

“It’s Not All about Us”: Reflections on the State of American Environmental History

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Paul Sutter has provided a valuable, balanced, and insightful review of the development of many of the central trends and tensions of the field of environmental history. He expressed an appreciation, which I share, for the diverse ways that, over the last quarter century or so, environmental historians have complicated the nature of nature, challenged Edenic pristine myths, recognized the hybrid nature of biocultural systems, and illuminated the role of power and privilege in contests over (and thefts from) terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Yet in the concluding section of his article, having praised the field’s strengths, he honestly worried “that all the attention given to complexity and hybridity was creating a haze of moral relativism.” Nevertheless, he contended, the twin narratives that had originally animated the field—recognizing dramatic anthropogenic environmental decline and an ecological awakening arising in salutary response—continue to characterize it. While Sutter accurately perceived the presence and danger of moral relativism, I am equally concerned with the normative implications being drawn from these new environmental histories. Moreover, I am less certain than Sutter that most of today’s environmental historians are still animated by an understanding of the accuracy of the declensionist narrative and by an urgent desire to promote an ecologically enlightened response to it.¹

My less sanguine perceptions are not limited to environmental historians, however, but apply to a wide range of scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, when reading much of the environmental history scholarship published since 1990 it would be easy to conclude that those promoting the protection of what they understand to be “natural” environmental systems are ignorant and naïve about the extent to which such systems are significantly anthropogenic. One might even gain the impression that such actors are only seeking to secure privileged access to and use of the earth’s lands and waters, that they are unmoved by historical injustices, and that they are ignorant or indifferent to the plights of marginalized peoples who struggle for access to basic environmental goods. As Rob Nixon has argued, there is a penchant among “postmodern” and “post-colonial” critics (and, I would add, among many environmental historians influenced by them) to portray

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¹ Paul S. Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” *Journal of American History*, 100 (June 2013), 94–119, esp. 119.

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environmentalists as unconcerned with social justice and to charge that biocentric ethics mask privilege, self-interest, and even misanthropy.²

Given such views, disdain among academicians toward environmental activists is unsurprising, as when in 1994 the foundational postcolonial critic Edward Said called environmentalism “the indulgence of spoiled tree huggers who lack a proper cause.” I recently heard, for further exemplification, a young environmental historian express a similar sentiment and then aver, on postcolonial grounds, that all protected natural areas should be abolished, given the deracination of indigenous peoples that has often surrounded the establishment of such areas. Directly or indirectly, such criticism suggests that given increasing human need there is no place that should be set aside for natural processes where the human impact is minimized and that those who think otherwise are imperialists or complicit in imperial projects.³

My ethnographic and historical research into grassroots environmental movements in North America and beyond complicates simplistic perceptions of environmentalists and environmental movements. Although elitists and misanthropes can be found within environmentalist subcultures, many if not most environmentalists have been and are politically progressive and concerned about social justice, especially since the first Earth Day in 1970. Many of them were social-justice, antiwar, or anticapitalist activists who eventually realized that their humanistic concerns demanded that they take up environmental causes. In recent decades, middle-class and affluent environmentalists have been, sometimes dramatically, trying to restrain their material appetites and consumption. And the caricature of people who care about wildlife and environmental systems as affluent has long been, and remains, overdrawn. Some, perhaps especially the so-called radical environmentalists, choose to live in or near poverty, reasoning that materialism and money making are antithetical to their values and counterproductive to their activism. Some of these activists have also been deeply involved in efforts to defend indigenous and peasant cultures, and they also seek to protect the commons that these cultures still, or once, depended upon and managed far better than either private owners or nation-state bureaucrats.⁴

² While Rob Nixon documented and criticized such overgeneralizations, he also thought that they were understandable since many environmentalists have been indifferent to issues of social justice. To his credit he argued that it was time for postcolonial critics to recognize the profound ways that environmental degradation injures the poor, but he also repeated typical, postcolonial criticisms of environmentalists, usually without citing evidence for the asserted truisms that he was parroting. This said, his book is a step in the right direction, forcing environmentalists and their scholarly defenders and critics to face each other forthrightly. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

³ *Ibid.*, 50–55. Edward Said is quoted *ibid.*, 332n69. On the deracination of indigenous peoples, see Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson, 1998); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York, 1999); Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Norman, 1987); and Jim Igoe, *Conservation and Globalization: A Study of the National Parks and Indigenous Communities from East Africa to South Dakota* (Belmont, 2004).

