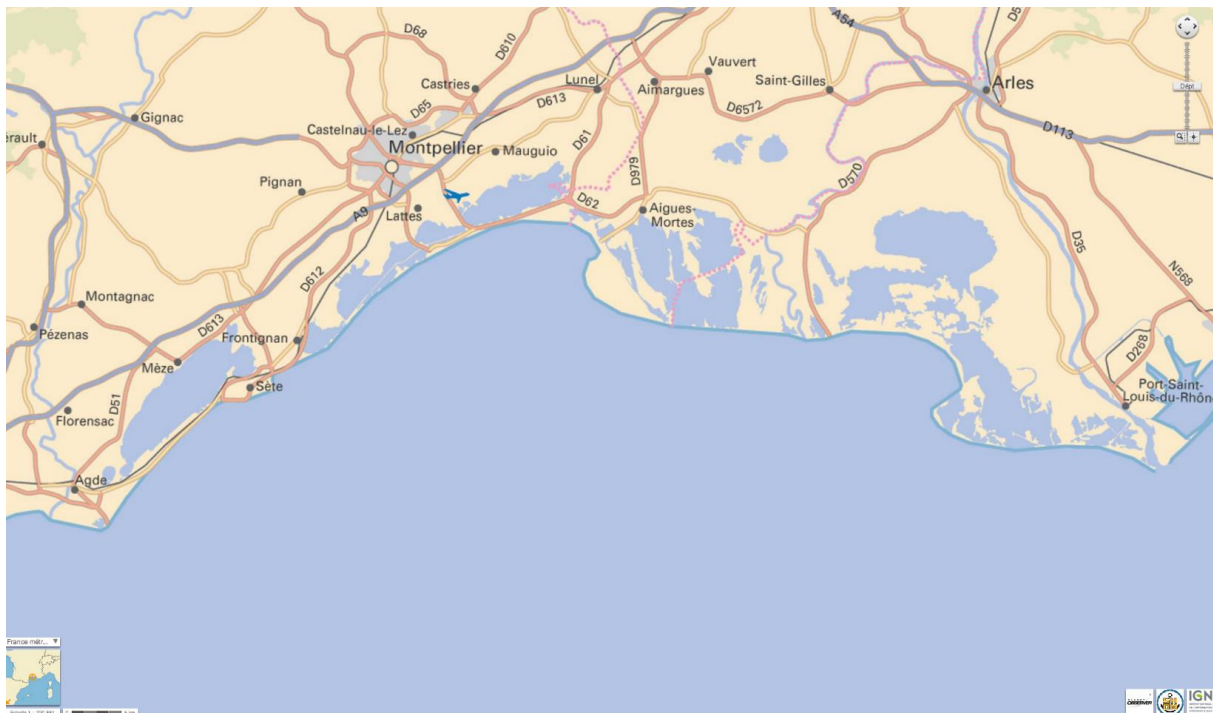
The Marble Table (which is the highest forestry's court in the province) claimed to have jurisdiction over the water issues, and prevented officers of the “*maîtrises particulières*” from exercising their jurisdiction. This caused an administrative as well as judicial blockage that kept the administration from verbalizing the individuals who ignored orders concerning the maintenance of windmills and channels.

This block led to devastating floods, because the channels that were commonly used to channel away the overflow of water were no longer being cleaned and were thus unable to fulfill their derivation function. The bridges, roadways' mills or mills themselves were no longer able to resist heavy water surges, that Froidour attributed to "l'excessive hauteur et de la proximité des montagnes d'où elles descendent, causent ordinairement par leurs inondations de grands ravages"⁶. The flooding also ravaged many land plots (indeed without any drainage, the water stagnates, makes these plots unusable or ruining the crops. But the cities were by far the most damaged, as Toulouse was during the flood of 1727. No less than 939 houses were destroyed and 50 people died.

The management of the environment (even if the concept didn't exist as such during the Ancien Régime) appears in the forestry administration's archives under the form of a litigious and increasing legislation. This form of management reached its peak in the regulations that were enacted in order to protect fish resources, particularly in the Lower Languedoc.

3 - Protecting a coveted resource

The use of fishery resources was common the entire territory of the *grande maîtrise*. However, the case of the Lower Languedoc was different. It was the only place where the activity of the *maîtrise* was mainly devoted to the monitoring and to the proper management of ponds in the diagonal Saint-Gilles/Marseillan.



⁶ Archives Départementales de la Haute-Garonne, 8 B 025, f°274 v.

Figure 4. Lagoons in the *mâîtrise* of Montpellier (<http://www.geoportail.gouv.fr/>)

The importance of fisheries for the economy and for the everyday life explains this peculiarity: the ponds were not open spaces. They were rented and subservient spaces, meant to provide incomes to their owners : "tantost du cinquiemes poisson, tantost de onze deux et quelques fois de onze un, ce qu'on appelle pulment (du latin *pulmentum*, la chère)⁷". As such, they were subject to tax and benefit of a register as shown in the following slide.

