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Author(s): William Cronon

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The Uses Of Environmental History

William Cronon

University of Wisconsin-Madison

When I first started teaching a lecture course on American environmental history at Yale over half a decade ago, I came to the end of the semester feeling that despite all the rough spots and gaps, it had gone as well as I could have expected. My ordinary practice on such occasions is to distribute teaching evaluations during the penultimate week of classes so I can read students' comments and report back to them on what they collectively see as the strengths and weaknesses of the course. When I did this for the new environmental history class, I was taken aback to discover that despite my students' enthusiasm for the course, the vast majority seemed profoundly depressed by what they had learned in it. I was unprepared for this reaction. What my students had apparently concluded from their encounter with my subject was that the American environment had gone from good to bad in an unrelentingly depressing story that left little or no hope for the future. Because my own feelings about the matter were not nearly so bleak, I had not intended to lead students to this dreary conclusion, and the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that I had no right to end the course on such a note. Whether or not my students' sense of despair was justified, I did not

think it was a particularly useful emotion, either personally or politically. To conclude that the environmental past teaches the hopelessness of the environmental future struck me as a profoundly disempowering lesson—albeit a potentially self-fulfilling one—and I felt that my responsibility both as a teacher and as someone who cares about the future must be to resist such a conclusion.

I therefore wrote a final lecture that ended the class on a deliberately upbeat note with a very personal set of reflections about lessons I had extracted from my study of environmental history—the morals I drew from its stories—and the reasons why I continue to remain hopeful despite all the apparent reasons for feeling otherwise. Leaving aside my own worries about the appropriateness of temporarily turning my lectern into the secular equivalent of a pulpit, I'm persuaded that it was the right thing to do, for my students seemed genuinely grateful for this unusual bout of sermonizing on my part. I still end my environmental history course with a similar lecture. And yet I also think there's something odd about an academic subject that seems to require such an antidote against despair. Certainly I've never felt the need for a comparable closing lecture in my classes on the history of the American West, where I suspect that a residue of frontier optimism and high spiritedness somehow combine with moral outrage and regional pride to produce more ambiguous lessons. Because I've also encountered this sense of despair not just among students but among readers as well, I think it's worth asking why environmental history seems regularly to provoke such a response. A more general way of framing the question is to ask how our study of the environmental past affects our sense of the environmental present and future. Perhaps the simplest way to put this is just to ask: what are the uses of environmental history?¹

Do practitioners of environmental history have special reason to worry about their field's usefulness? Yes. Like the several other "new" histories born or reenergized in the wake of the 1960s—women's history, African-American history, Chicano history, gay and lesbian history, and the new social history generally—environmental history has always had an undeniable relation to the political movement that helped spawn it. The majority (but not quite all) of those who become environmental historians tend also to regard themselves as environmentalists. And so it is no accident that many of the most important works in the field approach their subjects with explicitly present-day concerns. Any number of environmental histories have clearly been framed to make contemporary political interventions. Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* has played a

significant role in helping frame debates about wilderness protection in the three decades since its publication.² Samuel Hays's *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency and Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, though less obviously partisan in their politics than Nash's book, speak just as powerfully to major trends in conservation and environmental politics in the twentieth century.³ Among the most consistently interventionist of environmental historians has been Donald Worster, whose unflinching moral vision has never failed to produce works of history that are also passionately committed to change. *Nature's Economy* critiqued the twentieth-century evolution of ecological science by seeking to rehabilitate an older natural-history tradition that had fallen into disrepute with many modern ecologists, while *Dust Bowl* and *Rivers of Empire* located the origins of environmental degradation in capitalist world-views and modes of production that are as alive in the present as they have been in the past.⁴ Carolyn Merchant joined Worster in bringing an environmentalist perspective to the history of science, but combined it with a more feminist approach to argue in *The Death of Nature* that western science has harmed nature and women in parallel ways; her *Radical Ecology*, though less historical, is still more activist in its efforts to intervene in contemporary political struggles.⁵ Even scholars whose work has been less explicitly political have consciously sought to make it relevant to contemporary environmental concerns. Joel Tarr's many studies of pollution and waste streams have always aimed to address the concerns of contemporary policymakers, while Steven Pyne's epic histories of fire have consistently tried to persuade present-day resource managers of the complexity of their task.⁶ Pyne has even gone so far as to author a textbook on fire management practices.⁷ And so on and on. The list of such interventions is long, and applies in varying degrees to the majority of historians who work in this field. So I think we can take it as a given that many if not most environmental historians aspire to contribute to contemporary environmental politics: they want their histories to be useful not just in helping us understand the past, but in helping us change the future.

The Problem of Audience

How successful have we been at this? Or to put it a little less comfortably, just how useful have our contributions been so far? (For now, I leave aside the even more uncomfortable question of how useful we are being when so many who study our work apparently find in it a counsel of despair.) One way to start answering these

questions is to think about the different audiences our work has been intended to address. Questions about whether environmental history is useful can only be answered—explicitly or implicitly—relative to the people or things we seek to reach and help. *Useful to whom?* Whom do we see as our chief audiences, and how do *they* define usefulness? These are among the most basic questions any writer or teacher can ask. Each of our different audiences in some sense represents a different occasion for usefulness, with different opportunities and risks that follow from trying to attend to its needs and interests. Let me offer a brief guide to the folks I think we've been trying to reach.

