

Themes in global environmental history
CWEH workshop, 29th June, 2010, University of Sussex, 2p.m.- 5.30 p.m.
(Provisionally A155)

Global history signals a move away from the nation state as the unit of analysis, an analysis which has long been predicated on the record keeping of bureaucratic state structures. In a sense, imperial history has always had this advantage as empires could only be studied on a global scale. For environmental history, the nation state is the wrong scale on which to operate as ecological transformations unfold without any conception of borders. One of the many attractions of environmental history is the fact that much of its subject matter soils, plants, animals, climate and disease, pay little heed to national or other political boundaries.¹ The only variety of environmental history for which the nation-state format makes sense is political and policy history or if you are studying island histories. Yet even these histories cannot be studied in isolation unless they lend themselves to the nation state format. Environmental historians are arguably best able to lead the historical profession away from its reliance on the nation state as an analytical category.

As Donald Worster has noted 'to think globally about environmental history means to take an all-inclusive view to see the world as a whole, to study the planet as a single environmental system that has been radically reorganised by a single, integrated economy, technology and culture.'² It means transcending national boundaries or local concerns and focus instead upon what today binds all peoples and all eco-systems together, to understand how that happened and what the consequences have been. At its core global environmental history must deal with capitalism as the pioneering, and still the most important, architect of that new integrated world economy.' The global economy also has its own ecological vulnerabilities that must be studied by historians. The recent epidemic of swine flu shows how an outbreak of disease in one place can more quickly spread elsewhere. Oil rich countries can hold far-away nations hostage. The Icelandic eruption replicates stories told by environmental historians about the global ramifications of local catastrophes or local degradation. 'At the same time', as McNeill notes 'all global history should take account of local conditions whether it is environmental history or any other variety. It requires what natural scientists, especially those who work with satellite imagery, call ground truthing. Global environmental history, like all other global history, should include both microscopic and macroscopic lenses and provide local examples or case studies together with larger analyses and conclusions. Correspondingly... all local history, whether environmental or not should take into account larger perspectives, often not always global ones.'³

There is little doubt that European hegemony was based on the windfall resources of the colonies. However as noted the rise of the US illustrates the possibilities for new economic centres that are not strictly European. We can

¹ Keith Pomerantz

² Donald Worster

³ John McNeill

now see a time when Asians especially the Chinese and the Indians will dominate the global economy and environment. The success of these economies is changing the direction of globalisation away from its European centre. What will it mean for nature or society? As yet there is everything to indicate that Asians will simply replicate the attitudes and institutions of the West and it does not seem that there is a new social and environmental ethic waiting to emerge in the wings of the new Asian economies.

At the Centre for World Environmental History we have always been interested in themes in global environmental history. This is most evident through our project on 'the British Empire and the Natural World'. Between 1600 and 1960 the British Empire brought about an unprecedented transformation of the landscapes and environments of the world. This transformation occurred as a physical and biological consequence of economic globalisation and territorial expansion. The resultant ecological re-shaping was closely documented and it remains traceable in numerous papers and archives compiled both by private individuals and by colonial bureaucracies, naturalists, travellers and scientific services. Some of the documents and papers are often studied in isolation, but they have never been collected and researched for the network of socio-economic, literary, artistic and ecological information they contain. By bringing to light the historical past of the increasingly severe environmental challenges facing the world today, the work of the Centre for World Environmental History (**CWEH**) project on the British Empire and the natural world hopes to make a significant impact on the needs of cultural and environmental scholarship for the twenty-first century in Britain and the Commonwealth. Several stages of this project have already been planned and various collaborators from a variety of interdisciplinary fields have been brought together by CWEH. An initial feeder grant from the University of Sussex, the Leverhulme and the British Academy have already helped generate some publications, synergies and archival material on this exciting topic. The Centre is committed to providing the required infrastructure and backup for a network of researchers and scholars who have been associated with the project over the last few years. The research staff and associates are the authors and editors of several of the standard works published to date on environmental history and the history of science and are leaders in the relatively new interdisciplinary field. For the first time Dr Vinita Damodaran's work opened up in detail the critical part played by colonial forest policy in increasing the vulnerability of Indian tribal peoples. Dr Damodaran and Dr Richard Grove together edited *Nature and the Orient* (Oxford University Press) 1998, now considered the standard pioneering survey work on the Environmental History of South Asia. Dr Grove's *Green Imperialism* (Cambridge University Press 1995) showed for the first time how the environmental concerns of the French and British empires long pre-dated those of the United States and arose specifically from colonial conditions and early worries about artificially induced climate change in the eighteenth century, especially on oceanic islands. Dr Jim Endersby is a specialist in the history of science, with particular interest in the impact of empire on nineteenth-century Britain, and in the reception and influence of Darwinism. His first book *A Guinea Pig's History of Biology* won the Royal Society of Literature's Jerwood Prize and was long listed for the Guardian First Book award. He is also a specialist on Joseph Hooker. Currently one of our projects

