

Introduction

Caroline Ford and Tamara L. Whited

The historical journal *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations* published its first and only special issue on the theme of environmental history in 1974. In his introduction to that issue, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie noted that for some time the *Annales* had been interested in the “problems of ecological history” and that the history of the environment reconfigured the “oldest and the newest themes in contemporary historiography.”¹ These included the evolution of epidemics, climate change, natural catastrophes that were frequently exacerbated by human intervention, and the destruction of nature occasioned by urbanization, industrial pollution, and colonization. The issue, titled “Histoire et environnement,” contained articles on the environmental consequences of economic development, earthquakes in the Iberian world, climate and harvests in Switzerland, and floods in northern India by authors hailing from Denmark, Australia, France, and Switzerland. These authors followed in the footsteps of those who had founded the *Annales*, which from its beginnings reflected a deep and abiding interest in landscape, rural society, and the impact of environment on human society. These themes were reflected early on in Lucien Febvre’s *La terre et l’évolution humaine* (1922), Marc Bloch’s *Les caractères originaux de la terre française* (1931), and Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* and were later taken up by Le Roy Ladurie himself in *Histoire du climat depuis l’an mil* (1967).

While historians, particularly those in North America, have long recognized the impact of the so-called *Annales* school on the emergence and development of the field of “environmental history,”² many

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¹ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, “Histoire et l’environnement: Présentation,” *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 29, no. 3 (1974): 537.

² Alfred Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History,” *American Historical Review*

have downplayed the European, especially the French and southern European, contributions to the field. This may in part be attributed to the fact that the initial institutional and disciplinary infrastructure of the field was built in professional terms in North America with the 1977 founding of the American Society for Environmental History, which began to issue its own journal, *Environmental History*, whereas the European equivalent of this association, the European Society for Environmental History, was only created in 1999.³ Indeed, recent review articles on environmental history writing suggest that environmental history has not been as strong a field in Europe. One sociologist has even suggested that in France, and by implication in southern Europe, this may have to do with different attitudes toward nature among Catholics and Protestants.⁴

This perspective on European, and more particularly French, “backwardness” with respect to environmental history pervades an ambitious review article undertaken for the journal *History and Theory* as recently as six years ago by J. R. McNeill, who surveys the development of the field around the world.⁵ In considering the “prehistory of environmental history,” McNeill discusses the contributions of Herodotus, Ibn Khaldûn, and Montesquieu and then ironically fast-forwards to the *Annales* school, which, he argues, played a pivotal role in the development of the field by rebelling against “staid political intellectual history” between 1915 and 1930 to open up wholly new modes of inquiry centered on subjects such as “cattle, trees, diseases, and bodily functions.” While clearly recognizing that the *Annales* school played a major role in shaping the emergence of environmental history as a recognized field, he sees the “*Annales* moment” as a false start, noting that its practitioners subsequently neglected the subject: the journal devoted

100 (1995): 1177–89; Michael Bess, Mark Cioc, and James Sievert, “Environmental History Writing in Southern Europe,” *Environmental History* 5 (2000): 545–56; J. R. McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” *History and Theory* 42, no. 4 (2003): 5–43.

³ An earlier organization, the European Association for the History of the Environment, founded in 1987, is frequently ignored in such discussions. See Robert Delort, “Introduction: Pour une histoire de l’environnement,” in *Pour une histoire de l’environnement: Travaux du programme interdisciplinaire de recherche sur l’environnement*, ed. Corinne Beck and Robert Delort (Paris, 1993), 5. It must be said that disproportionately more historians belong to the American association than to the European one. McNeill notes that there were 1,000 members of the former and only 350 of the latter (“Observations,” 11).

⁴ Mark Cioc and Bjorn-Ola Linnér, “Environmental History Writing in Northern Europe,” *Environmental History* 5 (2000): 396–406; Bess, Cioc, and Sievert, “Environmental History Writing in Southern Europe”; Jean Viard, “Protestante, la nature?” in *Protection de la nature: Histoire et idéologie*, ed. A. Cadoret (Paris, 1985), 161–73.