One audience, obviously, is our fellow historians. The number of major academic and literary prizes won by environmental historians over the past couple decades is proof that our colleagues have been paying attention and are at least a little intrigued by what we've been up to. With this audience, we have an opportunity to make the case that "nature" is a fundamental category of historical analysis, no less important than—indeed, deeply entangled with—class, race, and gender. Moreover, our project of exploring the human past as part of a web of systemic relationships within the natural world offers exciting opportunities for seeing things whole at a time when the historical profession seems desperately in need of such synthesis. More than most of the other "new" histories, environmental history erodes the boundaries among traditional historical subfields, be they national or thematic, and suggests valuable new ways of building bridges among them. The risk here is much like that of every other academic field: as a discipline matures, it tends to become ever more self-referential, less accessible to a wider audience, so that its practitioners increasingly talk only to each other. Valuable as it may be for us to demonstrate that our approach constitutes a significant contribution to academic history, we must also guard against focusing too narrowly on purely disciplinary imperatives that may distract us from larger and more important agendas.

Much the same thing can be said about our colleagues in other academic fields, from the humanities to the social and natural sciences. If the case is strong that environmental history offers an unusual opportunity for synthesis across historical subfields, it is even stronger for the many other disciplines that analyze environmental change. Environmental history has already demonstrated its ability to draw on the insights of radically different fields—ecology, geography, economics, anthropology, and many others—in its attempts to construct a more fully integrated synthesis.

Moreover, it has generally been far more successful than most allied disciplines in making these insights available to wider audiences, probably because of the narrative literary styles that remain much stronger in history than in other academic fields.⁸ But the risks we face in speaking to our non-historical academic colleagues go beyond the usual danger of academic self-referentiality that I have already mentioned. Quite simply, it takes an awful lot of work to communicate with colleagues in other fields, and there are few institutional rewards for doing so. One does not generally get jobs, promotions, or tenure by teaching the basics of one's own discipline to people on the other side of campus who haven't thought about history since high school. Scientists often react to our eclecticism and our contextualized, narrative styles of explanation with more than a little suspicion that we lack rigor; in trying to defend ourselves against such suspicions, we may drift unconsciously toward seeking alien forms of rigor that our field can never attain. At an even more basic level, to speak to such folks in the first place, one has to spend considerable energy just learning their vocabulary—a vocabulary for which most of our fellow historians have little use and less patience. And so the risk we run, especially if we are young scholars trying to get established in our own discipline, is to inhabit an intellectual space so liminal that no one will adequately recognize the merits of our work. In trying to absorb and respond to the complicated agendas of other disciplines, we run the risk of not adequately serving our own.⁹

But the "usefulness" of environmental history is surely not limited to our fellow academics. If our histories are to help change the world, they must reach beyond the walls of the academy to affect the views of people who do more than just study the past. Under this heading fall many different groups. One is the policymakers, who represent an especially seductive opportunity. By challenging us to focus our research on very concrete modern problems, they tempt us to believe that the insights we contribute may actually influence the course of events in the real world. By speaking to power, so the story goes, we may capture a little of that power for ourselves. And yet there is considerable risk here too. By taking as our starting point only the questions that policymakers ask, we may misspecify the terms of our own analysis, treating as givens the very categories we should be subjecting to criticism and thereby ignoring structural causes that may not be so malleable to current policy or management tools. Worse, the prospect of wielding power may tempt us to see reality through the eyes of power. This in turn leads us away from critiques

that locate the roots of environmental problems in the very power we are seeking to influence or wield.

Comparable opportunities and risks attend our efforts to write history that speaks to environmental activists who may lack formal power but may be no less involved in the policy process. Since many environmental historians are uncomfortable with power and can more readily imagine protesting a policy than implementing it, they often see fellow environmentalists as their natural audience—and indeed have much to offer that audience. When, for instance, we write about the successes and failures of past organizing efforts, it's nice to think that our work might empower contemporary movements, helping them avoid past mistakes by focusing on efforts and initiatives that seem most likely to produce positive environmental change. But much like the policymakers, activists usually care more about effective strategies and usable stories than they do about good history. Both groups share an instrumental view of the past which entails a search for "what works." Just as in the policy arena, this intensely practical focus may discourage analyses that explain environmental problems in relation to deep structural forces that may not be responsive to grassroots organizing. Furthermore, activists often seek provocative stories that can serve as inspiring moral fables with clear heroes and villains. Neither of these impulses may be conducive to good history, since they tempt us toward what might be called environmentalist realism—a genre no more aesthetically pleasing or intellectually compelling than socialist realism, and in the long run no more effective.¹⁰

If policymakers and activists both constitute dangerously narrow audiences, one might think we would do well to go off in search of that holy grail of cross-over academic writing, the "general public." This is high on my own list of priorities, since I believe environmental history can profoundly inform public understanding of contemporary environmental issues by placing those issues in a broader historical context. Doing so increases people's understanding not just of the environment, but of history itself: the very eccentricity of our field makes it a highly attractive way to reinvigorate public interest in history and demonstrate the relevance of the past to the present. But we all know this is an uphill battle, given the low level of American public awareness of history in general. The mistaken assumptions and romantic myths that many people bring not just to history but to nature create endless distortions and misreadings that can defeat even our best intentioned efforts at education. Moreover, the public fascination for "newness" (itself a consequence of short

memories and weak historical consciousness) tempts the historian into bold overstatement and provocative storytelling that potentially obscure one of the most important qualities of the past: its twinned strangeness and familiarity, its frequent tendency to pair the most ordinary causes with the most extraordinary effects and vice versa. In the end, our efforts to provoke the public with “new” stories may ultimately prove self-defeating once those stories too begin to seem “old.”

