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"Science and the Desiccationist Discourse of the 20th Century"

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Saberwal, Vasant K. "Science and the Desiccationist Discourse of the 20th Century." *Environment and History* 4, no. 3 (Oct., 1998): 309–343. doi:10.3197/096734098779555547 . Recent ecological research has questioned the scientific validity of a number of environmental disaster scenarios, particularly those centred on the causal linkages between deforestation and desertification and intensified flooding. This essay explores the progression of theoretical models and empirical research linked to the understanding of the capacity of forested systems to regulate the hydrological regimes of a given area. Drawing upon writings of American and Indian foresters, I suggest that a diversity of viewpoints with regard to the climatic and protective capabilities of forests, expressed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries gradually gave way to a more unified - and highly alarmist - 'desiccationist' discourse by the middle of the 20th century. This position has been sustained within much of the popular press as well as in the publications of numerous conservation agencies, despite being based on models of forest functioning discredited in the ecological literature since the 1920s. This essay documents this transformation, and explores some of the factors that may have helped in the production of this powerful and lasting discourse on degradation. All rights reserved. © 1998 The White Horse Press

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