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States of Nature: Environment, risk and nation-building in the southern pine forests of the Landes de Gascogne

This paper focuses on one of the most famous “invented” landscapes of the nineteenth century, the *Landes de Gascogne* in southwestern France. Today one of the largest forests in Europe, the *Landes* was predominantly open moor and communal sheep pasture until the mid- nineteenth century. In 1857, the French state, concerned with increasing the productivity of the countryside, required villages to drain and forest their common lands. By the end of the nineteenth century, maritime pine forest covered nearly 1 million hectares, feeding a resin and timber industry that became the mainstay of the regional economy.

The troubled history of this engineered landscape, I argue, offers a revealing window onto the environmental dimensions of state-building in France. The state enlisted forestation in its broader project of territorial modernization and national integration. It promised to eradicate communal pasture, foster private ownership, facilitate capital investment and, ultimately, fund the infrastructure of national belonging- roads, railways, and schools. Yet margins (not to mention marginal environments) rarely behave the ways centers want them to. Both the management and the meaning of the forest quickly became appropriated by the landowners delegated to create it. Owners would re-invent the forest as a local and regional resource, one in need of constant vigilance both from a grasping state and disaffected rural populations.

In the broadest sense, this paper contends that modern states, far from presiding over the conquest of Nature, have in fact encouraged the proliferation of risky and uncertain natures, what Thomas Hughes calls “ecotechnical environments”. I argue that these unstable intersections of the natural and human-built world are not just artifacts of state power and contested sites of nation-building but also unpredictable agents themselves. In the *Landes*, the engineered forest has proven difficult for either state or local institutions to control. Threats of soil exhaustion, disease and, above all, fire have tested and at times reshaped both cultural perceptions and institutional policies of forest management. Fire, in particular, has been a difficult adversary, destroying lives and property while polarizing claims over the forest. Ultimately, I argue that in the *Landes* the boundaries between state and society, technology and nature, are constantly being invented, mobilized, policed, breached, repaired and re-invented as different groups seek to manage the environmental and social risks posed by monoculture forest.