But there is perhaps one other, more ultimate audience whose needs we seek to articulate and whose standards we hope to meet: non-human nature, the earth itself. This will no doubt seem an odd, even mystical, item to include on my list, since nature neither speaks our language nor reads our books and so can't really be an “audience” for our work in any meaningful sense. And yet I'm sure that many environmental historians measure the “usefulness” of what they do in precisely this way: by whether or not it contributes to the health and integrity of natural systems.¹¹ In this sense, one of the richest and most exciting challenges of our field is the chance to enlist historical scholarship in the service of improving human relationships with nature. Simply put, we are trying to write histories that speak as much for the earth and the rest of creation as they do for the human past. And yet inevitably, here too there are deep problems. In trying to speak on behalf of this non-human audience that can never talk back in the language we ourselves use, we can never finally be completely sure that we've gotten the story right, or that our own definition of “usefulness”—a peculiarly human concept if ever there was one—matches the conditions that drive natural systems.¹² Given the anthropocentrism that governs utilitarianism and narrative alike, any search for the “uses” to which nature itself might put our environmental histories is fraught with uncertainty—if not absurdity.

Our conclusions about the problem of audience must thus be ambiguous. We cannot escape the dilemma it poses, for if we fail to consider just whom we are addressing, our work won't even be read, let alone be useful. On the other hand, the competing needs of our different audiences can either tempt us to become so narrowly academic that we forget what it means to be useful, or encourage us to become so pragmatic, polemical, or present-minded that we forget what it means to do good history. In trying to discover the “uses” of environmental history, we perennially find ourselves between the Scylla of our disciplinary commitment to the autonomy of the past, and the Charybdis of our concern about modern problems seemingly so prodigious that they threaten to overwhelm all our traditional

ways of understanding the ties that link past, present, and future. The difficulty of navigating between the rock of history and the whirlpool of prophecy in a world where we supposedly face both the death of nature and the end of history is no small reason why so many of our audiences despair after hearing our stories.¹³

What We've Learned

All of this no doubt seems pretty vague and abstract, so let me offer a more concrete description of the useful lessons that environmental historians have thus far taught us in their work. There are two ways of doing this. I can either tally up a long list of practical lessons that have important implications for very specific environmental phenomena, or I can make a few much more general observations about the peculiar benefits that flow from thinking historically as we consider human relationships with nature. My own preference is for the latter task, if only because the former is potentially so endless. But before moving on, let me at least suggest the kinds of practical lessons I think can be drawn from our work. Here are just a few of my personal favorites:

- When people buy and sell things in a market, they link together ecosystems and encourage change, rarely understanding the full ecological implications of what they are doing. Along with many others, this has been a central concern of my own work, and I can restate it with one of a favorite metaphor: the more complicated the paths in and out of town, the more obscure they become and the easier it is to forget them.¹⁴
- Tools and technology are immensely important in shaping natural environments, but their effects are powerfully mediated by the cultures in which they are embedded.¹⁵
- When people migrate from one ecosystem to another, they carry with them other organisms—plants, animals, microbes—whose success or failure in the new location is often crucial in determining the success or failure of the migration.¹⁶
- Having learned to enjoy the spectacular effects of an oxidizing environment, people the world over have long

been inordinately fond of fire, thereby reshaping the world around them in the service of their pyromania.¹⁷

- Men and women often experience the world in very different ways, so that one cannot hope to understand the way a culture relates to an environment without examining the ways it engenders the natural world.¹⁸
- “Ideas of nature...are the projected ideas of men.”¹⁹

Such lessons as these are still quite general, but I can list others that are much more focused:

- Early conservationists were obsessed with questions of economically efficient production, while later environmentalists have been equally obsessed with questions of ecologically responsible consumption.²⁰
- A capitalist ethos, in combination with an economic cycle of boom and bust and an unusually long drought, was the principal cause of the environmental disaster known as the Dust Bowl—and, by extension, of other disasters as well.²¹
- People mismanage fish (and any other common property resource) when they misunderstand the dynamics of ecosystems and apply to them too rigid a definition of sustainable production.²²
- In American history, the horse was not simply a European invader, but a complex cultural entity that became attached to different human communities in very different ways: an English colonial horse was very different from a Spanish conquistador horse was very different from a Comanche trading horse was very different from a Sioux raiding horse was very different from a Pawnee herding horse.²³
- If you want to understand people’s environmental values, watch what they throw away and how they do the throwing—and take a look at what they do with plastic pink flamingos as well.²⁴

- Beware of bugs that come from afar.²⁵

I could go on indefinitely with these lists, piling up the many lessons, large and small, that have made environmental history such an exciting field for the past quarter century, but I trust I have made my point. Arguments such as these are the meat of our subject, the news we have to share with the rest of the world, and I think we can be rightly proud of the contributions we've made and are continuing to make. These insights—when situated in a particular place and time—are the concrete goals of our historical practice, for history ceases to be history when it cuts itself loose from concrete particularities. And yet I think we also have deeper lessons that are equally valuable, lessons that have less to do with our actual findings than with the ways we've done the finding.

