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Environmental History with an African Edge

Naming the workshop on which this volume is based "The Edges of Environmental History" was an inspired move by Libby Robin. "Edge" is a word that can be used in many contexts, has a wide variety of meanings as both noun and verb, and suggests opportunities and adventures. In addition, edges can serve as an enabling metaphor for environmental history as a discipline, as well as for its growth points, interstices, and adventures. Thinking in this way is appropriate, relevant—and fun.

Two people I admire have been edgy: their voices had urgent edges, they edged thinking in new directions, and they gave an edge to the way in which we conceptualise our world. One was Greg Dening, whom I met through Tom Griffiths at a graduate student workshop entitled "Challenges to Perform" at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra in 2000—a truly memorable occasion. Greg was a remarkable man, whose quotation about "othering" strangers appeared in huge lettering on a banner above the South African National Gallery in Cape Town in 1996 during Pippa Skotnes's exhibition "Miscast." Greg's life-defining moment came when he realised that he wanted to write the history of "the other side of the beach."[1] Like Henry David Thoreau, Greg had long been interested in islands—particularly Oceania in his case—but far from regarding islands as self-contained small continents, Greg wanted to conceptualise what had happened, and indeed what continued to happen, on the beaches—the point at which islands met the incoming and outgoing ocean and what, and who, it brought with it. In his book *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures and Self*, he explains how he came to appreciate that "beaches are limen, thresholds to some other place, some other time, some other condition. Writing a beach will always be a reflection on that edginess, a reflection of that edginess."[2] There is in fact, Greg Dening realised, no "other side of the beach . . . each side can only tell its own story by also telling the other's,"[3] a comment relevant also to terrestrial frontiers. The edge, whether cultural, political, ideological, geographical, or natural, is not a hard line but is permeable and, indeed, sometimes illusory.

1 Greg Dening, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures and Self* (Melbourne: The Meigunyah Press, 2004), 12.
2 Ibid., 31.
3 Ibid., 13.

The other person I greatly admire—a biologist rather than a historian—who investigated edges but who also created them and flourished in them was, of course, Rachel Carson. I am privileged to have been invited by the directors, Christof Mauch and Helmuth Trischler, to chair the academic advisory board of the centre named after Rachel Carson here in Munich, a relationship that has been a highlight of my academic career and the centre an international scholarly development that has breathed life and excitement into the edges between environment and society. I cannot thank them (and the centre) enough for according me the very great honour of hosting and sponsoring the workshop.

Carson's 1955 book, the second in her marine trilogy, was entitled *The Edge of the Sea*. This liminal and ever-changing space, she maintained, was "a strange and beautiful place . . . always the edge of the sea remains an elusive and indefinable boundary."[4] Carson wrote this work on the cusp of the environmental revolution which she herself did so much to create.

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Environmentalism of the kind that Carson stimulated had little effect in South Africa until the 1970s. Then, in 1974, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Pretoria took the opportunity afforded by the international Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE, founded in 1969) to initiate what it called the Cooperative Scientific Programmes. This was a series of ecological and environmental investigations that galvanised scientists in many biological fields to analyse and research issues caused by, or that impact on, humans and the environment. It also interested members of the public, including my husband, Vincent, and me, and it was our concern with exposing and bridging the division between the hard sciences and the humanities that these programmes illuminated so clearly that led me into environmental history.

At the time, southern African environmental history could have been described as a field "virtually totally neglected,"[5] but there was a rich thread of social history that

4 Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 1.
5 Jane Carruthers, *Game Protection in the Transvaal 1846 to 1926* (Pretoria: Archives Yearbook for South African History, 1995), 1.

had begun in the 1970s with a new generation of scholars who employed a Marxist paradigm of class relations to explain African dispossession, capitalist industrialization, and the disruption of indigenous lifestyles. Social history was politically activist, and around its edges, although not an overt priority, were environmental themes.[6] William Beinart has argued that thinking of an "African" environmental historiography within this genealogy has distanced it from the historiography elsewhere by situating it within African social history.[7]

