

Major Problems in American Environmental History

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MAJOR PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN HISTORY SERIES

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Major Problems in American Environmental History

Documents and Essays

THIRD EDITION

EDITED BY

CAROLYN MERCHANT

University of California-Berkeley



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Preface

Birds or oil? Ecology or economy? Nature or capital? The Gulf of Mexico oil spill on April 20, 2010, was a striking example of a major problem in American environmental history. The conflict is one between two approaches to knowledge, economy and ecology—both rooted in the Greek word *oikos*, meaning home or household. Economy is the management of the household, ecology the study of the household. Economic systems are managed for profit at the expense of ecological externalities. Ecological systems are open systems in which matter and energy flow across boundaries. In the BP spill, oil escaping from well casings and blowout preventers was moved by ocean currents and winds across the boundaries, booms, and berms set up to contain its spread. Plankton, corals, and fish were depleted of life-sustaining oxygen; fishers, oil workers, chefs, and waiters of life-sustaining work. All are part of humanity's larger planetary home—the *oikos*.

Environmental history illuminates the larger problems underlying current conflicts such as oil spills, forest depletion, and climate change. Insights into issues such as those in the BP oil spill can be found in this volume. Thus in Chapter 13 on the history of ecology, Donald Worster, Robert Clarke, and Linda Lear show how ecology as a science encompasses the entire human home and provides insights into how that home can be sustained. In Chapter 14 on water and energy, David Nye looks at the history of the choices society has made over the development of energy sources, whereas Adam Rome points out that in response to the 1969 Union Oil spill in Santa Barbara, California, thousands of demonstrators protested the unchecked power of “big oil.” And in Chapter 15, reporters discuss the relevance of world population growth to the debate over economy versus ecology, and Al Gore and Spencer Weart look at alternatives to fossil fuels in the debate over climate change.

Why do people study environmental history? Today, interest in the earth—its past, present, and future—commands worldwide attention. The 2009 Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen, Denmark, brought together

government leaders and environmental organizations from around the globe to address the problem of global warming, one of the topics explored in Chapter 15. As concern mounts over the quality of environments and human life in the future, the study of past environments—how they were used and how they changed—provides guidance for the formation of governmental policy. Leaders can learn from environmental history. Thus the rise of salmon fisheries in the Pacific Northwest and the role played in their depletion by the construction of dams for energy and flood control affect future policies on whether to build dams (or to decommission existing dams), a topic explored in Chapters 8 and 14. Environmental conditions also influence policy decisions. Urbanization of the American West, where droughts are all too frequent, prompts governmental funding of reclamation projects and soil conservation, as well as the interstate highway system linking east with west—themes explored in Chapters 9, 10, and 14. Environmental history, moreover, instills an appreciation of the complexity of human interactions with nature, and in this way contributes to a fuller understanding of history. Thus knowledge of rice cultivation by African slaves in the Southeast and of corn cultivation by Pueblo Indians in the Southwest casts new light on the conflicts that arose among the races and cultures of those regions, as Chapters 2 and 4 examine. Further, environmental history illuminates the different effects that forests, farms, and cities have on local environments, as Chapters 3, 5, and 12 reveal.

And there are still other reasons to study environmental history. Historical writings about nature offer aesthetic or spiritual perceptions of humanity's place in the natural world that continue to inspire respect and reverence for nature and to foster the conservation and preservation of nature. Poets who wrote about the natural world, such as Puritan Anne Bradstreet and slave Phyllis Wheatley; the Hudson River School of painters; New England transcendentalists, among them Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; and nature writers John Muir and Mary Austin initiated an appreciation of wilderness that influenced the creation of the national parks, a subject treated in Chapters 6 and 11. Gender and race also play critical roles in environmental activism. Women and men, blacks and whites, often perceive the environment differently and contribute diverse approaches to environmental movements as revealed in Chapters 12, 13, and 15. Such histories and case studies offer valuable perspectives to a world whose very survival depends on shifting from exploitative to environmentally sustainable development, and from inequality to environmental justice.

New to the Third Edition

The third edition of *Major Problems in American Environmental History* retains the broad goals of the first and second editions set out in the preceding paragraphs, as well as the basic structure of the book, and its most popular and successful documents and essays, making for a smooth transition to the use of the third edition in the classroom. The third edition, however, includes new topics and new scholarship in the chapters on the twentieth century in which environmental issues are rapidly evolving.