One reason I emphasize the importance of our historical practice is that there are impulses within environmentalism that are quite strongly *ahistorical* or even *antihistorical*, placing environmental history in some considerable but little noticed tension with the larger political movement that helped spawn it. This tension is fascinating in its own right, and it significantly complicates the already difficult task that environmental historians face in trying to make themselves "useful" to their fellow environmentalists. One of the longstanding impulses that environmentalism shares with its great ancestor, romanticism, has been to see human societies, especially those affected by capitalist urban-industrialism and the cultural forces of modernity, in opposition to nature. Ironically, environmentalism often commits itself to a fundamentally dualistic vision even as it appeals for holism. According to the standard terms of this dualism, nature is assumed to be stable, balanced, homeostatic, self-healing, purifying, and benign, while modern humanity, in contrast, is assumed to be environmentally unstable, unbalanced, disequilibrating, self-wounding, corrupting, and malign.

Implicit in this opposition is the belief that ideal nature is essentially without history as we know it, save on the very long time-scales that affect plate tectonics, biological evolution, and climatic change. Another way of putting this is to say that natural time is cyclical time, while the time of modern humanity is linear. Time's cycle is the proof of nature's self-healing homeostasis and equilibrium, while time's arrow is the proof of humanity's self-corrupting instability and disequilibrium. Humanity's arrow is the fall, while nature's cycle is salvation.²⁶ These metaphorical dualisms are among the most powerful in our culture, with roots that stretch back literally to Biblical

times, and by stating them in this way I do not intend to critique one or the other half of their implied dialectic. As with most dualisms, both poles of the opposition reveal important truths even as they work to disguise their mutual interdependence. I simply want to note that the environmentalist affection for natural equilibrium and cyclical time as the Archimidean foundation from which to judge the human drama as it unfolds in linear time necessarily implies a not-so-disguised flight from history. The natural or primitive utopia which serves as counterpoint for so many environmentalist critiques of modern society posits a rupture between past and future so radical as to imply what Francis Fukuyama would call an "end of history."²⁷

However one may feel about this utopian environmentalist vision—and it has many attractive features—it collides at numerous points with the intellectual agenda that environmental historians have set for themselves. Our task, after all, far from trying to escape from history into nature, is to pull nature itself into the stream of human history. Whatever affection we may feel for the attractions of cyclical time and natural equilibrium, our chief stock in trade is linear time and disequilibrium: we study change. Perhaps one might argue that this is a temporary phenomenon. Maybe, for instance, we tell linear narratives of environmental degradation as moral fables whose purpose is to transform people's consciousness and behavior in ways that will ultimately mean an end to linear time, heralding the coming millennium when cyclical time will reign once again over a stable equilibrium that applies as much to humanity as to nature. But I'm frankly dubious that many of us really believe this: most historians have pretty powerful negative reactions to pronouncements like Fukuyama's about "the end of history"—and not just because we have a professional vested interest in linear time!

The assumptions of our discipline more or less commit us to the task of historicizing everything we study, whether it be human cultures or natural systems. We know all too well that modern Americans have attitudes toward the natural world profoundly different from those of the native peoples who first inhabited this continent, just as we know that the plants and animals that share the American landscape with us have been significantly affected by those different attitudes. The more we study the history of cultural and environmental systems, the more difficult it is not to be impressed by how dramatically those systems have changed over time. Even our ideas of nature as a repository for sacred and eternal values—values which are among the bedrock foundations for environmental ethics that many of us would embrace—are themselves products of very

specific cultural histories. We can trace their stories back through romanticism to earlier cultural vocabularies in which words like the sublime, the picturesque, the pastoral, and the beautiful served as the trail markers for a complex convergence of beliefs drawn from antiquity, from Judeo-Christian traditions, and from the newly emerging philosophies of the Enlightenment. Just as the historicizing impulse of the nineteenth century helped erode the traditional biblical authority of received religion (a movement which in the guise of Unitarianism and Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism also supplied some of the roots of American romantic values about nature), so too does the historicizing impulse of environmental history potentially challenge some of the more unreflective assumptions on which environmentalism tries ground its own authority.