The environmental revolution played out in Africa somewhat differently from elsewhere. In South Africa it was directly shaped by apartheid and by the differing worldviews of black and white citizens. Roderick Nash—who was a great influence on my work and who has become a good friend—could write of the emergence of national parks within the national framework of the history of the United States and record the pride with which the majority of citizens viewed their national parks.[8] I was keen to contribute to this literature by providing a South African perspective and found it quite the opposite from the North American experience. Nature protection exposed the gulf between an ideology of a white elite, for whom national parks and other protected areas were morally worthwhile, accessible, and important, and impoverished black people, the majority of whom were forced to eke out a precarious living as a migrant proletariat or face rural poverty on marginal or unproductive land. It was highly political and highly divisive. Cast either as "police boys or poachers," there was little space for black South Africans in national parks,[9] while a growing population was crowded into homelands, some of which bordered on protected areas where a tourist industry thrived, predicated on the welfare of wild animals and their careful management.[10] Small wonder, then, that as negotiations towards a "new" South Africa took shape in the early 1990s, there were calls to abolish national parks—the Kruger National Park in particular. As expressed in *The Baltimore Sun* in May 1995:

6 William Beinart, "African History and Environmental History," *African Affairs* 99 (2000): 269–302.
7 Gregory Maddox, "'Degradation Narratives' and 'Population Time Bombs': Myths and Realities About African Environments," in *South Africa's Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons*, eds. Stephen Dovers, Ruth Edgecombe, and Bill Guest (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).
8 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind.* 4th edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
9 Jane Carruthers, "'Police Boys' and Poachers: Africans, Wildlife Protection and National Parks, the Transvaal 1902–1950," *Koedoe* 36, no. 2 (1993): 11–22.
10 Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press, 1995).

> To the tens of thousands of people who enter it each year, Kruger National Park offers the chance to mingle with lions, elephants and the other wild beasts of Africa. But for the impoverished millions of black people who live on the park's border, it represents an anachronistic bastion of white privilege. For generations, the people on the outside of the park's electrified fence have been like street urchins with their noses pressed up against the window of a showplace. In South Africa's new democracy, those people are now demanding to be allowed inside, to benefit from the potential riches there . . . [11]

Two unexpected edges developed around national parks and African exclusion from them. The first was successful land restitution claims after 1994 on the Kruger National Park (by the Makuleke and others) and the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (by the Khomani San), the negotiated contract park of the Richtersveld, and others still under review.[12] The second relates to the reluctance of the National Parks Board authorities in the 1970s and 1980s to employ English-speaking South Africans and Rhodesians, despite excellent academic and professional qualifications and expertise. These people found spaces for their skills. Freed from the bureaucratic constraints of the National Parks Board and thus at liberty to hire qualified black African staff and to experiment with community conservation, restoration ecology, and wildlife reintroductions, a park such as the Pilanesberg National Park, situated in Bophuthatswana, one of the "independent" homelands, became an international leader in these fields, and in later years even came to influence the philosophy of South African National Parks (SANParks).[13]

Remaining with the theme of protected areas and their edges, in recent years there has been considerable emphasis on transfrontier national parks, some of which are controversial but which are designed to improve relations between neighbouring governments by straddling edges that had been demarcated in the colonial era.[14] These parks go

11 Michael Hill, "Fenced-Out Villagers Await South African Park Reforms," *The Baltimore Sun,* 24 May 1995.
12 Jane Carruthers, "Mapungubwe: An Historical and Contemporary Analysis of a World Heritage Cultural Landscape," *Koedoe* 49, no. 1 (2006): 1–14; "'South Africa: A World in One Country': Land Restitution in National Parks and Protected Areas," *Conservation and Society* 5, no. 3 (2007): 292–306.
13 Jane Carruthers, "Pilanesberg National Park, North West Province, South Africa: Uniting Economic Development with Ecological Design—A History, 1960s to 198," *Koedoe* 53, no. 1 (2011).
14 Martin Pabst, *Transfrontier Peace Parks in Southern Africa* (Stuttgart: SAFRI, 2002). See also www.peaceparks.org.