⁴ Radical environmental activists founded organizations such as the Rainforest Action Network, Amazon Watch, and the Sacred Land Film Project. For ethnographic and historical studies of radical environmental movements, see Bron Raymond Taylor, ed., *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (Albany, 1995); Bron Taylor, “The Religion and Politics of Earth First!,” *Ecologist*, 21 (Nov.–Dec. 1991), 258–66, http://www.brontaylor.com/environmental_articles/pdf/Taylor-ReligionPoliticsEarthFirst.pdf; Bron Taylor, “The Tributaries of Radical Environmentalism,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 2 (no. 1, 2008), 27–61; Bron Taylor, “Resacralizing Earth: Environmental Paganism and the Restoration of Turtle Island,” in *American Sacred Space*, ed. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington, 1995), 97–151; Bron Taylor, “Earthen Spirituality or Cultural Genocide? Radical Environmentalism’s Appropriation of Native American Spirituality,” *Religion*, 27 (April 1997), 183–215; and Bron Taylor, “Religion, Violence, and Radical Environmentalism: From Earth First! to the Unabomber to the Earth Liberation Front,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10 (Dec. 2007), 1–42, http://www.brontaylor.com/environmental_articles/pdf/Taylor-ReligionViolenceandRE.pdf. A widely anthologized portrait of

No small number of those who begin work with humanitarian social-justice causes come to apply an anti-imperial logic to their own species, recognizing that as their own kind spread around the earth they have taken the lives and habitats of many nonhuman organisms, driving untold numbers of them to extinction. Not uncommonly, such understandings have been shaped by the work of environmental historians, but I have often wondered why scholars who are alert to and even outraged by human on human imperialism are so often indifferent to the ecocidal domination of humankind over the rest of the living world. Moreover, too many scholars have remained mired in simplistic and outdated understandings of nature protection movements as animated foremost by recreational or aesthetic preferences or by individualistic spiritual values. Since the time of Henry David Thoreau and Charles Darwin, however, the rationale for nature protection has increasingly been based on the value of biodiversity, as undergirded by understandings of biotic kinship, and the ecological interdependence and mutual dependence of every species. Scholars continue to find new ways of understanding the importance of protecting biological diversity and environmental systems. These include the biocultural understanding that humans can and sometimes do live in ways that are synergistic with the environmental systems they belong to and depend on rather than parasitical (therefore biological and cultural diversity are not antithetical but are mutually dependent); and understandings from the field of environmental psychology that environmental, physical, and emotional health is enhanced by, if not directly dependent upon, contact with relatively intact biological systems.⁵

radical environmentalist groups, based largely on the published writings of several of the most misanthropic voices among them, is Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third-World Critique," *Environmental Ethics*, 11 (Spring 1989), 71–83. For another critique of Western environmentalism, see Ramachandra Guha, "The Authoritarian Biologist and the Arrogance of Anti-humanism: Wildlife Conservation in the Third World," *Ecologist*, 27 (Jan.–Feb. 1997), 14–20.

