

Abby Kisicki
Brianna Lafoon
Disc. 305, Tues. 1:20-2:10pm

2. Historians have traditionally appealed to human ideas, intentions, institutions, and actions to explain past events. Environmental history also looks to a variety of non-human actors, material conditions, and environmental relationships in constructing its explanations, while also seeking to understand the causes of environmental change itself. Construct a carefully crafted essay using three extended case studies, supported by evidence from readings, lectures, and discussion sections, that seem to you to offer diverse and especially compelling examples of how environmental history works, offering an argument about what you see as the field's most valuable contributions to our understanding of the past.

RESPONSE:

When we think of 'history', we tend to think of the history of humans. But history is much more than human history. Human history alone can't answer the questions: 'How did we get here? What were we looking for?' What does answer those questions is the history of our ecosystem, 'eco', from Greek, meaning 'home'. As Prof. Cronon said in the first lecture, environmental history is about connections, not separation. Environmental history's most valuable contribution to our understanding of the past its teaching that human history has a direct connection to — and is in fact driven by — the history of the land and other non-human actors. Even as our socialized concept of nature tells us that we are separate from it, environmental history teaches us we must apply the historical framework of knowing that our human lives are wholly integrated with nature, and sustained by it.

European settlement in America was motivated by and sustained by an economically driven 'path out of town': the English market for lumber. In *Changes in the Land* and in lecture, we learned that when the English first surveyed North America, they took great notice to the large number of trees on the landscape, which they viewed as resources "free for the taking". The 16th and 17th century English settlers used an enormous quantity of wood in heating for their homes and for the construction of houses, using it even for the roof shingles of their homes. Even in applications where colonists would have used low-quality wood in England, they used high-quality wood in America because they saw the American landscape as having an immeasurably

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large abundance of lumber relative to the shortage they had of lumber in England, where the English were used to having to build half-timbered homes. This history translates to modern Americans' penchant for having super-sized cars, homes, etc. That part of America's identity had its beginnings in colonists' view of the 'abundance' of trees on the American landscape. In *Changes in the Land*, we also learn that the English government began to depend on the white pines of New England to construct the masts of their powerful Navy's ships. The market for New England's white pines, which had properties which were excellent for ship construction, was a major cause of the widespread forest-clearing of America in the 16th and 17th centuries. The lumber market served as a powerful international 'path out of town' in America's early colonial history that, in fact, was the primary driver of the rapid and widespread clearing and change of America's landscape.

While environmental history incorporates the context of non-human actors, that doesn't mean that human attitudes and ideas aren't factored into environmental history.

Thomas Cole, a painter who created some of the most famed and breathtaking artworks of American Romanticism, also wrote in conjuncture with his paintings. His prose sketch, "The Bewilderment", describes the writer's fictionalized violent, terrifying, awe-inspiring experience in nature. Cole describes anxiously hurrying through valleys with vegetation destroyed by a tornado, and falling a significant height down to a body of water that sweeps him away and traps him in front of a wall of stone, as he laments that he feels that he will die and that his friends and family will never know what happened to him. The passage is extraordinarily dramatic and terrifying. Cole's description of his experience in nature serves as an example of the Romantic concept of the sublime — an experience of nature which is steeped in man's experience of terror, solitude, darkness, and awe of God and the divine. Cole's encounter with the sublime abruptly ends as he finds himself seeing light, walking on a beach, until he hears dogs barking and comes

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upon a log cabin, where awaiting him is a woman cooking dinner, a fire in the fireplace, and an armchair made of the roots of a tree. The comfort that Cole feels when he's reunited with the elements of society — domesticated dogs, gender roles which dictate that women handle preparation of food, the taming of fire, the taming of trees' roots for the sake of man's relaxation — highlights the stark dividing line in Cole's mind that separated society from nature. Cole's comfort once he escapes "nature" and reaches the "home" is an attitude that's still present in American culture today. We take comfort in being at "home sweet home" and sheltered from the vastness of the natural world around us. This attitude allows us to see nature as pure, untouched, Godly, something to revere, something to go out and "visit" — even as the very roads on which we travel today to go out and see it required the very destruction of it.

