The Uses of Environmental History: John R. McNeill

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Explorations,Uses of Environmental History

This is the first 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 the Renmin University's **Center for Ecological History**.

"As Useful as We Want to Be"

By **John R. McNeill**

Environmental or ecological historians do not "*need* to become more useful and practical" in anything. They should feel free to be useless as regards global problems if they wish. If their motives for engaging in environmental history are nothing loftier than curiosity, that is no sin. The great majority of historical work, like the great majority of work in general, makes little to no contribution to addressing global problems. Just because environmental historians work with the environment, and the environment is the locus of some global problems, does not create any special obligation for environmental historians. Historians of slavery do not need to become more useful and practical in addressing human trafficking, just as labor historians do not need to become more useful and practical in addressing mass unemployment.

Indeed, for some environmental or ecological historians, it would require considerable retooling to be able to become more useful in addressing current global problems. Those whose expertise focuses on the depiction of nature in late medieval Spanish texts or water management in the Chola kingdom[1] probably have no better basis for addressing such global problems as climate change or biodiversity loss as the average citizen. But that should not mean that their topics are illegitimate because they are not deemed "useful." Usefulness in the context of today's problems should not be a

requirement for historians. If it were, very little history, even environmental history, would be justifiable.

If environmental historians *wish* to become more useful and practical in addressing global problems, they should do so. Many find this ambition a compelling reason to pursue environmental history in the first place. Some labor or gender historians find motivation for their work in the hope that it will advance the cause of social equality. This is well and good, if it is their wish and not an expectation, or *a fortiori* a requirement.

One way to seek to be more useful and practical relies on belief in a variant of John Maynard Keynes's words: **"Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."** Environmental historians might aspire to be the modern equivalent of Keynes's defunct economist or academic scribbler (though few of us aspire to be defunct). They might hope their work will filter into the minds of people in power, albeit more likely not through their own words, but via popularizers and journalists. It probably will never happen for most of us, and the "practical men" and "madmen in authority" will get their unoriginal ideas elsewhere. But it might happen for some of us—for better or for worse.

A second way is to become an authority on the recent history of a particular issue, as Stephen Pyne has done on wildfire and fire management in the US.[2] From time to time, when the US Forest Service engages in reconsideration of its principles and policies, it invites Pyne to weigh in. Ultimately, he may be ignored more often than he might wish. But, every now and then, he gets a chance to influence fire management policy in the US.

Some parallel to Pyne's route is open to some of us. No doubt, it requires persistence, good fortune, a tolerance for having our wisdom ignored, and calm in the face of the routine belief that "scientists'" views are more authoritative than those of historians. But it is possible to become a prominent expert on the recent history of a given current environmental issue, becoming influential through our writings and occasionally being invited to the table when policy discussions are convened.

As one who works in Washington, DC, I have been invited to help produce policy papers in think tanks that work hard to influence policy. These experiences have been educational, in an anthropological fieldwork sort of way, and enjoyable. But I have not

seen a shred of evidence to suggest that my efforts made a scintilla of difference to anyone, let alone to those with their hands on the levers of power.[3] Nor do I stand much chance of being among Keynes's influential academic scribblers. This does not trouble me at all.

It does not trouble me partly because there is a third way, beyond the Keynes route and the Pyne route, to address global problems. It is even more indirect, and open only to those of us who are teachers: our students. Some of them seek to exercise power, and a few may succeed. To the extent that I can shape their outlook, their priorities, I can hope to wield some indirect influence upon global problems (although I confess that I see no evidence of that among my former students now in high places). Moreover, thousands of my former students are citizens and consumers, and it is possible that by exposing them to environmental history I have helped shape their behavior in ways that, however small, address global problems.

The other reason I am not troubled is my starting point: Environmental historians do not need to become more useful and practical. We should do so if we want to.

Coda

Since I wrote the above words, I have tried to make myself more useful. Some years ago, in order to write a book about ecology, disease, and warfare in Caribbean history, I learned a fair bit about a species of mosquito that has since acquired notoriety. Centuries ago, *Aedes aegypti* influenced the course of imperial politics by serving as the primary vector of yellow fever. It also can carry dengue, chikungunya, and other human diseases. Today it is famous as the chief vector of the Zika virus that is spreading around the world.

To date, Zika's primary impacts have been felt in Brazil. But by late summer in 2016, it had infected more than 7,000 people in the US territory of Puerto Rico, and several cases had turned up in Florida. The US Congress came in for widespread criticism for doing nothing about it.

My education in mosquito matters is only skin deep, so it came as surprise when I was asked to "brief Congress" on the history of efforts to control *A. aegypti*. Together with Prof. Margaret Humphreys of Duke University (a historian of medicine), I turned up on the appointed September day, better dressed than usual—admittedly a low bar. Prof. Humphreys and I each spoke twice about the perils and promise of mosquito control,

once for the House of Representatives and once for the Senate. We answered dozens of questions, most of them not about the past but about the future. We gave the impression that mosquito control nowadays is no easy proposition—for both political and biological reasons. We explained that no vaccine against Zika is likely to be available for two years or more, and there is no assurance an effective one will ever exist.

The audience, all better dressed than I, consisted of a few dozen of what we call in Washington "Hill staffers," meaning employees of members of Congress.[4] As far as I could tell, not a single senator or representative attended. I was only mildly disappointed, because I had been advised to expect that "briefing Congress" did not mean speaking to anyone who was actually a member of Congress.

So I thought little about it and returned to my quotidian duties, as did Prof. Humphreys. Three weeks later, she emailed me with the news that Congress had just voted to approve $1.1 billion for Zika control (she apparently pays closer attention to US politics than I do). We jokingly congratulated each other on historians' astounding power to shift the Congress out of its lethargy. Did we actually have any impact? Did the staffers to whom we spoke convey the gist of our remarks to their bosses? Did the senators and representatives take action because of what they heard? I don't know, but I would guess not. I suspect I am still not one of Keynes's consequential academics. But if I'm ever asked to brief Congress again, I'll probably dig out my best clothes once more.

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[1] These examples are randomly generated. I am not aware of anyone who has such expertise; if anyone does and feels aggrieved at these exampled being used in this context, I apologize.

[2] Pyne has written many fire histories, some of which delve into deep history, but what interests policy people in Pyne's views on today's issues is his work on recent history. Perhaps it also helps in his case that he worked as a fire fighter for many summers in his youth.

[3] E.g., J.R. McNeill. "**Can History Help Us with Global Warming?"** in *Climatic Cataclysm: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications of Climate Change*, ed. Kurt Campbell (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 26–48.

[4] They work on Capitol Hill, hence the phrase "Hill staffers."

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