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History 460 – American Environmental History

Paper #1

September 26, 2020

Home or Colony: Differing Perspectives on the Northeastern United States

"The ground affoards very good kitchin Gardens, for Turneps, Parsnips, Carrots, Radishes, and Pumpions, Muskmillions, Isquouterquashes, Coucumbers, Onyons, and whatsoever growes well in *England*, growes as well there, many things being better and larger," William Wood wrote in his *New Englands Prospect* in 1634.[1] A century later, in 1747, an agricultural reformer named Jared Eliot observed that much of the land in New England had become "so poor that it would produce turnips no larger than buttons."[2] The diminishing size of turnips was a symptom of a much larger problem—depleted soils from decades of improper farming. And it wasn't just the soil that had degraded—forests, wildlife, wild fruits, and many other natural resources no longer existed in the quality and abundance that Wood had recorded back in 1634. While Wood's account may have sometimes over-exaggerated the bounty of New England, there is no denying that the region went through massive ecological changes as control of the land shifted from the Native Americans to English settlers, who had very different ways of looking at and using the land.

The inhabitants of Europe and the Americas, separated by the vast Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, did not know that each other existed until Columbus first sailed across the Atlantic in 1492. Because their civilizations had been separated for thousands of years (or forever from some Native American points of view), it is not especially surprising that the inhabitants of these

two continents had developed very different ways of looking at land and of using the natural resources that it produced. While both Christian Europeans and Native Americans like the Haudenosaunee believed that humans had been created out of soil, the Native Americans had a much deeper spiritual attachment to the earth as their mother, the place their ancestors were buried, and the place from which future generations would arise.[3] The Native Americans of New England did not think of themselves as owning the land itself, only as having rights to use certain areas for hunting, fishing, agriculture, or villages. Many tribes in northern New England were migratory, following whatever food sources were in season. Those in southern New England practiced a shifting agriculture, clearing fields and planting them for several years before moving to a new area and letting the forest reclaim the land.[4] In contrast, the English colonists had a very different view of land ownership. They believed that land was a commodity that could be bought and sold, and that purchasing a piece of land gave the owner the right to do whatever he wanted with it—including cutting down the forest, fencing it in, and keeping other people from hunting or even walking on it. This disconnect between the ways that the colonists and the Native Americans viewed the land meant that what the Native Americans thought they were selling was not the same as what the colonists thought they were buying.[5]

One of the reasons that the colonists and the native peoples viewed land ownership differently was because they had different ideas of how they wanted to use that land. Both groups relied on animals for a significant portion of their diet, but the way they managed the land to raise those animals was very different. The Native Americans had no domesticated livestock and relied on hunting wild animals for their meat supply. To increase the population of these animals, they manipulated the forest by burning and other methods to create productive edge environments that could support more animals than mature forests. The colonists, though they

also hunted, preferred to rely on domesticated animals—cattle, sheep, and hogs—for their primary food supply as soon as sufficient numbers of these animals could be imported from England. Like the Native Americans, they tried to create a favorable environment for their animals by finding the most suitable spots for grazing and, perhaps accidentally, importing European forage plants that provided more reliable and nutritious cattle fodder than the native vegetation. The Europeans had developed quite successful grazing systems back in their home countries, though it took many years for them to transplant all the associated organisms to New England.[6]

Had English settlers only raised enough food for their own subsistence, their impact on the American environment might have looked more like that of the Native Americans. But even the Pilgrims—who came to America seeking religious freedom, not commercial profit—were still tied to the market economy of England and Europe. Non-food animals, trees, and other natural resources that couldn't immediately be used where they grew became market commodities, for paying off debts and purchasing items that the colonists perceived as necessities but couldn't grow or make for themselves in America. Fur-bearing animals were one of the first natural resources that Europeans turned into a commodity, long before they actually colonized North America. Traditionally, the Native Americans had only killed enough animals to provide the food and other materials that they needed. By trading with the Native Americans for furs, Europeans encouraged hunting far in excess of the animals' reproductive rate, causing serious decline in populations of fur-bearing mammals. It is notable that the Native Americans aided in this increased harvest of animals for the fur trade, suggesting that neither party realized that they were overhunting and would eventually cut off their supply of furs.[7]

The colonists and native peoples also had very different ideas about how to use the North American continent's vast forests. While the Native Americans managed their forests as hunting grounds, the colonists saw the forests partly as a market commodity that could be sent back to wood-scarce England and Europe and partly as "a barrier of mainly useless plants opposing the march of the plow." Some trees, like white pines, were reserved for use as ship masts. Others provided lumber, firewood, and ashes to ship back to wood-starved England. Many trees were just girdled or cut down and burned in place to clear fields for crop production, similar to methods used by the Native Americans but on a much larger scale. The English treated the American forests much differently than the woodlands in their home country, where a wood shortage forced them to avoid waste.[8]