⁵ McNeill, “Observations,” 5–43. This perspective is shared by Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, who even argues that the *Annales* historians, represented chiefly by Braudel, were not pioneers in a field that, according to her, came into its own in France only after 1999 (Verena Winiwarter et al., “Environmental History in Europe from 1994 to 2004: Enthusiasm and Consolidation,” *Environment and History* 10 [2004]: 513).

no further special issues to it, for instance, and indexed few articles as environmental history between 1989 and 1999, when the field in North America took off.⁶ McNeill suggests that Braudel's and his followers' embrace of a historical geography, predicated on a kind of environmental determinism associated with the "histoire immobile" practiced by many *Annales* historians, militated against the field's further growth and development among the French.

It is true that *Annales* historians, and French historians more generally, have never identified themselves as "environmental historians," frequently preferring to use the term *milieu* to designate the object of their inquiry. That the *Annales* did not publish a second special issue on "histoire et environnement" does not mean, however, that its early interest in the history of the environment disappeared without a trace or that the general area of inquiry has failed to thrive in France.⁷ To understand fully how the field has evolved in France, one must observe that French contributions since 1974 have been shaped by different conceptions of the environment and by epistemological assumptions regarding the nature of "nature" and the nature-culture divide that differed from those underpinning the field of environmental history in North America. Moreover, these contributions have been inspired by different historiographical concerns that have pervaded the larger field of French history.⁸

It has long been recognized that environmental history in its twenty-first-century incarnation was born of deeply held moral concerns associated with ecological activism in the 1960s and 1970s, even though environmental history, in the words of one of its founders, "has become an intellectual enterprise that has neither any simple, nor any single, moral and political agenda to promote."⁹ Indeed, ethical concerns have been the principal force driving environmental history in the United States, where the autonomous forces of a wild nature have held a particular fascination. While these concerns were certainly not absent in France, what has made the work of European, and more especially French, environmental historians distinctive is their deep and abiding interest in agricultural and peopled landscapes, in which "wild" nature

⁶ McNeill, "Observations," 12.

⁷ Massard-Guilbaud also curiously conflates resistance to the appellation *environmental history* among French historians with an absence of the historical work on the environment (Winiwarter et al., "Environmental History in Europe," 513–14).

⁸ For a discussion of some of these differences, see Caroline Ford, "Landscape and Environment in French Historical and Geographical Thought: New Directions," *French Historical Studies* 24 (2001): 125–34; and Ford, "Nature's Fortunes: New Directions in the Writing of European Environmental History," *Journal of Modern History* 79 (2007): 112–33.

⁹ Donald Worster, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *Journal of American History* 76 (1990): 1089.

has little or no place and where the hand of humanity is ever present. They have, moreover, rejected a rigid divide between nature and culture, and since the early twentieth century historians of France have been particularly concerned with the symbolic meanings with which the natural world has been invested. In addition, not all of this work can be traced to the *Annales* school, and many environmental historians work outside the institutionalized discipline of history in France and elsewhere. In a broad sense, those writing about the environment in France have taken three separate, but sometimes interrelated, paths of study—cultural-literary, material-scientific, and institutional—since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The first path focuses on the cultural representations of nature and can be observed early on in Daniel Mornet's 1907 thesis on eighteenth-century conceptions of nature in France, which primarily relied on literary sources and analysis. Mornet's work was followed by a spate of studies.¹⁰ These helped invigorate the field of landscape history, as evidenced in Pierre Nora's multivolume *Lieux de mémoire* or Alain Corbin's pathbreaking work on the landscape and the transformation of environmental sensibilities during the nineteenth century.¹¹