under a number of names, including Transboundary Protected Areas, "Peace Parks," and Transfrontier Conservation Areas. The first, in 2000, was the 38,000 square kilometre Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, an amalgamation of South Africa's Kalahari Gemsbok National Park and Botswana's Gemsbok National Park that straddles the dry Nossob River (the international boundary). This venture encouraged others in the region, including the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (comprising the Kruger National Park, Mozambique's Coutada 16, and Zimbabwe's Gonarhezhou), the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area, and the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Initiative that straddles Lesotho. There are others throughout Africa. These enterprises highlight the transnational history of the region—a historiography that aims directly to blur edges. The year 1994 brought South Africa back into the international community, forcing us, in addition, to focus on "contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of government."[15] I was pleased to have been one of the commissioning editors of the *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, edited by Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier.[16] Movements and flows of people, ideas, goods, finance, and services are at the heart of transnational analysis. How productive this kind of thinking may be was shown many decades ago by the "Annales" historians of the 1930s to whom we environmental historians owe so much. A transnational framework identifies new and blurred spaces and with these new edges come fresh insights and fresh histories.

Natural resources exist in disregard of national boundaries. The transnational dimension of environmental history has generated debates that have influenced South Africa's environmental history conceptually, including the question of just how relevant the environmental history of the United States has been to other parts of the world. Extremely influential in this regard was the work of Richard Grove, author of *Green Imperialism* and for some years the editor of *Environment and History*. He and some other historians of British imperialism and colonialism were adamant that environmentalism was a consequence of past imperial and colonial eras and not of the modern environmental movement in the United States. Both Grove and the very eminent John McKenzie have promoted environmental history outside of the United States as being more "interesting

15 Pierre-Yves Saunier, "Transnational History;" in *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History, From the mid-19th Century to the Present Day*, eds. Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2009), 1047–55.

16 Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

and innovative," "more integrated, outward-looking and comparative . . . in uncovering the processes and discourses of colonial expansion and cultural encounter" than the "ultra-nationalist" perspective characteristic of North America.[17]

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It is also true that historiography from the emerging world—of which South Africa is part—has its own edge. As Paul Sutter expounded upon so well in his article on what environmental historians in the United States could learn from non-US environmental history, we have specific research questions and priorities that are related to our environmental, political, economic, and social situations.[18] Contributing to volatility and endemic violence in many emerging countries is the enormous gap between rich and poor that has direct environmental consequences. As measured on the Gini index, South Africa is tenth among the 30 countries with the greatest inequality. The effect of this is that the majority of citizens have a poor quality of life while those who are wealthy are extremely rich. This is exacerbated by the fact that land is unequally distributed and equitable service provision problematic for many reasons. Just one of the consequences of the inequities is that politicians and society prioritise employment, economic growth, and development, and this is predicated on the use of the country's bountiful natural resources. In South Africa this has led to the construction of coal-fired power stations, mineral extraction from environmentally sensitive areas, and similarly inappropriate developmental projects.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, environmentalism was an international political movement. In the South African situation of that time, this translated into robust debates around environmental justice.[19] These focussed on "brown" rather than "green" issues: demands for clean water and less industrial pollution, worker safety, and land for housing and subsistence farming. Using slogans like "apartheid divides, ecology

17 Richard Grove, "North American Innovation or Imperial Legacy? Contesting and Re-Assessing the Roots and Agendas of Environmental History 1860–1996," unpublished paper presented at the Colloquium on the Environment, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, February 1996; Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Grove, "Editorial," *Environment and History* 6, no. 2 (2000): 127–29; Grove, "Editorial," *Environment and History* 1, no. 1 (1995): 1–2.

18 Paul Sutter, "Reflections: What Can US Environmental Historians Learn From Non-US Environmental History?" *Environmental History* 8, no. 1 (2003): 109–29.