Is this a bad thing? I think not. If the grounding assumptions of modern environmentalism are susceptible to criticism for being historically naive, then surely they deserve to be criticized. We shouldn't evade that task for fear that it will weaken the larger political movement, since any movement worth defending—as environmentalism surely is—can only be strengthened by fostering rigorous critical analysis and debate. In a very different context, Eugene Genovese once wrote of socialist historians that, "We are so convinced we are right that we believe we have nothing whatever to fear from the truth about anything.... Our pretensions, therefore, lead us to the fantastic idea that all good (true, valid, competent) history serves our interest and that all poor (false, invalid, incompetent) history serves the interest of our enemies—or at least of someone other than ourselves."²⁸ Although I've never been able to muster quite this level of self-assurance about my own political beliefs, I share Genovese's conviction that it is always best to look at the world with clear eyes. Indeed, I believe that historical habits of thought are profoundly valuable, offering our best antidote to naive assumptions, decontextualized arguments, excessive generalizations, and plain old-fashioned wishful thinking—all of which pose problems for contemporary environmentalism. It is here, I think, that we will discover the most important uses of environmental history.

Thinking Like a Historian

Let me move toward a close by offering what seem to me to be some of the core lessons that make environmental history useful not just in its specific claims but in its habits of thought. I'll state these as a general set of very broad, very simple morals for the stories we've

been telling. They are among the deepest articles of faith for at least this environmental historian, articles of faith which I suspect many of my colleagues share.

1. All human history has a natural context.

This is so obvious to most environmental historians that it is almost a truism of our subfield, and yet it is also the claim that seems to come as the greatest surprise to our colleagues. History since the 1930s has had a powerful bias toward cultural determinism, spawned in part as a reaction against the extreme environmental determinism that characterized some fields of history and geography in the pre-World War II era when racialist theories held sway. The chief defenders of materialist history in the intervening period were Marxists who had their own reasons for deemphasizing the natural context of human history. Their critics in turn used the attack on Marxism as a reason to reject all determinisms as inherently destructive to human freedom. One important contribution of environmental history, then, has been to reintroduce materialist styles of analysis to the study of past human-environment interactions while trying to finesse a full-blown determinism. Our strategy has been to argue for a dialogue between humanity and nature in which cultural and environmental systems powerfully interact, shaping and influencing each other, without either side wholly determining the outcome. One can restate this prescriptively as follows: *in studying environmental change, it is best to assume that most human activities have environmental consequences, and that change in natural systems (whether induced by humans or by nature itself) almost inevitably affects human beings.* As a corollary, most environmental historians would add that human beings are not the only actors who make history. Other creatures do too, as do large natural processes, and any history that ignores their effects is likely to be woefully incomplete.

2. Neither nature nor culture is static.

This is the historicist argument I've already mentioned. Any vision of a past human place in nature that posits an ideal relationship of permanent stability or balance must defend itself against almost overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Descriptions of historical eras in which human populations were supposedly in eternal equilibrium with equally stable natural systems are almost surely golden-age myths. A comparable rejection of stasis has occurred within the modern science of ecology, where the notion of a permanent climax community as postulated by Frederic Clements and his

followers now seems thoroughly discredited. In its stead, we have a newly dynamic, even stochastic or chaotic ecology in which history plays a crucial role in shaping the pattern and process of ecosystems whether or not people are involved.

Recognizing the dynamism of natural and cultural systems does not, of course, mean that all change is good or that there are no benchmarks for comparing one kind of change with another. Most past societies, for instance, have not altered the natural world at anything like the rate or scale that has typified the modern era. To argue otherwise would be to engage in a different form of myth-making, in which the values and behaviors of different cultures toward nature are assumed to be everywhere and always the same—"economic man" being undoubtedly the most familiar subspecies of the genre. The insights of environmental history tend to be powerfully anti-essentialist, lying in the middle ground between the golden-age myth of permanent equilibrium and the economic myth of a reductively universal human nature. Our work suggests that nature and culture change all the time, but that the *rate* and *scale* of such change can vary enormously. Perhaps this is why we feel some kinship with a Braudelian vision of history in which the different time scales of *la longue durée*, *la vie matérielle*, and *l'histoire événementielle* weave together to form the tapestry of the past.²⁹ Although our general bias is often toward the *longue durée*, we understand that the interactions of environment, economy, political institutions, social norms, cultural values, and natural processes are endlessly complex. Any simple formula for understanding their interactions is almost sure to be wrong. Restated prescriptively, this suggests that *the relationship between nature and culture should always be viewed as a problem in comparative dynamics, not statics*. Naive assumptions about the stability of natural systems can produce behavior that is as environmentally destructive as it is culturally inappropriate.³⁰ As a corollary, essentialist arguments about past cultures and environments are almost always historically suspect.

3. All environmental knowledge is culturally constructed and historically contingent—including our own.

On the surface, this will probably seem the most radical challenge that environmental history has to offer environmentalists who regard nature as a source of absolute authority for their vision of how people ought to behave in the world. Here again we encounter the problem of sacred versus historical time. If one is inclined to regard nature as an eternal realm of absolute facts, stable processes, and permanent

values, it is not at all reassuring to discover that such beliefs have clear historical roots and that people in other times and other places and other cultures have held very different views. Much of what they took to be permanent and absolute has since changed, and the same will likely happen to many of our own most cherished beliefs as well. The historicist impulse seems to undermine sacred knowledge and replace it with a relativist world in which nature is apparently no more than what we think it is, with literally everything up for grabs. If static nature is our moral compass, then historicism threatens to set us adrift on an unfamiliar sea with no way of taking our bearings.