⁵ Studies influenced by environmental psychology and evolutionary biology include Steven Stoll, "Farm against Forest," in *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis (New York, 2007), 55–72; Julie L. Lockwood and Michael L. McKinney, eds., *Biotic Homogenization* (New York, 2001); Jared Diamond, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race," *Discover*, May 1, 1987, pp. 64–66; Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York, 1997); Jim Mason, *An Unnatural Order: Uncovering the Roots of Our Domination of Nature and Each Other* (New York, 1993); Paul Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, ed. Florence R. Shepard (San Francisco, 1998); Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, 1991); Clive Ponting, *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York, 2007); and Charles A. Reed, *Origins of Agriculture* (Berlin, 1977). On the value of biodiversity, see Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley, 2010); and Bron Taylor, "Wilderness, Spirituality, and Biodiversity in North America: Tracing an Environmental History from Occidental Roots to Earth Day," in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religions: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, ed. Laura Feldt (Berlin, 2012), 293–324. Examples of biocultural studies are Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management* (1999; New York, 2008); Peter J. Brosius, "Local Knowledges, Global Claims: On the Significance of Indigenous Ecologies in Sarawak, East Malaysia," *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*, ed. John A. Grim (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 125–58; Thomas J. S. Carlson and Luisa Maffi, *Ethnobotany and Conservation of Biocultural Diversity* (New York, 2004); Roy Ellen, Peter Parkes, and Alan Bicker, eds., *Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and Its Transformations: Critical Anthropological Perspectives* (Amsterdam, 2000); Lance H. Gunderson and C. S. Holling, *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* (Covelo, 2002); J. Stephen Lansing, *Priests and Programmers: Technologies of Power in the Engineered Landscape of Bali* (Princeton, 1991); Ellen Messer and Michael Lambek, eds., *Ecology and the Sacred: Engaging the Anthropology of Roy A. Rappaport* (Ann Arbor, 2001); Darrel A. Posey, ed., *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity* (Nairobi, 1999); Roy A. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (New Haven, 1968); Roy A. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Richmond, 1979); Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999); Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos: The Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indians* (Chicago, 1971); Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, "Cosmology as Ecological Analysis: A View from the Rainforest," *Man*, 11 (Sept. 1976), 307–18; Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *The Forest Within: The World-View of the Tukano Amazonian Indians* (Totnes, 1996); Ricardo Rozzi et al., *Multi-ethnic Bird Guide of*

More scholars need to recognize the diverse rationales for environmental protection that have been unfolding. Moreover, as Sutter properly notes, there should be greater acknowledgement that state, national, and international environmental actors, by recognizing the injustices that historians and other critics have made clear, have begun to take a wider complex of (often competing) interests and values into consideration. Novel, imperfect, but still positive efforts at co-management of protected areas by indigenous nations and U.S. resource agencies provide one type of example. Past injustices are rarely overturned, but they can be mitigated, and when it comes to protected areas, this can be done in ways that provide some restorative justice while protecting biodiversity.

My reflections are rooted in Sutter's concern about moral relativism and by simplistic analyses and fanciful prescriptions offered by progressive critics. In few cases, for example, is the repatriation of land to its original inhabitants politically or practically feasible, and in some cases, depending on which values take precedence in difficult situations, this would not even be desirable. Whether analyses and prescriptions produce cynicism about those seeking to protect the diversity and resilience of ecosystems, or indifference to the entwined causes of biological and cultural diversity conservation—if either cynicism or indifference is the outcome of our scholarship—then environmental historians will be complicit in the erosion of both biological and cultural diversity. Given what I see in the academy today, I do not think this is an idle fear.

My final thoughts are inspired by Sutter's comment about those who have cast suspicion on the idea that we can derive our values from nature. Trained in ethics, I am of course familiar with the supposed "naturalistic fallacy" caused by deriving values from natural facts. I also understand the charge that such ethics are inherently conservative, supporting the status quo rather than some envisioned better set of environmental and social facts. To the contrary, however, I agree with Donald Worster's 1977 thoughts about the unfolding

