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The Ends of Environmental History: Some Questions

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The purpose of this commentary is step back from the specifics of the foregoing papers and raise some wider historiographical questions. It is written bearing in mind two broad issues that were raised during our sessions and continue to be aired on a regular basis in other fora. The first of these concerns the interface between environmental history and the history of ecology, which as we noted in the introduction needs to be systematically developed further. Secondly, even as environmental history develops rapidly, there is considerable dispute about the roots and objectives of the field between practitioners coming from different disciplinary, national and regional contexts.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF ECOLOGY

In writing about the history of environmental policies and politics in specific contexts, environmental historians often confront environmental sciences in action – bodies of scientific knowledge and situated practice institutionalised in professional traditions and organisational and other settings.

There is a significant body of work on the history of ecology, including the papers in this collection. A great deal of this work has been to identify the various strains of the 'environmental' sciences and thought, and the myriad contexts in which they have been practised. Among the earliest attempts at doing this was Clarence Glacken's epic, *Traces on The Rhodian Shore* (Glacken 1967). In a long and sweeping intellectual history of Western civilisation ranging from classical antiquity to the eighteenth century, Glacken identified three key themes in human attitudes to the natural world. The first of these was the idea of a designed earth, the doctrine of final causes as applied to natural processes. This, Glacken argued, was the basis for the emergence of natural history and ecology and their interpretation of the nature of earthly environments as wholes and as manifestations of order. Glacken's second theme was the idea of environmental influence, which, building on the ancient contrast between *physis* and *nomos*, i.e., between nature and law or custom, led first to climate being held responsible for the inebriety or sobriety of whole peoples in the post reformation period and then to the idea of the limitations which the environment as a whole imposes on all life, in the work of Montesquieu, Hume, Wallace, and Malthus. Glacken's

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final theme was the idea of human beings as modifiers of nature. He argued that whereas in the work of John Ray and Count Buffon this was seen as positive and optimistic, it was, by mid-19th century, and especially in the work of George Perkins Marsh, seen as negative and pessimistic.

There have been several attempts at writing histories of ecology since Glacken. Some (e.g. Whittaker 1962, Brewer 1960, Macintosh 1985; Edgerton 1983; and Bowler 1992), have concentrated on the histories of clearly identifiable 'self-conscious' ecological sciences, or to use the phrase of one historian of science, 'ecology as done by professional scientists' (Nicolson 1988). Others (e.g. Worster 1977) persisted, like Glacken, with the 'antecedents' of ecology.[1] In the meanwhile scholars in the mainstream of the history of science have been producing a considerable wealth of material on scientists and natural historians whose work has contributed to the development of the environmental sciences and thought, without necessarily emphasising the environmental ideas and research of their protagonists (e.g. Spary 1993 on Buffon; Dettelbach on Humboldt; and the 'Darwin industry').[2]

Having been successful in large measure in identifying several strands of both institutionalised ecology and the antecedents of 'ecological' thought, a project that now needs to be undertaken more systematically is to *situate* these knowledge systems. There is a need, for example, to explain the social, political and economic milieus in which they arose; the manner in which they were institutionalised; the cultures of their practitioners; and the relationships between institutions and personnel in the diverse sites in which such work was and is being done. Then there is the issue of the ways in which the environmental sciences have been sought to be 'applied'; how they have contributed to existing and new applied ecology disciplines; the resultant attempts at policy formulation; the question of who these politics served; the cultures of expert communities, and the attitudes of experts toward nature, resource and 'other peoples'. While some work does indeed exist on such issues, (e.g. Weiner 1988; Grove 1995; Osborn 1994; Mitman 1992; Rajan 1994, Drayton 1993; Wilson 1992 and McCraken 1982) much more needs to be done on other domains of the environmental sciences. Some of this involves re-visiting a great deal of the history of ecology marked as 'done' (e.g. Cittadino 1990; Kingsland 1985; Tobey 1981; Nicolson 1984; MacPherson 1971 and Fischedick 1995) and drawing out the social 'situatedness' and politics of the people and institutions they discuss.[3] Several of the papers in this issue and other special issues on the history of ecology such as in the *Journal of the History of Biology* over the past decade (*JHB* 1986, 88 and 92), are illustrations of the kind of work that can be done. It is however equally important to extend such analytic approaches to the history of the social sciences as well, especially to the histories of the various traditions of 'social ecology' in disciplines such as geography (Buttimer 1971 and Livingstone 1992); anthropology (Orlowe 1980, Ellen 1982 and Bennett 1976); and economics (Norgaard 1994 and Martinez-Alier 1987).

A related project that cries out for attention is to stake out systematically the relationship between the environmental sciences and various ideologies, social utopias and values that have far reaching ramifications on how people look at some very basic issues. What are the roots and histories of such everyday concepts as carrying capacity, demographic saturation, limits to growth, sustainability and climate change? How do we situate some of the twentieth century variants of such ideas and the genealogies that some ecological practitioners of our time construct (e.g. Hardin 1969)? How do these concepts and ideas get naturalised, then socialised, and then give rise to or get adopted by social movements that emphasise the nature of life, the harmony of natural processes, the undesirability of certain human actions, and pronounce on race, culture and civilisation (e.g. Bramwell 1989)? How does environmental history deal with technological pessimism and technoscepticism in general? In particular, how does the social history of science and technology respond to the kinds of arguments advanced by Merchant 1980, Worster 1977 and Skolimowsky 1981 given that it is now three decades since the publication of Lynn White Jr's well-known paper, 'Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' (White 1968)? Moreover, how do we recover and situate various traditions of concerns about the impact of human technology and risk? (e.g. Beck 1995; Giedion 1948; Heidegger 1977; Luhmann 1993; McKibben 1989; Mumford 1970; White 1962; and Veblen 1921).