But one must be careful here, for this lesson can be pushed much too far. It must somehow be paired, however paradoxically, with the implied realism of my first lesson. Most environmental historians take it as a strong article of faith that the natural world exists quite apart from what we believe about it, that it powerfully affects the course of human history, and that if our beliefs diverge too far from its realities, we will eventually suffer at least as much as it will. Recognizing the culturally constructed character of our own knowledge is thus quite different from a claim that the world does not exist, or that people invent it merely as an idea in their heads. Rather, it acknowledges the chastening fact that we can never know nature at first hand. Instead we encounter it only through the many lenses of our own beliefs, cultural institutions, and structures of knowledge, all of which can only hope to approximate natural reality in a mimetic or metaphorical fashion, never actually replicate it. Rather than interpret this argument as a defense of human arrogance—asserting that we can do whatever we like because nature is whatever we wish it to be and will do whatever we want—I prefer to see the constructedness of human knowledge as proof of our own fallibility. The moral I find in this story, in other words, points us toward humility, tolerance, and self-criticism.

This lesson has several corollaries that are well worth noting. However unsettling it may be to become more aware of the historical origins of one's own beliefs, it is also liberating because it encourages us to explore different ways of thinking about the human relationship to nature that our own dogmatic blinders might have prevented us from seeing. Conversely, once one begins to understand the origins of one's own ways of thinking about nature, one may be better able to avoid falling into familiar ruts. One may, for instance, more easily recognize the romantic impulses that sometimes afflict environmentalist thinking, and more easily remember that scientific knowledge is rarely so absolute as its devotees sometimes pretend.

One way of understanding our task is to think of trying to synthesize in historical perspective the divergent but complementary approaches of ecology and ethnoecology. Despite their apparent opposition, they are in fact equally valuable and the tension between them can be immensely fruitful.

Let me sum up this third lesson more prescriptively: *recognizing the historical contingency of all knowledge helps us guard against the dangers of absolute, decontextualized "laws" or "truths" which can all too easily obscure the diversity and subtlety of environments and cultures alike.* An historical, social-constructionist perspective takes seemingly transparent, absolute environmental "facts" and places them in cultural contexts which render them at once more problematic, more interesting, and more instructive. Paradoxically, by making reality more contingent the historicist approach to knowledge lends greater realism to our understanding of nature and culture alike.

My final lesson may seem oddly put, but seems to me the core of what sets environmental history apart from most other fields that seek to understand and influence the way we relate to the natural world. It describes a peculiar quality that characterizes most historical writing and sets it apart from the social and natural sciences. It is simply this:

4. Historical wisdom usually comes in the form of parables, not policy recommendations or certainties.

The significance of this point is hardly intuitive for anyone who is not a historian. Whenever I lecture to the general public or to scholars in the social or natural sciences, I'm invariably asked afterwards for my predictions about the future course of environmental change. Just as invariably, I explain that historians usually make reluctant prophets, despite the teleological similarities between the stories we tell about the past and the prophecies that others may wish us to make about what will happen in the future. The power of our history derives from the fact that, when speaking about the past, we can at least pretend that we know the end of the story. Doing so enables us to make our arguments and narratives point toward the present and hence seem to explain it, if only for the brief period in which that supposed "ending" continues to hold good. This sense of narrative closure is never available to us for the future, the very contingency of which is what prophecy seeks to contain and resist. Because historians cannot help but respect the awesome, terrifying complexity of past cause and effect, and because we recognize the dangers of teleology even as we embrace it as a necessary consequence of the narrative

form, most of us—unlike many of our colleagues in the sciences—are reluctant to predict the future course of events.

This is not to say that we are silent about the future, or that we regard our histories as irrelevant to present concerns. Instead we adopt a much older, albeit less seductively scientific, rhetorical strategy. Rather than make *predictions* about what *will* happen, we offer *parables* about how to interpret what *may* happen. Strange as it may sound, I believe this may be the most important contribution we environmental historians can make in a world where expert knowledge has for the most part forgotten the peculiar form of wisdom that the parable represents.

Santayana was probably wrong in implying that those who study the past can avoid repeating it, because in fact the past never repeats (and yet always repeats) itself. Instead, any series of past events can seem to resemble almost any other series of events, past or present, while at the same time differing in ways that seem no less important. In struggling to compare past and present so as to draw lessons for the future, we inevitably turn to analogy as one of our chief analytical tools. Analogy, alas, is never clean, is always subject to criticism, can often have diametrically contradictory implications, and is one of the reasons we historians rarely aspire to certainty in the parallels and differences we draw between past and present. But these problems with analogical reasoning are also one of its chief strengths: it continually reminds us that we are engaged in an interpretive, hermeneutic enterprise, not a quest for absolute knowledge, and that competing interpretations about the meaning of the past for the present are not only possible but inevitable. Analogy is the logical foundation for metaphor and parable alike, all three of which are near the heart of our scholarly practice. The job of historical scholarship is to provide the richest possible contextual field within which to frame and discipline our analogies, not because we expect historical insight to give absolute answers—it won't—but because it is the best source we have for *questions* whose subtlety and complexity can mirror that of the world we wish to understand. It is our own best route to mimesis, self-knowledge, and—to repeat again that old-fashioned word—wisdom.