The second path draws on geography and other disciplines and is best represented by *Annales*. Many of the studies published in the journal have sought the identity of the nation in its geography. They have focused on the relationship between communities and their natural milieu and have gravitated toward the rural, as opposed to the urban, and more particularly toward studies of the boundaries of "natural" regions and *pays*. But geography has not been the only neighboring discipline that has enriched the field of French environmental history. More recently, anthropology, archaeology, and sociology have left their

¹⁰ Daniel Mornet, *Le sentiment de la nature en France de J.-J. Rousseau à Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: Essai sur les rapports de la littérature et des mœurs* (Paris, 1907). See Jean Ehrard, *L'idée de nature en France dans la première moitié du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1963); Geoffroy Atkinson, *Le sentiment de la nature et le retour à la vie simple, 1690–1740* (Geneva, 1960); Paul van Tieghem, *Le sentiment de la nature dans le préromantisme européen* (Paris, 1960); Georges Jacques, *Paysages et structures dans "La comédie humaine"* (Louvain, 1975); Michel Crouzet, *Nature et société chez Stendhal: La révolte romantique* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 1985); *Le paysage normand dans la littérature et dans l'art* (Paris, 1980); and Colette Capitan, *La nature à l'ordre du jour, 1789–1793* (Paris, 1993).

¹¹ See, in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1986), four essays on landscape, 2:431–597, and two on forests and seashore, 3:616–737; Alain Corbin, *Le territoire du vide: L'Occident et le désir du rivage (1750–1840)* (Paris, 1988), published in English as *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Cambridge, 1994); and Corbin, *Le miasme et le jonquille: L'odorat et l'imaginaire social (XVIIIe–XIXe siècles)* (Paris, 1982), published in English as *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1986). See also Corbin, *Historien du sensible: Entretiens avec Gilles Heuré* (Paris, 2000). Particular attention has been paid to mountainous landscapes in France. See section "L'homme devant les Alpes," in *Destin humain*, vol. 2 of *Histoire et civilisation des Alpes*, ed. Paul Guichonnet (Toulouse, 1980), 169–248; Vincent Berdoulay, ed., *Les Pyrénées, lieux d'interaction des savoirs (XIXe–début XXe siècle)* (Paris, 1995); Philippe Joutard, *L'invention du Mont Blanc* (Paris, 1986); and Martin Körner and François Walter, *Quand la montagne a aussi une histoire* (Bern, 1996).

mark, as have botany, medicine, and zoology. This cross-disciplinary fertilization has been aided by research units constituted since 1978 under the aegis of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, whose work has been showcased in numerous conferences, the principal means through which environmental history has been brought before the public in France.¹²

The third path focuses on state and institutional structures regulating environmental use during the early modern and modern periods. They include governmental bodies like Ponts et Chaussées, Eaux et Forêts, and the French legal courts, and historians and legal scholars have drawn on the abundant regional sources and archives left by one of the most centralized European states in fruitful ways. These various approaches to the study of the history of the environment have been captured in a three-volume work edited under the direction of Andrée Corvol (and sponsored by the Archives de France and the Institut d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine) on the sources of French environmental history from the eighteenth century to the present.¹³

In short, the environmental history of France is alive and well, as the contributions to this special issue of *French Historical Studies* attest. Each contribution reflects some of the epistemological, methodological, and historiographical concerns of earlier historians while focusing on new subjects and areas of inquiry. These articles present a common tendency: all of them take issue with the long-supposed dominance of the French state in driving understandings of nature, the naming and uses of natural resources, and notable modifications of the environment. In addition, two articles concern the history of forested landscapes, and three deal with the control of water. These tendencies among the articles were by no means criteria of selection for this issue; striving for temporal and geographic balance, originality, and overall quality, we noticed this convergence only after the selections had been made. The salient historical actors include peasant woodsmen, rural “hydraulic” communities, local landowners and shepherds, bourgeois associations, and, true to the concerns of environmental history, climatic factors. If anything, nature’s agency assumes less importance for these authors than do social and cultural factors, but the consistent de-emphasis on the French state’s significance to the country’s environmental history represents, collectively, the most intriguing contribution to more than one historiographical perspective.