II. REFLEXIVITY AND PURPOSE IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Turning to a different set of historiographical issues, the creation myths of North American environmental historians emphasise, among other things, the influence of the frontier and western school of American history and to an extent the French Annales historians (Worster 1988: 291). These two traditions, the Americans argue, laid the foundations of the field by emphasising the environmental basis of society. Scholars elsewhere however accuse the Americans of ignoring other equally important traditions that could be seen as forerunners for environmental history. In a recent polemical and provocative paper, for example, the British historian Richard Grove has attempted to claim that the seeds of environmental history were sown, not only by the Americans and the French but by British colonial geographers, geologists and archaeologists (Grove 1996). Interestingly, some scholars from India and elsewhere see Grove's argument itself as a form of British neo-colonial revivalism,[4] and in a recent internet debate, South Africanist and South Asianist members of the American Society of Environmental History staked vastly different genealogies for the discipline.[5]

A reason for this sometimes parochial exchange is that many environmental historians have moved in to the field from other traditions – often with strong self-identities and standpoints. They see environmental history as an opportunity

to extend the scope of their regional economic, social and political historiographies while preserving the broad parameters of their respective traditions. While there is indeed an openness to borrow and learn, there is equally a resistance to being subsumed into what some see as new forms of intellectual globalisation. Hence, British historians like Grove feel the need to challenge their American counterparts, and Indian environmental historians take great pain to distinguish their work from both American environmental history and a generic 'colonial environmental history', pointing out the distinctiveness of their nationalist and post-colonial historiography. Similar arguments can be made for other national and regional contexts.

A corollary to this is that while there have been some excellent historiographical discussions *within* each of these traditions, there has been little effort to understand the common ground *between* different traditions. Environmental historians thus live in several parallel worlds and with the exception of individuals doing comparative work, often do not meaningfully converse with their counterparts working on other contexts.

The time has therefore come to be aware of the various genres of environmental history and actively examine the *spice* (similarities, patterns, interconnections, continuities and differences, and evolution) of the discipline. It would be instructive to comparatively explore specific historiographical genres, such as those on the United States, Britain, Germany, France, the Mediterranean, Northern Europe, India, South Africa, Australia, and Latin America.[6] It is important in doing so to be sensitive to particular historical traditions. Categories such as 'colonial environmental history' should be unpacked and desegregated in order to better understand the several different theoretical and political standpoints therein. Much of South Asian environmental history, for example, stems from the subaltern school and addresses issues of access to and control over natural resources and the hegemony of the state. There is also a strong move toward viewing environmental history from the perspective of agrarian history, and toward examining pre-colonial contexts. A great deal of South African history is about the impact of settlement, frontier alienation and the symbolic aspects of environmental imperialism, such as trophy hunting and the establishment of national parks. While there is indeed a considerable degree of thematic overlap, the historiographical traditions that have given rise to environmental history in these contexts are different, and reflect the wider character of professional history in these areas (Rajan 1998).

A related issue that we would do well to bear in mind is that there are several cognate fields with histories and traditions different from our own, but from which we have a great deal to learn. Among these are historical geography, landscape history and garden history, each of which, in turn have distinctive national styles. (e.g. Meinig 1968 and 1979, Hartshorne 1939, Brown 1948, Green 1991, Butlin 1993, Conzen 1990, Baker 1972, Frantz 1996, and the journals *Landscape* and *Journal of Garden History*).

To conclude, I would like to raise a big question about the ends of environmental history. Although most of the founders and practitioners of this field have been historians by training and vocation, a considerable proportion of our audience lies outside, in disciplines such as geography, anthropology and environmental studies. This has resulted in environmental history being interpreted and packaged in a myriad different ways. To give an example, James O'Connor, the founder-editor of the journal, *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, sees environmental history in the following terms:

> Environmental/ecological history is not so much the history of how environment/ ecological systems affect humankind and political and material, and social life. The main problem for environmental history is how human agency modifies, shapes, revolutionises nature and built environments and cultural landscapes. Its method is thus an active materialism; it puts a mirror to the world and shows the world how it has produced, shaped, etc., its own nature, including its own body. And the world does this by its labor, social labor, the division of labor, defined as material activity. (O' Connor n.d.)

While such a view resonates with part of the environmental history project, as laid out, for example, in Worster 1988, it also leaves out a great deal. The same goes for approaches that see environmental history as a subdiscipline of social theory or a component part of a new political ecology (e.g. Peet and Watts 1993; Bryant 1992). The existence of multiple interpretations raises some important questions for how environmental historians themselves view the field. Where precisely do we draw the line between the objectives of our discipline and what our colleagues in other social scientists want to/see us doing? Where do we depart, if we do, from other, more conventional sub-domains of academic history? How do we see the relationship between environmental history, policy, advocacy and activism? What, in essence, is the ultimate objective of the discipline?

NOTES

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[1] These two historiographical perspectives are often opposed. Historians who write about the discipline of ecology have in particular taken great exception to the work of those like Donald Worster who write about the history of ecology from the point of view of the history of ecological thought. See e.g. Nicolson 1988 and Egerton 1983.
[2] Unfortunately, though, there has been very little conversation between these historians

and either environmental history or the history of ecology, which is in itself and important historiographical issue for the future.

[3] Each of these books is excellent in its own right – as solidly researched pieces of work in the history of science. It would however be useful to explore their subjects from the perspective and agendas of environmental history.

[4] There is no documented critique of Grove's paper, and I am not quite sure the allegations are justified either, but the fact they are raised is an illustration of a wider contest over purpose and identity in the field of environmental history.

[5] This discussion is archived in the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) Web page (http://h-net2.msu.edu/~aseh/).

[6] Two good examples of such an exercise are Beinart and Coates (1995) and Herrera (1997).

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