is the correspondence of William and Joseph Hooker as successive Directors and ex-Directors of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew between 1842 and 1906 is undoubtedly the single most important source on the botanical and environmental history of the British Empire. These records remarkably remain an entirely unpublished manuscript source, and thus remain problematic to use. Along with Henry Noltie of the Edinburgh Botanic Garden, senior research associate of the centre propose to edit, transcribe and publish two initial bodies of the correspondence of the two men, starting with Joseph Hooker's critically important India correspondence between 1848 and 1851 and the letters written to William Hooker between 1825 and 1857. We are hoping to interest the University's strategic partner Kew Gardens in this project. Robert Iliffe, a historian of science at Sussex and a leading digitalisation expert is keen to explore the digital possibilities of some of these projects with us. Saul Dubow, another important historian of Science in South Africa, author of *Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and white South Africa*, 2006, is closely connected with several of our projects. Other members of the team include Kate Showers (*Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho*, 2004), a leading environmental historian of southern Africa, associated with this project and who is currently engaged in finishing a manuscript on the environmental history of Lesotho for the Leverhulme Trust and Alan Lester, the historical geographer, who has done considerable work on the idea of networks, *Imperial Networks*. Collaborative research networks have also been established with Professor Mark Harrison of Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, University of Oxford, Professor Deepak Kumar, a leading historian of science, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi and Dr Rohan D'souza one of South Asia's leading historians and author of *Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India*. Professor Mark Elvin, one of the world's leading historians on China, author of several books including *Sediments of Time* and *Patterns of the Chinese Past*, is associated with the CWEH as an advisor and is an active supporter of the CWEH's activities. The workshop aims to bring together some of the associates of the centre for a summer meeting at the University of Sussex.

Workshop programme

Issues in Global environmental history: a panel discussion

2.00 to 3.00

Prof Alan Lester (Sussex) Dr Rohan D'souza (JNU, India)
Dr Vinita Damodaran (Sussex) Dr Pauline von Hellerman
(York)

Tea: 3 p.m.

3.15-4.30

Chair: James Thomson (Sussex)

Prof Mark Elvin ANU/Sussex, 'How distinctive are the environmental histories of developed premodern societies? Reflections on China'

Dr Heather Goodall (Sydney); 'City ecologies: recognising working class and indigenous natures on city rivers'

Dr Rohan D'souza (JNU) 'Effecting separations, global histories about drainage'

4.30- 5.30

Chair: Rob Iliffe (Sussex)

Dr Jodi Frawley (Sydney) 'Environments of Hope and Fear: the dynamics of overabundance, scarcity and the circulation of botanical knowledge's through Inter-colonial networks.'

George Adamson (Brighton) 'Climate variability and adaptability in Western India.'

Concluding comments: Prof Rob Iliffe (Sussex)

Contact: V.Damodaran@sussex.ac.uk if you would like to attend.