Hence the affection we historians feel for the parable: by seeing the past as a story to be told rather than as a problem to be solved, we leave ourselves open to analogies, metaphors, resonances, and interpretive contexts that would probably be obscured by a more rigidly rule-bound analytical approach. In their book *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest

R. May label this approach “Goldberg’s Rule” and, appropriately enough, tell a story to explain the label. After describing to a class of corporate executives the historian’s habit of explaining past events by telling stories about them, one of their students, Avram Goldberg, responded by exclaiming, “Exactly right! When a manager comes to me, I don’t ask him, ‘What’s the problem?’ I say, ‘Tell me the story.’ That way, I find out what the problem *really* is.”³¹ What distinguishes environmental historians from environmental scientists and policy experts is our tendency to frame our work around one common question: “What’s the story?” Moreover, like most modern historians, we have a special fondness for stories that convey a sense of irony, because irony best expresses our sense of the multivalent complexity of the world. It reflects one of the central insights our field explores, which is that whenever people act to change the natural world, the ensuing story has unexpected endings, because our actions seem always to have unexpected consequences. This in turn suggests a deeper moral still about the incompleteness of our knowledge of the world and the unexamined assumptions we have made about it.

To repeat: *environmental history is at least as important for the way it asks and answers questions—by analogy, metaphor, and parable and the search to discover their meanings—than for any specific problems it may actually solve.* As such, it is a powerful and indispensable antidote to scientific and analytical approaches that aspire to greater and more unitary certainty in their search for knowledge.

Ground for Hope

Is telling parables about nature and the human past a useful thing to do? Yes. I believe so in my bones, which is what I told my students when they expressed despair about the seemingly hopeless lessons they thought they had learned from our course in environmental history. Let me close by returning for a moment to my secular pulpit to repeat some of the articles of faith I shared with those students.

The answers we environmental historians give to the question “What’s the story?” have the great virtue that they remind people of the immense human power to alter and find meaning in the natural world—and the even more immense power of nature to respond. At the same time, they remind us that whatever we do in nature, we can never know in advance all the consequences of our actions. This need not necessarily point toward despair or cynicism, but rather toward a healthy respect for the complexity and unpredictability of history, which is much akin to the complexity and unpredictability of nature

itself. The proper lesson of such complexity, I believe, should be to teach us humility. It should make us more critical of our own certainty and self-righteousness, and deepen our respect for the subtlety and mystery of the lives we lead on this planet, entangled as we are in the warp and woof of linear and cyclical, secular and sacred time.

Humility and constant attentiveness to that which we do not know seem to me essential to what we might call honesty in our relationships with each other and with the world around us. We can't not act if we are to remain alive—we have to use nature, we have to participate in the earthly webs of killing and consumption that sustain every creature on this planet—but we must also act carefully—*act with care*—being as attentive as we can be to the consequences of what we do. The chief moral of my own version of environmental history is the one I tried to embed in the title of my book *Changes in the Land*. To live as human beings on this planet is to change the world around us. That much is inescapable. Environmental history tries to reconstruct the endless layers of change that we and the earth have traced upon each other. It is the history recorded in Aldo Leopold's tree rings, the history recorded by the marks of his saw upon the good oak as he cut it down, the history recorded by the memories in the hatted head with its shadow on the stump: all of these are inextricably bound together.³² There cannot be people outside of nature; there can only be people *thinking* they are outside of nature. By the same token, in the world in which we now live, there cannot be a nature separate from humanity. We are in this together: as the *Whole Earth Catalog* once declared, "we are as Gods, and might as well get good at it."³³

Tracing patterns on the landscape is something all living creatures do, and people are the furthest thing possible from an exception to this rule. The lines and shapes we draw on the land reflect the lines and shapes we carry inside our own heads, and we cannot understand either without understanding both at the same time. This means that the material history of environmental change is simultaneously a spiritual history of human consciousness and a political economic history of human society. They can never finally be separated from each other, and it would be foolish even to try. I find a mysterious sort of wonder and beauty in that fact. Even our most abstract, grid-like shapes upon the land are also statements about our different visions of community: amongst ourselves and other people, ourselves and other living creatures, ourselves and the earth itself. The struggle to live rightly in relation to the earth and its creatures does not end, and the problems it poses are never solved. In seeking to tame the earth, we have taken upon ourselves the burden

of tending and caring for the garden we have sought to make of it. We have become responsible for the earth, and must now accept the moral consequences of that fact. In caring for the earth and its creatures we must also learn to care for ourselves, because taming nature with respect and love means taming ourselves as well.

These are the moral dilemmas to which the parables of environmental history must always return. In the particularism of its storytelling—its focus on particular people at particular times in particular landscapes—environmental history reminds us of the endlessly diverse human ways of using and living in nature. I personally take considerable solace in this diversity and particularism, for they remind us that—all appearances to the contrary, even in an era of “Global Change”—there is not One Big Problem called “The Environment.” There is rather a near infinitude of smaller problems, each expressing a different relationship of use and meaning between people and the world around them. Although we will never solve the One Big Problem that does not in fact exist, we can never *stop* solving those smaller environmental problems which together come very close to defining what it means to be alive. All of us change the world around us, and yet different people choose to confront their problems and make their changes in strikingly different ways. The diversity of their experiences, past and present, can serve almost as a laboratory for exploring the multitude of choices we ourselves face. Stories about the past lives of such people teach us how difficult it is to act in ways that benefit humanity and nature both—and yet how crucial it is to try. By telling parables that trace the often obscure connections between human history and ecological change, environmental history suggests where we ought to go looking if we wish to reflect on the ethical implications of our own lives.