Environmental history also teaches us that resources haven't just been used in terms of their physical substance. In the 8th lecture, we learned about the rise of water-powered mills during America's first industrial revolution in the 18th century. The water itself wasn't what was powering the machinery — the energy that humans harnessed from the kinetic energy of falling water was powering the machinery. This time period saw the rise of factories powered by underground water mills. In order for these factories to get their power from water, factories had to be located near water sources and even had water canals built underneath the buildings so that the lowest level of the factory could reap the water's energy to power the belts that ran vertically throughout the factory building. This system is an early example of a labor structure that is vertically aligned. We still reference vertical hierarchy in our modern corporate language: When we refer to our bosses, we say that they're 'my higher-up', or 'the guy above me'. This convention originates from the way humans harnessed the energy of a natural resource which they designed to use its energy in a way that could be harnessed by humans. The natural resource origins of vertical power structures can only be captured through the lens of environmental

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history. An environmental historical lens also helps us understand the ecosystem implications of industrialization, particularly H.J. Habakkuk's theory (from lecture 9) that what differentiates British land history from American land history is that Britain had a shortage of land and a surplus of labor, while America had a shortage of labor but a surplus of land. Habakkuk's theory helps us see industrialization through the lens of Americans' conception of labor. Even when we weren't physically sapping a resource, we relied on nature to do our labor for us, shifting the sourcing of labor from energy exerted by humans to energy exerted by natural resources. This environmental-historical lens helps us understand that humans' move toward industrial revolutions may not mean a net system reduction in necessary labor; it just means that humans are shifting the responsibility of labor that's needed for bigger and bigger tasks from humans to non-human actors such as water.

Environmental history, like history in general, is about asking questions. While general history asks the questions, 'What made things this way?' and 'How did we get here?', these questions imply our desire to answer one big action-based question: "Where do we go now?" With an impending climate catastrophe on our hands, we must look to history as if it were data which we should analyze for patterns that will point us to where we go now. Only environmental history, in its incorporation of human and non-human actors in telling stories about the past, can show us where we should go so that we can save our ecosystem — our home.

value: ^{MUCH} more context. All context.

↳ Env. history is essentially the hist of everything.

① (Changes in the Land) WOOD - MKTS/ECONOMIC
- overuse, driven by Eng. mkt for wood (capitalism)
→ translates to Am. bigness now

Thoreau
② (Cote, other) separation of society & nature - ATTITUDES / IDEAS

→ comfy @ "home", illusion of being away from nature
→ fear of nature

→ Niagara falls tourism/canoeing etc. today:
↳ roads for NF even constructed for tourists' own

→ The env. impacts are hidden from us -
this allows us to see nature as pure, untouched, Godly, a thing of its own -

even when the very road on which we travel to see it was constructed by the destruction of places like it.

③ (lecture) Labor, energy - VALUES

→ way back to Changes, - Eurs thought Ind men were

→ Habbakuk: Am: ↑ land, ↓ labor
Eur: ↓ land, ↑ labor

→ So Am's innovated, to create more labor. Labor from nature.

→ water mills as depletion of natural resource:

not physical, substantive resource - no ENERGY.

↳ we still do that and we have 1/3 of it as the environment too

see
↳ the wealthy didn't know
↳ urbanization
↳ today, big rich corps most contribute to C.C.
w/ "nature" destroying land & resources, process

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The above outline is clearer than the first one I made, which is below. It's just the same as this one, but it's the first, more detailed version. So please reference the above version!

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Conc. The question "what made things this way/how did we get here?" implies the following question: "Where do we go now?"

Intro History is data. It's the answer to the question, "Why should/shouldn't we do this?"

argument: Env. history is the key to steering our world away from impending climate catastrophe. ^{hist. being taught as} _{→ nature as resources? → everything is nature}

Pom. Changes: wood example - (markets) cap. _{→ overuse driven by Eng. [mkt] for wood}

ECONOMI/MKT
we fear! see it as separate, don't identify how did they begin to fear? → translates to Am. bigness now - cars, homes, _{→ fear as the start}

feel we're ours (and of the same bundle) → Pom. Readings: Emerson _{→ attitudes}

ATTITUDES: extremely present in enviro. ist thought right down the line

VALUES: energy from nature now instead of humans
→ aligns w/ ^{requiring less} labor in NE, changes physically
→ shows that even when we're not sapping a resource, we relied on nature in tech. innov.

SHARPKKUK: Eng. laid labor Ant. laid labor
constant tech innovations move toward ↓ labor, and ↑ reliance on labor or nature - until nature won't labor for them anymore

attitudes about nature: "home" - buildings, society - give us the illusion that we're away from nature, allow us to be comfortable & disconnected from nature - even though we're not.

Magin Falls: we go out to credit it, not just a part of our world
→ this is why we aren't addressing climate change so quickly - it's out of our heads