We begin with Richard Keyser’s analysis of the highly human-

¹² Tatiana Muxart et al., “Des chercheurs à l’étude de l’environnement des Français d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” in *Les Français dans leur environnement*, ed. René Neboit-Guilhot and Lucette Davy (Paris, 1996), 42–74.

¹³ Andrée Corvol, ed., *Les sources de l’histoire de l’environnement*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1999–2003).

ized forests of medieval Champagne. Without taking issue with the thesis of high medieval forest clearance famously articulated by Marc Bloch, Keyser seeks to reorient the discussion to actual patterns of forest usage in the high medieval period. He argues that fewer tall trees appropriate for timber production were found in northern France by the mid-twelfth century because peasants were not managing forests to produce them. In advancing this thesis, Keyser challenges the historiography of French forests for its “resolutely modern and statist” tendencies. Unavoidable in the prominent histories of French forests is the venerable forest administration, the Eaux et Forêts, active from the late thirteenth century. The Eaux et Forêts issued regulatory edicts that were rationalized initially in Colbert’s 1669 Forest Ordinance and ultimately in the 1827 Forest Code, leaving a corpus of forest legislation that in some ways recapitulates the emergence of the centralized French state.

Keyser’s medieval perspective alters the state-centered interpretation of French forests in that he depicts an ecological transformation in the county of Champagne whose protagonists were peasants. Departing from an extensive system of sylvopastoralism, in which lords took little interest, *champenois* woodsmen converted to intensive small wood production in response to rising urban demand for wood products. Short-cycle coppicing for wood production demanded careful micro-management, most crucially the leaving behind of standards for timber and other uses. That lords and their agents sought to exert control and oversight, even negotiating the partitions later known as *cantonnement*, does not negate the market-driven and small-scale origins of intensive forestry in Champagne.

Alice Ingold’s contribution explores local agency from another angle, the readings of particular local societies and their milieus provided by elite administrators and agronomists of the first half of the nineteenth century. In an ongoing research project drawing on a diverse literature that includes treatises in law and jurisprudence, travel accounts, administrative reports, and other texts, Ingold engages with the historiography of environmental thought. Her sources differ markedly, however, from those that have informed most studies of the construction of environmental knowledge in France, which was largely shaped by state-run institutions and colonial science.¹⁴ Ingold focuses here on texts written by François-Jacques Jaubert de Passa, a notable and administrator from the Pyrénées-Orientales, and by the multitalented Italian thinker Carlo Cattaneo. Collectively, their work covers a broad northern Mediterranean region including Roussillon, Catalonia,

¹⁴ See Ford, “Nature’s Fortunes,” 115–19.

Valencia, Grenada, and Lombardy; their subject matter is the description and analysis of local “hydraulic societies,” that is, societies that had fashioned a landscape and a concomitant set of regulations surrounding water usage, namely, irrigation.¹⁵

Both Jaubert de Passa and Cattaneo hypothesized that local hydraulic societies manifested a lasting and stable relationship to nature, their irrigation structures having preceded state formation and having endured throughout the vicissitudes of state politics. As such, these societies represented an alternative path to agricultural modernity, marked in many parts of Europe by the sustained interest and intervention of the state since the eighteenth century. These texts appeared at a crucial moment in the development of environmental knowledge; not only did jurists involved in drawing up national law codes clamor for greater clarity with regard to water rights, but also, and more broadly, postrevolutionary states redefined, in Ingold’s words, “the scale and conditions for the exercise of power over their territory and its resources.” The balance of power may have been shifting toward states in terms of inventorying, regulating, and using natural resources, yet the writings under consideration demonstrate that this was a contested process. In addition, Ingold provides important evidence that early-nineteenth-century writers historicized nature in ways that European environmental historians echoed much later in their emphasis on the imbrications of the natural and cultural elements that have long shaped the European environment.