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New material is included on global environmental history, climate change, the environmental movement, recreation, and environmental health. New documents highlight the work of environmentalists Gaylord Nelson on the first Earth Day in 1970, David Brower on the problem of dams in the West, and Al Gore on climate change. New essays on global environmental history by J. Donald Hughes and the history of global warming by Spencer Weart bookend the volume. A major emphasis on the twentieth century has been continued, and those chapters have been updated. Included here are essays by Robert Gottlieb and Adam Rome on politics and masculinity in urban reform movements, a sharper focus on water and energy in the American Southwest, and new material by Paul Sutter on the role of the automobile in promoting consumer culture and national park tourism.

One of the strongest features of the book is the inclusion of the voices of people of color and women, and those contributions have been retained in the third edition. The roles of minorities and their interactions with each other and the environment are emphasized in essays by Andrew Isenberg on Indians and bison on the Great Plains; Judith Carney on “black rice” in South Carolina; William Katz on “black Indians;” Elizabeth Blum on slave women’s views of wilderness; Philip Burnham on Indians and the National Parks; Eileen McGurty on the origins of the environmental justice movement; Carl Anthony on African Americans and the environment; Winona LaDuke on native struggles for land and life; and the Principles of Environmental Justice from the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Women in the conservation, urban reform, and environmental movements appear as voices of change in the twentieth century, while Rosemary Radford Ruether highlights the role of ecofeminism as a global force in the twenty-first century.

Greater attention is likewise paid to international connections and globalization that reveal the historical and current roles played by the United States in the wider world. Historical influences on the North American environment, in addition to those of Europeans and Africans on the East Coast, include those of the French in Canada, the Spanish in Mexico and New Mexico, and the Russians in Alaska. Current international issues are reflected in the Johannesburg Earth Summit on Sustainable Development, the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, and why global warming is a global crisis. The book also incorporates new directions taken in the field over the past decade, such as that taken by Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Mark Stoll on the New England Puritans, Jessica Teisch on *Engineering Nature*, William Cronon on the meaning and value of wilderness, and Linda Lear on Rachel Carson’s ecological vision.

Structure, Scope, and Aims of the Third Edition

The third edition of *Major Problems in American Environmental History* is the result of more than four decades of the growth of the field of environmental history. This volume, like its companions in the Major Problems in American History series, draws on both documents and essays. It is intended as a primary text in a one- or two-term environmental history or environmental studies course, but it

also may be assigned to provide an environmental dimension to introductory classes in U.S. history. Chapter introductions discuss the place, period, and particular focus of each case history. The documents for each chapter provide a variety of perspectives written or spoken by those who lived in and helped to create the history of a specific environment. These primary sources stimulate students to form their own opinions on environmental history and, through discussion with others, to develop confidence in their own interpretations. The essays offer a range of views, demonstrating that scholars often draw conflicting conclusions from the same primary sources. This format encourages students to evaluate each interpretation, as well as to gain an understanding of the ways in which different underlying assumptions and positions influence the writing of history. It is hoped that the third edition, like the first and second, engages and challenges students to think critically about the American past and the role the environment has played and will play in the global future. This edition includes the glossary from the earlier editions, plus a timeline and integrates within the chapters a set of maps for reference to geographical regions, natural resources, and environmental conditions in various places and periods of history.

Acknowledgments

In compiling the third edition, I am grateful for contributions, suggestions, and evaluations from my students and teaching assistants over the past several years. I am also indebted to Sarah Thomas who collected and helped to evaluate the many outstanding articles and chapters recommended by reviewers and updated the Further Readings. I am grateful for the excellent suggestions made by Dylan Esson regarding the inclusion of particular documents and essays and ideas for truncating others.

The following reviewers of the third edition offered many helpful suggestions and helped shape and strengthen the volume: Andrew Graybill, University of Nebraska—Lincoln; Dwight Henderson, University of Texas at San Antonio; Connie Lester, University of Central Florida; James Longhurst, The University of Wisconsin—La Crosse; and Paul Rosier, Villanova University. Thomas Pater-son, general editor of the Major Problems in American History series, was extraordinarily helpful in framing the scope of each edition. I am grateful to my editor Jeffrey Greene, to Larry Goldberg who oversaw the copyediting, and to Rathi Thirumalai and PreMediaGlobal for producing the volume. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Charles Sellers, who over the years has profoundly influenced my interpretation of American history and helped me to conceptualize my approach to in environmental history.

I welcome readers' feedback on and suggestions for improving this anthology. I also would be interested in receiving copies of supplementary chapters that instructors or students create or other projects that grow out of the study of this volume.

C. M.

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