And that, on reflection, seems quite a useful thing to do.

¹ My title and central question are borrowed, of course, from Herbert Joseph Müller, *The Uses of the Past: Profiles of Past Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).

² Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, 1973, 1982).

³ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁴ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977); Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

⁵ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁶ Joel Tarr's published output is prodigious, but representative examples include "The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Air, Land, and Water Pollution in Historical Perspective," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*, 51 (1984), 1-29; Tarr and K. Koons, "Railroad Smoke Control: A Case Study in the Regulation of a Mobile Pollution Source," in Mark Rose and George Daniels, eds., *Energy and Transport: Historical Perspectives on Policy Issues* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982), 71-92; and *Retrospective Assessment of Waste Water Technology in the United States: 1800-1972*, A Report to the National Science Foundation/RANN, October 1977, with F. C. McMichael, et al. Pyne's classic work in American history is Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁷ Pyne, *Introduction to Wildland Fire: Fire Management in the United States* (New York: John Wiley, 1984).

⁸ For this reason, I also believe that environmental history is an almost ideal subject for bridging the deep chasm that separates the natural sciences from the rest of the modern university, thereby offering a potentially crucial way of defending a coherent vision of liberal education in institutions that sometimes seem to have forgotten the meaning of that phrase. Although I will not elaborate this argument explicitly in the pages that follow, it is implicit in everything I say.

⁹ A subtler intellectual risk of an interdisciplinary field like environmental history is that its less skillful practitioners, as well as students just beginning their studies, may sail out into the waters of several disciplines before they have quite mastered one. Too often we forget that by becoming steeped in a single discipline—an act we often criticize as "narrowing"—we gain a crucial experience in rigor. How to retain this sense of rigor and make it serve as our intellectual compass as we venture out across disciplinary boundaries is perhaps the greatest single challenge of graduate training in environmental history.

¹⁰ Much the same thing can be said about laudable recent efforts to broaden environmental history (and one hopes environmentalism as well) to include groups other than the well-to-do white folks (many of them male) who have for the most part dominated environmental politics. Among those whose stories can only contribute to the diversity and richness of environmental history are women, multicultural people of color, poor people, and workers. But again there's a temptation toward white-hat-black-hat narratives in which oppressors and victims conduct their struggles in degraded landscapes that simply mirror the terms of social oppression in too mechanically predictable a way. Moreover, the recent history of multiculturalism suggests that there are special dangers here of essentialist styles of reasoning that can be quite ahistorical.

¹¹ At this and several other points in this essay, I trust that readers will hear my echoes of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 224-25.

¹² This suggests one important way in which environmental history differs from the other "new" histories of post-1960s historiography. Whereas fields like women's history and African-American history have sought to recover the "lost" voices of "ordinary people" by letting their subjects "speak for themselves," we can never hope to discover quite so certain or autonomous a voice for the natural actors that participate in our own narratives. Their silence must remain deeper and more profound, and their stories more genuinely alien from our own.

¹³ The reference to the death of nature echoes Merchant's *Death of Nature* and Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989); the reference to the end of history is to Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹⁴ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983); Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); and Cronon, "Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town," in William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980); White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); and Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

¹⁶ Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Greenwood, 1972); Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ Pyne, *Fire in America*.

- 18 Merchant, *Death of Nature*; and Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
- 19 This quotation is one of the wisest and most profound statements in a most wise and profound essay: Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 82.
- 20 Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency and Beauty, Health, and Permanence*.
- 21 Worster, *Dust Bowl*.
- 22 Arthur F. McEvoy, *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850-1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 23 White, *Roots of Dependency*.
- 24 Here I refer to Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment, 1880-1980* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1981); and to the uncompleted Yale doctoral dissertation of Jennifer Price (working title: "Flight Maps: Imaginative Encounters with Birds in Modern America"), about American attitudes toward nature as reflected in certain key species of birds.
- 25 Crosby, *Columbian Exchange and Ecological Imperialism*.
- 26 Among the most accessible discussions of this distinction between time's arrow and time's cycle are Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1954); and Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 27 Francis Fukuyama, *End of History*. Examples of radical or deep ecological critiques of linear time include Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985); Jeremy Rifkin, *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987); and Calvin Luther Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). But I should note in passing that environmentalists can also tell linear narratives about heroic environmentalism: Nash's whig history of wilderness consciousness and the rights of nature is probably the most obvious case in point.
- 28 Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 4.
- 29 This tripartite division occurs in all of Braudel's work, but was most famously articulated in his classic *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, translated Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
- 30 An excellent example of the dangerous consequences of naive assumptions about natural equilibria can be found in Arthur McEvoy, *Fisherman's Problem*.
- 31 Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 106.
- 32 The echo here is that of Leopold's "Good Oak," *Sand County Almanac*, 6-18.
- 33 *Whole Earth Catalog: Access to Tools* (Menlo Park: Portola Institute, Spring, 1969), inside front cover.