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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
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Samuel Temple

Unruly Marshes: Obstacles or Agents of Empire in French North Africa?

As long as marshes have not totally disappeared, Algeria's prosperity will not be complete.
— Dr. François-Clément Maillot, 1875

Out of the reclaimed marsh grow men strong and vigorous, "good for the plow, and good for the battle."
—Dr. Edmund Sergent, 1947

Environmental historians struggle to describe the contact zone between nature and society. It is our Bermuda Triangle, easy to lose one's bearing in. We meet other curious souls there, trying, like us, to gauge the horizon, the relationship between people and their surroundings, the distance between past and present. It has become a home of sorts, although it is unruly—full of complex exchanges, subtle flows, and sudden collisions. How do we describe this intertidal zone, this convergence of human and nonhuman, and to what end? What of our historical actors? Were they merely buffeted by its currents, or do they have things to teach us? Were the boundaries between nature and society any clearer to them? The obscure history of marshes in North Africa is as good a place as any to consider such (unruly) matters. Through a short account of French reclamation in Algeria, I suggest that it is precisely between two divergent notions of environmental agency—environments acted upon and environments acting—that unruliness emerges as a provocative and potentially useful theme for environmental historians.

Where Soldiers Die and Empires Are Born

At first glance, the presence of marshes in colonial North Africa may seem anomalous. Historically speaking, too little water—rather than too much—was the environmental challenge of this region for natives and settlers alike. Sensibly, historians have tended to focus on how aridity shaped colonialism, both as an environmental constraint and

a discursive set of claims and fears about the environment. Yet lingering on the boggy edges of empire has its rewards. Upon closer examination, marshes have much to tell us about the nature—in both senses—of French colonialism. During the formative years of French conquest and occupation (1830–70), the greatest environmental challenge was *too much* water. Marshlands stood between the coastal cities and the Algerian interior and became formidable obstacles to French colonial aims. Soldiers and settlers alike fell victim to their malarial airs. Yet, paradoxically, marshes not only repelled imperial aims; they enabled them, becoming vital pathways of empire. Their transformation into productive agricultural land became a key part of French colonial identity, a symbol of environmental mastery and, by extension, cultural supremacy. That these marshlands ultimately proved difficult to control indicates just how unstable that identity—and mastery—was.

French expeditionary forces landed at Sidi Ferruch in 1830 and quickly captured the coastal cities. Their progress was slowed, however, once they turned their attention inland, towards the vast marshy plains to the south. Known as the Mitidja, the region was both prime settlement territory and a strategic gateway to the Algerian interior. Unfortunately for the French it was also malarial. The Mitidja quickly gained the reputation as a man-eater. This “killing climate” fouled the air with noxious miasmas, those invisible agents of disease that dominated the medical imagination prior to, and even after, the advent of germ theory. The French had good reason to fear the region: despite the fierce resistance of Algerian tribes, the biggest killer of French soldiers was malaria. Between 1830 and 1860, soldiers in the *Armée d’Afrique* were 33 times more likely to die of malaria than from military action. Expeditions and outposts in the Mitidja suffered particularly high mortality rates, and tales of death and disease became part of military lore. Bouffarik, a military colony literally built on top of marshes, became synonymous with death. In a single year, the “climate sickness,” as many called it, claimed 92 settlers and three successive priests sent to administer last rites. Faced with such losses, military leaders grew skeptical about settlement. It took only a few months after their arrival in 1830 for the first French commander to declare the Mitidja—and by extension, all of Algeria—unfit for French living, concluding it was “nothing but one great cesspit” and the “tomb of all those who dare cultivate it.” Ten years later, his successor glumly concurred: “Cemeteries are the only growing colonies that Algeria supports.”

The Mitidja did not repel all its suitors, however. For pro-settlement groups, the road to empire ran through, not away from, the marshes. What better theater to demonstrate the genius of French civilization and its mastery of nature? Embracing a narrative of environmental ruin that served so many would-be European colonizers, colonial boosters blamed Turkish decadence and Arab ignorance for the creation of marshes. According to them, the heroic work of the Romans had been squandered, their irrigation and drainage systems reduced to ruins. The French would take up the mantle of their imperial forebearers, remaking the region into the granary of a new empire. The transformation of sickly marshes into healthy and productive fields would vividly illustrate—and thereby legitimate—the French civilizing mission. In the end, settler optimism, fueled by feverish dreams of colonial riches, won out over military skepticism. Henceforth, the Mitidja became both the material and symbolic site of French claims of environmental agency and, by extension, the environmental impotence of Algerians.