With Samuel Temple’s exploration of the *Landes de Gascogne* under the Second Empire, we devote attention to one of France’s better-known high modernist projects: the transformation of the *Landes* into a “productive” landscape of even-aged maritime pine forests. State discourses depicted the *Landes* as a forsaken, even catastrophic landscape, so “unproductive” due to its aberrant ecology as to be fit only for pastoralism. Promoters of the forestation of the *Landes* believed that the engineers who would drain and plant the moors would be the avatars of social regeneration via environmental transformation:¹⁶ a lucrative export economy based on resin and private property would replace an

¹⁵ These hydraulic societies are not to be confused with the large-scale hydraulic works, and their supposed linkage to authoritarian structures, that Karl Wittfogel attributed to Asia in *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, CT, 1957). Wittfogel’s thesis has been critiqued by American environmental historians examining California’s vast system of water management. See, e.g., Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985).

¹⁶ The progressive desiccation of the northern European landscape deserves more analysis, given its profound ecological consequences. Jean-Pierre Goubert treats this theme tangentially in *The Conquest of Water: The Advent of Health in the Industrial Age* (Princeton, NJ, 1986). For a more direct treatment focused on the northern British Isles, see T. C. Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600* (Edinburgh, 2000).

archaic pastoralism grounded in regimes of communal property. The tale—with the inevitable denouement of ecological and social failure—rings true to modern environmental historians, but Temple shows in this case study how a theoretically top-down process became inflected in practice by local agency. The *landais* elite appropriated the process of forestation at the outset, largely benefiting from local concessions of communal property, showing little solidarity with shepherds and sharecroppers, and thwarting state engineers' subsequent prescriptions, namely, mandatory firebreaks. Yet the rural elite had to reckon with the appropriations of those same rural poor who set fire to young stands of maritime pine, notably as the Second Empire crumbled in 1870.¹⁷ Thus the reworking of the *Landes* became, Temple writes, a “volatile and contingent affair,” accentuating social fissures in the region. Local divisions interacted with, yet were not dwarfed by, a technocratic vision that pitted state against region.

The productive landscapes analyzed in the first three articles give ground in Patrick Young's piece to the newly aestheticized landscapes of the early twentieth century, landscapes to be preserved for bourgeois consumption. Even in this late modern setting the role of the state remains minimal. As nature protection associations were founded in Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Touring Club of France inaugurated its Sites and Monuments campaign for the purpose of identifying landscapes worthy of protection. Whereas older aesthetic canons of the picturesque and the sublime remained intact, nature preservationists now harnessed them to venerable national projects for the conservation of art and architecture, through which notions of *patrimoine* became solidified.

Although landscape preservation has become a well-rehearsed theme in the environmental history of modern Europe, Young links it in novel ways to tourism. Focusing on Lower Brittany, he shows how local, well-connected bourgeois, working frequently through *syndicats d'initiative*, promoted tourist development and landscape preservation as two sides of the same coin. From the perspective of officials in the Touring Club of France, these local actors functioned explicitly to identify classifiable landscapes while implicitly standing as the principal consumers of them through “tasteful” tourism. The role of photography emerges as a pivotal element in both the designation of

¹⁷ Rural fires and forest delinquency accompanied the declaration of the republic in 1870 elsewhere in France as well, as they had the birth of the Second Republic in 1848 and as they would the massacre and dispersion of the Communards in 1871. See Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside, 1846–1852* (Oxford, 1992); Jean-François Soulet, *Les Pyrénées au XIXe siècle*, vol. 2 (Toulouse, 1987); and Tamara L. White, *Forests and Peasant Politics in Modern France* (New Haven, CT, 2000).

picturesque sites and the documentation of discordant billboard advertising—one example among several that Young uses to illustrate the unresolved contradictions between preservation and tourism. Tensions between commodified nature and nature-as-patrimoine had presented themselves in the case of Brittany by the first years of the twentieth century.