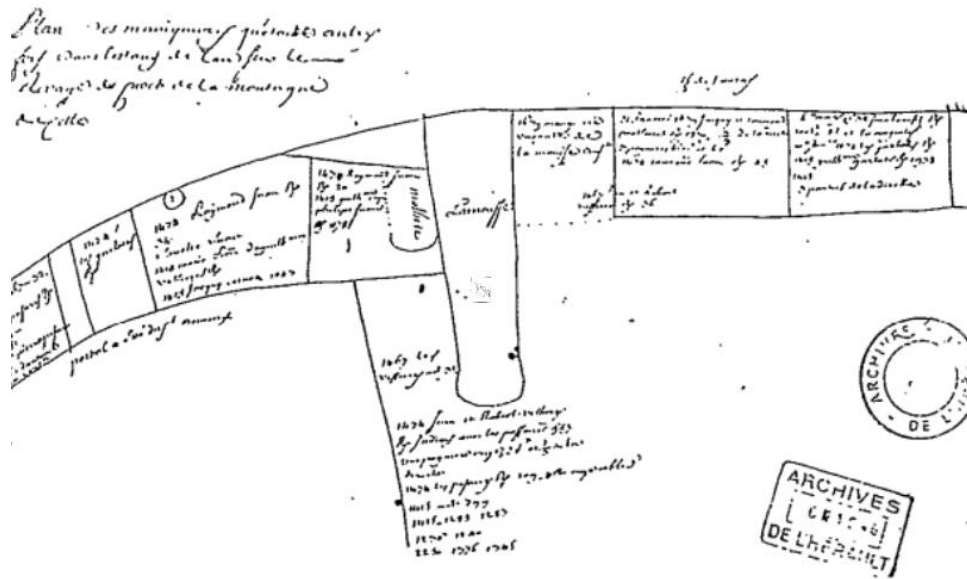


Figure 5. Détail des plans des maniguères qu'estoient autres fois dans l'estang de Tau sur le privage du pioch de la montagne de Cette. Archives départementales de l'Hérault, C 1246, Eighteenth Century ; in Giovannoni, Vincent. (1995) Les techniques traditionnelles ont une histoire : éléments pour une analyse ethno-historique des engins et des techniques de la pêche dans l'étang de Thau (Languedoc), *Questions sur la dynamique de l'exploitation halieutique*, Montpellier, ORSTOM Éditions, p. 219.

To do this, it was necessary to ensure the maintenance of lagoon ecosystems. So as to avoid the depopulation of ponds, the king's officers were obliged to draft a series of rules capable of sparing the delicate balance between fishing and the income it generates. In fact, despite its artisanal proportion, fishing caused a significant subtraction in fisheries. We must picture ourselves these ponds as spaces split down by many nets, near the banks, or all along their width, as illustrated in the following slide. These fisheries, also called *maniguères*, included a large number of facilities which worked as cages to trap the fish. While most of them targeted specific fish species using specific mesh sizes, some caught fish of all sizes and all ages.

⁷ Archives Départementales de la Haute-Garonne, 8 B 020, f° 154 r.



MANIGUIÈRE

Figure 7. Maniguière, in Giovannoni, Vincent. (1995) *Les techniques traditionnelles ont une histoire : éléments pour une analyse ethno-historique des engins et des techniques de la pêche dans l'étang de Thau (Languedoc)*, *Questions sur la dynamique de l'exploitation halieutique*, Montpellier, ORSTOM Éditions, p. 223.

The officers tried to ban these kind of devices.

To do this, several rules were enacted. Several of them retain more attention as they are emblematic of a rational use of the resource, through a strict control of the environment.

First of all, the devices that did not select specific fish were removed:

Nous jugeons que les maniguières, principalement celles de la tranchée ou l'on tend soixante et dix Berthouleres qui ne laissent passer aucun poisson sont tres dangereuses (...) et que si l'on deffendoit d'en user, les estangs seroient incomparablement mieux peuples de poisson⁸.

Meanwhile, the commissioners recommended freeing the *grau* (that is to say, the estuary of the lagoon) from any device, to allow the regeneration of fish stocks and to avoid to "scare" it too much.

Finally, a greater control of the fishing season was enacted, in order to let the fish spawn again without loss to rebuild the stock:

Et comme le poisson fraye dans la mer aux mois de fevrier et de mars, il seroit bon que toute sorte de pesche fut deffendue pendant ce temps la et mesme jusques au mois de may, parce que le petit poisson passe de la mer a l'estang pendant ce temps la (...) Il faudra du moins ordonner que pendant led. temps, les passages des maniguières demeureront entierement ouvertes⁹.

These many issues developed here were particularly crucial for the people whose income and livelihood depended on these lagoons. One may read between the lines that overfishing threatened the regeneration of the resource.

Conclusion

Let me now briefly conclude this presentation stating that the water issues constitute a significant part of the archives of the forestry administration. The brief examples that I have just been presenting are only a small part of the wealth of this fund, which is too often ignored, contrary to the fund of Bridges and Floor or of the Admiralty archives.

The issues related to the control and to the good management of the aqueous resource were both economic and societal. Like the forests, these water issues constituted the two facets of a environmental management, even though it was not called as such.

⁸ *Ibid.*, f°150 r.

⁹ *Ibid.*, f°153 r.

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