the Sub-Antarctic Forests of South America (Punta Arenas, 2003); Richard Evans Schultes, *The Reason for Ethnobotanical Conservation* (Geneva, 1989); John Richard Stepp, Felice S. Wyndham, and Rebecca K. Zarger, *Ethnobiology and Biocultural Diversity: Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Ethnobiology* (Athens, Ga., 2002); Julian H. Steward, *Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups* (Salt Lake City, 1938); and Julian H. Steward, *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution* (1955; Urbana, 1972). Examples of studies influenced by environmental psychology are Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); Stephen Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, eds., *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington, 1993); Ian G. Barbour, *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes toward Nature and Technology* (Reading, 1973); William R. Catton, "Social and Behavioral Aspects of the Carrying Capacity of Natural Environments," in *Behavior and the Natural Environment*, ed. Irwin Altman and Joachim F. Wohlwill (New York, 1983), 269–306; Stephen Kaplan and Janet Frey Talbot, "Psychological Benefits of a Wilderness Experience," *ibid.*, 163–203; Stephen R. Kellert, "Affective, Cognitive, and Evaluative Perceptions of Animals," *ibid.*, 241–67; Katherine S. Van Wormer and Fred H. Besthorn, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Groups, Communities, and Organizations* (New York, 2007); Joachim F. Wohlwill, "The Concept of Nature: A Psychologist's View," in *Behavior and the Natural Environment*, ed. Altman and Wohlwill, 5–37; Warren Brown and Tim Kasser, "Are Psychological and Ecological Well-Being Compatible? The Role of Values, Mindfulness, and Lifestyle," *Social Indicators Research*, 74 (Nov. 2005), 349–68; Warren Brown and Richard M. Ryan, "The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84 (April 2003), 822–48; Louise Chawla, "Significant Life Experiences Revisited: A Review of Research on Sources of Environmental Sensitivity," *Environmental Education Research*, 5 (Nov. 1999), 369–82; Thomas Dietz, Amy Fitzgerald, and Rachael Shwom, "Environmental Values," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 30 (Nov. 2005), 335–72; Stephen Kaplan and Janet Frey Talbot, "Psychological Benefits of a Wilderness Experience," in *Behavior and the Natural Environment*, ed. Altman and Wohlwill, 163–203; Janet Frey Talbot and Stephen Kaplan, "Perspectives on Wilderness: Re-examining the Value of Extended Wilderness Experiences," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 6 (Sept. 1986), 177–88; and Netta Weinstein, Andrew K. Przybylski, and Richard M. Ryan, "Can Nature Make Us More Caring? Effects of Immersion in Nature on Intrinsic Aspirations and Generosity," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35 (Aug. 2009), 1315–29.

ecological and evolutionary world view: “With all of its ambiguities and apparent contradictions, there is really no place to go but nature.” He then argued that from such understandings environmental historians could surmise an “ecological ethic of interdependence,” although a “quasi-religious conversion” to awaken people “to the ‘oneness’ in or beyond nature” might be required. He noted that such perceptions and values cohere “with many of man’s ethics and principles, social aims, and transcendental ambitions.” Drawing on Darwinian understandings in the 1940s, Aldo Leopold argued similarly:

It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise.

I agree with Worster and Leopold that it is possible to derive ethics from evolutionary and ecological understandings. I would also add that it is no great stretch for ethical and emotional creatures to deduce from the struggle for existence an environmental and social ethics. This can be done by identifying and empathizing with other kind in their own struggles and by surmising that there exists an obligation to live and let live and thus to promote the kind of ecological and social relations wherein all species flourish. Of course, such broad principles leave unanswered many difficult questions about what specific actions would be effective or otherwise warranted, and they will not reveal the limits of obligations; the move from general principles to concrete judgments is usually fraught. Even so, many of these answers will come from the close observation of nature, and the difficulties of doing so do not negate the obligation. As the sociologist Bernard Zaleha has noted, “the alternative to ethics derived from close observation of actual biophysical reality is to rely instead on mental imaginings pulled from thin air, mere reifications of human biases and speculations. How can this latter option be thought a solid foundation for ethics, be they environmental or social?”⁶

My hope is that environmental history and other methods of analyzing the reciprocal interactions between humans and other organisms will help guide individual and collective action toward the flourishing of all species and ecosystem types. Toward this end, as Sutter’s essay implies, to provide that vision environmental historians will need both ongoing critical analysis of human failings as well as an ethical narrative of environmental enlightenment and social progress. Leopold insightfully noted that all ethics recognize that individuals constitute mutually dependent communities and are products of “social evolution,” which is an “intellectual as well as emotional process.” Cynicism and relativism are dead ends. I am grateful for scholars such as Sutter who remind us of the ways that the work of environmental historians should, and does, matter.⁷

⁶ Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977; Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 338. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (1953; New York, 1966), 116–17. Bernard Zaleha to Bron Taylor, Oct. 14, 2012, e-mail (in Bron Taylor’s possession).

⁷ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River*, 263.