Water Out of Place

Once the major campaigns against native forces were over, military and civilian engineers waged a parallel war on the Mitidja, intent on transforming it into a land fit for Europeans. Engineers bent themselves to the task of “rationalizing” the hydrology of the Mitidja. For the French, this meant fighting against basic realities of climate and hydrology. More rain actually fell in Algiers than Paris, but unhappily for the French almost all of it came in the winter months, usually in torrents. The Mitidja was essentially an enormous catch basin for seasonal run-off, collecting waters from the Atlas Mountains to the South. With water rich in limestone and other debris, the rivers, or *oueds*, that tumbled down into the flat plains of the Mitidja slowed and spread out. With only one main outlet to the sea, the rivers bled their waters into surrounding areas, creating seasonal marshes and stagnant pools—breeding grounds for malaria-carrying *Anopheles* mosquitos. To combat these inconvenient truths, the French created hydraulic networks. Engineers, with the help of much forced native labor, scored the landscape with drainage canals and ditches, using the natural slope and paths of the four major river basins to ensure a suitable gradient.

The immediate goal of this hydraulic engineering was to create a landscape suitable for commodity production, primarily wheat, orchards, vineyards, and livestock. By the

1850s, some colonial observers were already talking about the “miracle of the Mitidja.” The village of Bouffarik, once considered deadly, became a testament to French environmental mastery. The transformation of its sickly marshes into healthy and productive crops became a symbol of the French civilizing mission. As one former resident recounted, “engineers pulled Bouffarick out of the mud, drained its marshes, altered the course of rivers, leveled the soils, planted orchards, gardens and forests . . . Today the climate is excellent, the air is salubrious . . . Bouffarick has become the healthiest, happiest and most prosperous of all French settlements.” Engineers were not only reclaiming marshes; they were inventing a new landscape of French belonging.

Yet celebrations over the conquest of marshes were premature. In the summer of 1857, a mysterious epidemic broke out across the Mitidja. The colonial governor sent out anxious missives to his prefects and engineers, asking for their opinions about its cause. The responses reveal an interesting shift in attitudes towards environmental agency. While there was a general consensus that the persistence of marshlands, fed by an unusually wet winter, contributed to the outbreak, most pointed to another, unexpected agent of disease: the drainage networks themselves. The problem, it seemed, was one of *curage*, the cleaning and upkeep of canals and ditches. The matrix of man-made channels had begun to clog up from the siltation of limestone-rich waters. Vegetation grew quickly in the nutrient-rich sediment: marshes were being reborn inside the very technology designed to eradicate them. It made little practical difference whether one believed that illness spread by miasma or mosquito. The French were engineering their own insalubrity now; or, rather, their engineered landscape was.

The displacement of risk from marshes to infrastructure, from native to colonial nature, turned narratives of French environmental agency inside out. Unruly nature emerged from inside the systems designed to control it. Understandably, fingers were pointed. Engineers and state officials blamed settlers for not maintaining their hydraulic systems. Settlers, on the other hand, viewed lingering insalubrity as a failure of state, not society. It simply had not done enough. One observer wrote acidly in 1863: “Unfortunately, neither Arabs nor emigrants are completely to blame. If the land, abandoned and used for centuries, exhales its feverous miasmas, if pestilent marshes persist, if there are not enough trees to purify the air, and if the rivers are, for the most part, unhealthy, the fault lies partly with the state for not improving and draining the lands enough.”

Despite these setbacks, the development—and myth—of the Mitidja continued apace. With lands prized from native Algerians—through military and legal violence—European settlers spread across the region. Soon, the “miracle of the Mitidja” became a testament to the hardy frontier souls who dared to cultivate it. Its story, often repeated, cast settlers, not the French state, as the true environmental agents of the colony. Nature, like the Algerians themselves, had been conquered, disciplined, and retrained. That, at least, was the story.

