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[Georges Buffon](#) is best remembered for his *Histoire naturelle*, a 44 volume encyclopedia describing everything known about the natural world. A genre that greatly rose in importance was that of scientific literature. Natural history in particular became increasingly popular among the upper classes. Works of natural history include [René-Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur](#)'s *Histoire naturelle des insectes* and [Jacques Gautier d'Agoty](#)'s *La Myologie complète, ou description de tous les muscles du corps humain* (1746). However, as François-Alexandre Aubert de La Chesnaye des Bois's *Dictionnaire de la Noblesse* (1770) indicates, natural history was very often a political affair. As E. C. Spary writes, the classifications used by naturalists "slipped between the natural world and the social ... to establish not only the expertise of the naturalists over the natural, but also the dominance of the natural over the social".^[171] From this basis, naturalists could then develop their own social ideals based on their scientific works.^[172]

The target audience of natural history was French polite society, evidenced more by the specific discourse of the genre than by the generally high prices of its works. Naturalists catered to polite society's desire for erudition – many texts had an explicit instructive purpose. But the idea of taste (*le goût*) was the real social indicator: to truly be able to categorize nature, one had to have the proper taste, an ability of discretion shared by all members of polite society. In this way natural history spread many of the scientific developments of the time, but also provided a new source of legitimacy for the dominant class.^[173]

Outside ancien régime France, natural history was an important part of medicine and industry, encompassing the fields of botany, zoology, meteorology, hydrology and mineralogy. Students in Enlightenment universities and academies were taught these subjects to prepare them for careers as diverse as medicine and theology. As shown by M D Eddy, natural history in this context was a very middle class pursuit and operated as a fertile trading zone for the interdisciplinary exchange of diverse scientific ideas.^[29]