Back home, the Europeans had established fairly good agricultural systems which had been sustained for many generations. Groups like the Pilgrims, who were "used to a plaine countrie life, & ye inocente trade of husbandry," hoped to transplant English agricultural systems to North America. But they quickly discovered that some of their staple crops, like peas and wheat, didn't grow nearly as well in the cold climate and stony soils of New England as they had back in Old England. The Pilgrims were saved from starvation only by the kindness of Squanto, who showed them how to plant maize or Indian corn.[9] Traditionally, the Native Americans in New England had grown maize in a shifting cultivation system, where they girdled the trees, burned the undergrowth, and used a stick to plant three to ten kernels of corn, along with a few bean seeds, in hills that could be up to a foot in diameter. The hills were usually three to four feet apart, but the intervening ground was usually planted with pumpkins or squashes, not left bare.[10] In the Northeast, women weeded the ground "with their Clamme shell-hooes, as if it were a

garden rather than a corne-field, not suffering a choaking weede to advance his audacious head above their infant corne."[11]

While the early colonists used Native American corn cultivation methods out of necessity, they soon imported draft oxen and horses and started to grow corn like they had grown wheat back in England. They used increasingly sophisticated plows with moldboards to break up the soil and replaced hand hoes with horse-drawn cultivators. The best way to save labor was to plant the hills of corn in a "checkrow" system, which made it possible to cultivate in two perpendicular directions, making hoeing mostly unnecessary.[12] This system saved a lot of labor over the methods used by the Native Americans, but it had one major disadvantage. Unlike wheat, which would produce tillers and form a dense mat of vegetation covering a field, corn cultivated using the new methods introduced by the English settlers left most of the soil surface bare all year long.[13] Unfortunately, what seemed like an ingenious way to cut down on the labor of corn production had catastrophic consequences on the hilly lands of New England. The exposed soil particles washed downhill in every rainstorm, creating small rills and eventually huge gullies that rendered the land useless for future agricultural use.[14]

Looking at the changes that took place in New England, and later the rest of the American continent, it is easy to conclude that the Native Americans were good stewards of their land and that the English were wasteful and exploitative. But to say that good or bad stewardship were inherent qualities of either people group is problematic. The English were just as good at taking care of their native lands as the Native Americans were, although they had different cultures and uses for resources and therefore used different land management practices. But for a variety of complex reasons, English settlers did not initially treat American land with the same care as their home soils. Instead, it seems that the pioneers in every region of the country threw

aside all caution about conserving natural resources, assuming that forests, wildlife, and soil fertility were all "inexhaustible." It was not until at least the second generation of colonization that New England farmers, faced with the reality of resource depletion, adopted soil, forest, and wildlife conservation practices that were more in line with those practiced either back in England or by the Native Americans.[15]

Perhaps the real difference between the way the Native Americans and English colonists related to the landscapes of the northeastern United States had less to do with culture or religion than with their relationship to the American environment. To the Native Americans, America was home, and they knew what they could and couldn't do to the land if they wanted to maintain the lifestyle to which they were accustomed. To the English, America was a "new" world, a seemingly infinite source of commodities for the "old" world to which they were culturally attached. They may not have realized at first that the "new" world was subject to the same rules of nature as the "old" world with its all-too-familiar limitations; or in some cases they may have perceived natural resources like fur-bearing mammals as expendable because they had lived without such plentiful sources of them in the past and could do so again when the supply was exhausted. It could be argued that the reason colonization initially caused so much destruction of natural resources was because the English did not understand or care about the American environment as much as their homeland. It is entirely possible that had the situation been reversed—had Native Americans invaded England—they might have caused just as many ecological problems.

[1] William Wood, *New Englands Prospect: A True, Lively, and Experimentall Description of that Part of America, Commonly Called New England* (1634; repr. Boston: John Wilson, 1865): 15.

[2] Hugh Hammond Bennett, *Soil Conservation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939): 871.

[3] Shepard Krech, III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999): 30-33; Susan M. Hill and Barbara Lorenzkowski, *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* (University of Manitoba Press, 2017): 22-24, 52.

[4] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003): 37-42.

[5] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 67-74.

[6] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 31, 51, 108, 142; Krech, *Ecological Indian*, 103-106; Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972): 73-102; Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 158.

[7] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 98-100; Krech, *Ecological Indian*, 151-209.

[8] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 108-118; Russell Lord, *To Hold This Soil*, US Department of Agriculture Miscellaneous Publication 321 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1938): 17.

[9] William Bradford, *Bradford's History "Of Plimoth Plantation" from the Original Manuscript* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1899): 16, 22, 116, 121.

[10] William D. Emerson, *History and Incidents of Indian Corn and Its Culture* (Cincinnati, OH: Wrighton, 1878): 29; Paul Weatherwax, *The Story of the Maize Plant* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1923): 204; Linda Murray Berzok, *American Indian Food* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005): 49-50.

[11] Wood, *New Englands Prospect,* 104.

[12] Weatherwax, *Maize Plant*, 81-91.

[13] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 147-150.

[14] Bennett, *Soil Conservation*, 868-869; Lord, *To Hold This Soil*, 24-28.

[15] Richard W. Judd, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997): 25-50, 50-63.