From Miasma to Malaria

When participants gathered in Algiers for the Second International Conference on malaria in 1930, the first tour they took was through the Mitidja. Once an “infected plain,” they were told, the Mitidja was now healthy and prosperous, thanks to French engineering, French settlement, and, most recently, French science. In truth, the emergence of malarial science contributed little to the conquest of the Mitidja. True, the discoveries of the plasmodium parasite by Alphonse Laveran (himself stationed on the edge of the Mitidja) in 1880 and of the *Anopheles* vector by Ronald Ross in India in 1897 shifted attention from miasmas and marshes to mosquitoes and humans. Antimalarial programs attempted to control the human “reservoir” of plasmodium parasites through spleen exams, quinine distribution, screen installation, education, and, to a lesser extent, segregation. Yet environmental engineering, despite its grounding in miasma theory, remained an important part of French antimalarial campaigns. New drainage projects, insecticide spraying, canal cleaning, even the introduction of mosquito fish all focused on reducing the breeding habitat for *Anopheles*. Above all, the antimalarial campaign understood the importance of maintaining French waterworks. As Edmond Sergent, head of the antimalarial services and president of the Pasteur Institute in Algiers, wrote in 1933, “domesticated waters offer no habitat for *Anopheles*.”



Poster Commemorating the Centenary of the Conquest of Algeria by France (Henri Dormoy. "L'Algérie 1830-1930." Poster. 1930. Pays de grande production agricole. Imp. Paris).

Water, however, kept finding ways to evade domestication. Indeed, the very existence of an antimalarial service spoke to the persistent unruliness of the Mitidja. One of Sergent's main concerns was the clogging up of the Mitidja's plumbing a now vast hydraulic network of canals, drains, and ditches. Siltation was an ever-present challenge given shallow gradients and the high percentage of limestone and other sediments suspended in the water. As in the 1850s, the hydraulic landscape had, inadvertently, fostered the growth of a new kind of marsh, a "linear marsh" of choked drains and ditches. It was no coincidence that the first antimalarial campaign targeted railway lines and stations where drainage ditches and mixed crowds of Europeans and Algerians converged. Although championed as proactive measures, antimalarial campaigns highlighted the flagging environmental agency of both settlers and the colonial state. Colonialism had overcome one set of environmental risks only to encounter other, more complex risks that emerged from the very infrastructure and institutions of empire itself. The eruption of environmental unruliness anticipated the social and political unruliness to come.

Unruly Histories

What difference does unruliness make, both in the histories we seek to understand and the stories we choose to tell? In the case of French Algeria, paying attention to unruliness underscores the ecological uncertainty of colonial rule, something that gets lost in more instrumentalist readings of colonial environments. There is now a formidable scholarship on how narratives of environmental degradation served to reinforce colonial claims over both resources and people. Caroline Ford and Diana Davis, both prominent environmental historians of France, argue that exaggerated stories of deforestation justified and legitimized colonial conquest in North Africa. Yet one is hard-pressed to find nature "talking back" in these accounts. Ideologically charged, it remains strangely inert and mute. Unruliness helps one tune in to the ways that nature escapes through the cracks of instrumentality, and how it exceeds the boundaries and meanings we attribute to it.

Many environmental historians would probably vigorously deny that they are deaf to the unruly speech of nature. Many would probably nod in agreement to Timothy Mitchell's provocative question, "Can the mosquito speak?" After all, what is the point of environmental history if you have little sense of nature's agency? Yet I think there is a way we fancy ourselves—environmental historians, that is—as the only ones who hear these strange

noises. According to Mitchell, the British in Egypt were incapable of grasping the composite agency of nature because they were unwilling to disentangle the knot of political, technological, economic, and ecological regimes that together supported their empire. According to anyone, or anything, with environmental agency threatened the very assumptions of modernity and its exaltation of European rationality. Yet it seems clear, at least in Algeria, that the French were aware of the tangled web of environment and infrastructure, ecology, and politics. That modernity produced new, more complex sets of risks was not lost on them. I think this is so because, as Bruno Latour suggests with a wink, “we have never been modern.” French colonial order certainly attempted to maintain rigid distinctions between nature and culture, just as it did between native and settler. But everywhere you look you see evidence of how much work that actually took, of how incomplete its workers knew the project to be, and how they, almost despite themselves, struggled with their own assumptions about agency. And so, to finally come around to my next reason for attending to unruliness: it is also useful for sweeping away some of the cobwebs that still cling to our assumptions about modernity, then and now. In some ways, one might argue that our historical subjects were more, rather than less, attuned to their unruly worlds. In that case, we have as much to learn *from* them as we do about them.

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