

## **The Past as Present Environmental History and Environmental Science**

Let's begin with the bad news. Most scientists consider history as bardic and archival. Historians are asked, like palace bards of old, to introduce affairs of state by singing the heritage of the clan; then they are expected to assemble the records of decisions and deeds into a chronicle or yearbook. In between, they depart the hall while the real business occurs. More thoughtful observers might add other tasks. Historians, it is hoped, should be able to contribute data, thus extending the range of analysis, and they should be able to provide lessons learned to guide future decisions. Occasionally - the summit of expectations - historians should contribute to the social and ethical dimensions of creating policy.

The good news is that historians can do all this: they just don't do it in the way others, particularly scientists, policy wonks, and practitioners, want them to. The glories of the past include gore and error as much as righteousness and wisdom, such that scholarly histories often quarrel with received legend in ways that displease the authorities, whether they be political or professional. What gets preserved depends on what it connects to; what participants think is important is not often what a professional historian considers significant and worth sheltering. The data of the past is not easily coded into the quantitative parameters of today's models. The lessons of history are plural and contradictory, and ultimately it is the realization that no single lesson exists, only the ceaseless, tidal pulls of context and contingency. A factory manager can identify and remove errors in the manufacturing process; but history is not a machine, the production of historical scholarship is not reducible to simple trial and error, and what works or fails in one setting may act very differently in another. This makes it difficult to extract ethical prescriptions from the tangled bank of living history, so that, while a moral universe, revealed and analyzed, is the ultimate product of humanistic history, that constructed world tends to run parallel to the constructed worlds of science, technology, and commerce. Scholarly history is qualitative, as much about means of expression as substance, or better, that what one says and how one says it cannot be disentangled.

In a sense, the two cultures are mirror images in their expectations of one another. The sciences would like history to tell them what they want to know in a way they understand and with sufficient authority that they can insert its sources into their own models, without all the apparent wordgames (and garbled blather) that clog the flow of information like so much arterial plaque. Similarly, history would like to take natural science at its published word as authoritative and immutable, a secular version of revelation, and not, as George Bernard Shaw famously put it, the worst form of knowing because it is always changing its mind. Surely, the sciences would protest that this image is a cartoon of what they are really about, that their knowledge is provisional, that inquiry is a form of organized skepticism. Yet that, in reply, is the attitude that historians would ask scientists to extend in return. What endures is what used to be called the eternal verities, those basic virtues such as courage, wisdom, humility, and the like. All of which leaves the common ground before both scholarships as the fallability of human knowledge and the need to act regardless.

Environmental history is a special case. It is not simply natural history with people in it but human history with nature in it. It is often said of history that it involves the search for a usable past. Environmental history adds to that charge, the search for a usable place. Its concern is how we live in the material world. Its particular vision is that the past remains in the present, or as William Faulkner observed, the past isn't over, it's not even past. The world looks and runs the way it does because of what has happened over time - an observation that should seem idiotically obvious to any discipline such as biology that considers evolution as an organizing principle. Tinkering with the ecological machinery requires not only saving all the pieces but knowing in what order they go. History is thus a necessary though not sufficient requirement to understanding where and how we live. And if it cannot say with absolute certainty how we *should* live, it can suggest ways we shouldn't, much as Popperian science can declare what is false but not unreservedly what is true.

The justification for historical scholarship is that it makes us better human beings by enriching our sense of why we are the way we are. Knowing more, and knowing it in more and varied ways, simply improve our capacity to act wisely and prudently. It makes unintended consequences less unexpected. Its output is not a matrix of prescriptive behavior; but then biologists have never justified the study of evolutionary ecology on the grounds that it will lead, as a bullet shot from a rifle, to prettier gardens and cancer cures. Rather, it enriches our understanding of our material selves, which makes improvement more likely. On that count both science and history share a common philosophy, and in the case of environmental history, a common cause in making our natural setting both a habitat and a home. That is environmental history's present to environmental science.

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