

## Bruce Kreidler: How much wood could woodcutters cut if cutting wood in today woods

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### Bruce Kreidler

With recent columns concerning both the ability of trees to "capture carbon," and the historical need for trees as a strategic material, there's one pretty important character in forest life that I didn't cover.

To me, that person seems pretty important: The "woodcutter," sometimes mentioned in literature, both fiction and non-fiction.

Apparently, woodcutter types involved with forests belonging to "the realm" were not thought to be as skilled as the foresters who knew how to grow a tree so as to be able to get a ship's keel from it.

So, even when you are reading books about this kind of thing, there just isn't much about woodcutters.

However, when you read other types of history books, some having to do with people's everyday survival, woodcutters come up more often. Granted, it's usually only to mention that they were there, and practicing their trade, but they do get some mention.

Essentially, they mostly seem to be just taken for granted. To my way of thinking, that's a shame, because without them, it would have been a lot harder to maintain the king's forest for the uses it was intended.

My thinking is that it would be awfully hard to harvest lumber for ships, if the forest where you were trying to grow that lumber burned down every decade or two, or was haphazardly cut up for fuel by desperate tree poachers.

Usually, when woodcutters are mentioned, it will mostly have to do with the fact that they supplied fuel to the people where they resided. Certainly an important activity, and something that would be very important to the community at large, which would, of course, need to be able to generate heat for cooking and survival.

However, it may well be that the largest service they provided was to keep the extra fuel, which naturally builds up on the forest floor, controlled.

It takes a lot of firewood to supply all the cooking and heating needs of a community, even if that particular community happened to be in a more temperate area. I can't imagine how much firewood would be needed to supply a village of 200 to 500 people if they also happened to have cold winters. I suspect that most places had several woodcutters, not just one.

What I find so interesting about this is that hundreds of years ago, people came up with a system that protected important forests, and at the same time benefited pretty much everybody who needed wood for fuel. Not bad, considering that these days, we are faced with some of the same forest protection issues, and have not always done quite as well.

While we may not be looking to our forests to build big honking capital ships, or a huge merchant fleet, we have a lot more need for timber and lumber than our ancestors ever could have imagined. And yes, in many places we do a great job of managing the trees that deliver those products.

On the other hand, a lot of our forests that we don't log, seldom, if ever, have the naturally built up woody debris cleaned out, and eventually, despite our best efforts, all that accumulated fuel catches fire, and the resulting forest fires are destructive in the extreme.

"The woodcutter" might seem like a pretty incidental part of pre-modern life, but I think that job was way more important than most people realize. In fact, looking at some of our current day forest conditions, maybe we should hire a few old-timey type woodcutters here and there.

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