Uses of Environmental History: Don Worster

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This is the fourth in a series of posts exploring the uses of environmental history. The series has been adapted from contributions to a roundtable forum published in the first issue of the new **Journal for Ecological History**, edited by Renmin University's **Center for Ecological History**.

By **Donald Worster**

If I did not believe that environmental history is already useful and practical, more so than other fields of historical research, then I would have abandoned it long ago. Seeing nature as part of the many changes and revolutions that have occurred in human history has always seemed to me one of the most useful things in the world. How can we live wisely without understanding more fully how we got here or how the natural environment has interacted with society? When historians have explained more fully the course of history, as Charles Darwin explained the evolution of species, then we will have become the most practical people around. We are not there yet, but we are making progress.

Admittedly, there are historians who still don't know how to be useful in that way. They assume without question that society has had no important connection with water, soil, climate, energy, or biota. The crying need of our time is to overcome that blindness and explain the global ecological crisis. Historians are most useful when their research reveals some significant truth about how that crisis developed over time, or what we can learn from earlier societies about solutions they attempted and how well they worked.

But, for some, it would seem that bringing nature into our historical perspective and explaining changes in the human impact on the ecosphere are not enough. We are asked whether we should do even more—perhaps spend less time writing books and more time advising government, business, or the military, all of whom have to deal with their impact.

Our colleagues in the study of law and economics do not hesitate over that challenge. They may write books but they also readily offer advice to those in power. They think of their disciplines as “policy oriented,” which means they think it is their duty to apply knowledge to specific problem solving. Can or should historians become policy advisors or problem solvers in the same way?

My answer is yes and no. Governments assuredly need historians, as well as engineers, economists, lawyers, and other experts, for advice on what actions to take on the issues they have to deal with. One of the biggest issues right now is climate change. Economists have recently discovered the problem and offered their help in calculating the costs of that change (though usually minimizing it) and in finding efficient solutions. Historians cannot match that kind of advice. We are not much help on technical remedies. But if we broaden the definition of “policy” to expand the boundaries of what should be considered, we make it possible for historians to become valued advisors to decision makers.

Knowing, for example, the social and economic consequences of climate change during the Little Ice Age can be profoundly helpful in dealing with consequences of anthropogenic global warming. Likewise, a historian can explain that what we may have called a “natural disaster” was, in fact, created by humans. The historian can revive useful environmental reforms that have been attempted and then forgotten, like designing cities with nature in mind; ideas that can be recovered from the past and applied to our times. Historians have a deeper perspective that can inform the citizenry. If we don’t have confidence in that knowledge and are reluctant to step outside our university enclaves, then we are guilty of making historical knowledge seem useless.

But the problem is not merely historians who prefer to hide out in the archives. Policy makers, too, often tend to think in reductive terms and to dismiss this practical side of history. Historians are not reductionists. We resist the temptation to reduce a problem to its simplest terms and then offer a quick fix. Take for example the challenge of fixing the problems caused by fossil fuel burning; too often, an agency merely asks which renewable energy technologies should be adopted as fast as possible—without asking how and why we created modern economies based on burning coal and oil in the first place. There is no quick fix for the most important problems facing human beings—poverty, discrimination, overconsumption, or abuse of the Earth. How could we decide which energy path to take without first knowing which forces have pushed us down the

path we are on? How can any of us make wise policies when we're in too much of a hurry to think about the larger picture?

The most useful contribution that historians can make to the practical issues of our day is to promote complex instead of reductive thinking. We are experts in dealing with complexity, for we constantly work to understand problems that had more than one cause and solutions that led to many unpredictable outcomes. We understand, probably better than most other experts, that the ecological crisis began far back in the past, in a tangle of deep roots, and is the outcome of a very intricate relation between nature and culture. Is there any policy maker in the world today who doesn't need to grapple with that complexity? And is there any better way to do so than by knowing more history?