19 Jane Carruthers, "Dainfern and Diepsloot: Environmental Justice and Environmental History in Johannesburg, South Africa," *Environmental Justice* 1, no. 3 (2008): 121–25.

unites" and "the greening of our country is basic to its healing," environmentalism rode a wave of euphoria. The expectation was that after a divided political past, all South Africans regardless of race, class, or age cohort, would care for the physical environment because—unlike authoritarian apartheid—environmentalism was grass-roots mobilisation for "our future and for our children" within a united democratic nation.[20] However, this kind of environmentalism has waned for many reasons, although the issues around environmental injustice remain evident and demand attention.

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The colonial experience was, without doubt, the defining historical experience of the continent, at least south of the Sahara. The African environment was certainly the site of the struggle for power over people and resources, and the environment is integral to examining other axes of power and injustice.[21] The colonial experience is too diverse to be encapsulated in a single postcolonial theory that merely dichotomises "colonisers" and "colonised." As Sachs argues, this is a circular argument that prevents any possibility of an advance in thinking. It locks history into a stereotype of an unchanging bi-fissured exploitative relationship between monolithic groups, recognising neither change over time nor specific historical context. It is only through careful and sophisticated historical scholarship that the postcolonial trap of simple divides that Sachs believes has crippled environmental history will be avoided and fresh perspectives on colonial and other power structures unearthed.[22] In southern Africa both colonised and colonisers were highly diversified and the imposition of an overarching "settler mentality" was uneven, specific, and always challenged strongly by ongoing resistance. The region exhibited great "hybridity" and was (and is) replete with sub-nationalisms and competing subaltern discourses and cultures. In short, there were, and are, many edges. Beinart refers to a "struggle to free historiography and social studies from narratives of dependence, victimhood and romanticism."[23] In this regard the research of environmental historians

20 Jacklyn Cock and Eddie Koch, eds., *Going Green: People, Politics and the Environment in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15; Eddie Koch, Dave Cooper, and Henk Coetzee, *Water, Waste and Wildlife: The Politics of Ecology in South Africa* (London: Penguin, 1990); Brian Huntley, Roy Siegfried, and Clem Sunter, *South African Environments Into the 21st Century* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau Tafelberg, 1989).

21 E. Stroud, "Does Nature Always Matter? Following Dirt Through History," *History and Theory* 42 (2003), 75–81.

22 Aaron Sachs, "The Ultimate 'Other': Post-Colonialism and Alexander von Humboldt's Ecological Relationship with Nature," *History and Theory* 42 (2003): 111–35.

23 Beinart, "African History and Environmental History," 302.

has gone a long way to changing historical and current thinking about African issues, yet little is known about indigenous or authentic regional natural resource strategies or biocultural knowledges that might have been, or how they might be revived or integrated into modern conservation biology and management. At stake are environmental and social resilience and sustainability. These challenges become all the more urgent with fears that global climate change will have inequitable effects and with the realisation that economic growth and development will not take place without improving the environmental health of the poor.[24]

Environmental history is *the* humanities field that lies at heart of the interface between people and their physical environments. Tom Griffiths thoughtfully calls it "a distinctive endeavour [that] moves audaciously across time and space and species," that "challenges some of the conventions of history," and "questions the anthropocentric, nationalistic and documentary bases of the discipline."[25] Within environmental history, particularly with an African edge, we have an arena in which to broaden the horizons and boundaries of historical study. It could become one of the most important and relevant fields, particularly in the emerging world. Not only can environmental history "allow a more complex reading of the past [and] also challenge and revitalise the subject of history itself,"[26] but it can also relieve the historical narrative from becoming bogged down in "tragic tales" as Mark Carey calls them, and provide a reinterpretation of our understanding of historical processes.[27]

24 Joan Martinez-Alier, "Reflections," *Development and Change* 43, no. 1 (2012): 341–59.
25 Tom Griffiths, "How Many Trees Make a Forest? Cultural Debates about Vegetation Change in Australia," *Australian Journal of Botany* 50 (2002): 375–89, 377.
26 John MacKenzie, "Introduction," *Environment and History* 10, no. 4 (2004): 371, 377.
27 Mark Carey, "Latin American Environmental History: Current Trends, Interdisciplinary Insights and Future Directions," *Environmental History* 14 (2009): 221.