Chris Pearson's work on the Camargue during World War II relates both to cultural representations of landscape and to state intervention while specifically examining the foregoing themes of marginality, nature protection, and, in passing, tourism. The Camargue assumes a paradoxical place in France's natural *patrimoine*: a thoroughly modern landscape created by nineteenth-century drainage works, it was invariably construed in literary culture as a wild region and, Pearson argues, "a guarantor of Occitan traditions, specificity, and nationalism." Even the Camargue had been subject to debates between preservationists and agricultural modernizers in the prewar decades, yet Pearson's distinctive context is that of war and occupation, an area of inquiry that has garnered much attention in recent years.¹⁸ On one level, state agency is paramount, for German plans to subject the Camargue to aerial bombardment for training purposes, and later to flood the region—thereby rendering it unfit for the landing of Allied aircraft—threatened to nullify the debate in civil society over preservation versus modernization. These facts also present a clear case for extending analysis in environmental history beyond national borders. The preservation of the Camargue depended on the receptiveness of German authorities to arguments grounded in ecology and landscape aesthetics, and that receptiveness depended in turn on the extent to which those arguments reverberated with Germany's own traditions of nature protection. Without detouring into the substantial literature on the latter topic or on the environmental policies of the Nazi regime, Pearson does credit German (and later American) acknowledgment of the Camargue's international reputation with limiting the damage inflicted by aerial bombardment.

In the final ecological showdown over the Camargue, the imperatives of war trumped values associated with nature protection as the Germans enacted plans to submerge the region by increasing pumping from the Rhône in early March 1944. In this fascinating episode, the role of the state recedes while the roles of temperature and the mistral move downstage. These climatic factors had much to do with thwarting the scheme, and they provide one subset of the various con-

¹⁸ See, e.g., Jean-Pierre Amat, "L'impact de la grande guerre: Paysages dévastés et voies de reconstruction," in Corvol, *Sources*, 3:3–39.

tinuities in the Camargue's history that transcended even their wartime circumstances. In addition, the cultural staying power of nature protection emerges strikingly in extraordinary circumstances of war and occupation. Given that Pearson gestures toward more contemporary instances of (French) military accommodation of environmental values, one might be tempted to weigh the "environmentalization of the military" as a construct alongside the more familiar "militarization of landscapes."

It must be said that this special issue on French environmental history does not include an essay on a significant new focus of research: the history of the environment in France's overseas empire and the impact of empire on conceptions of nature in metropolitan France. While this focus has been central to the historiography on the British Empire, it has been taken up only recently by historians of France.¹⁹ It is perhaps no accident that the British scholar Richard Grove was one of the first to emphasize the importance of imperial expansion for reconceptualizing nature and the environment as early as the seventeenth century, and both historians and geographers have since built on Grove's pathbreaking work for the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.²⁰ This lacuna aside, the contributions to this special issue indicate that the field of French environmental history is both rich and varied. Its practitioners clearly survey the field from a variety of perspectives and build on an interdisciplinary tradition in French scholarship that transcends borders and boundaries in ways that enliven a field that continues to remake itself.

¹⁹ See, e.g., John M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation, and British Imperialism* (Manchester, 1988); MacKenzie, *Imperialism and the Natural World* (Manchester, 1990); Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Seattle, 1997); Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran, and Satpal Sangwan, eds., *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia* (Delhi, 1998); David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, and Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* (Delhi, 1995); William Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment, 1770–1950* (Oxford, 2003); and David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856* (Delhi, 2005).

²⁰ Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge, 1995). See also Diana K. Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* (Athens, OH, 2007); and Caroline Ford, "Reforestation, Landscape Conservation, and Anxieties of Empire in French Colonial Algeria," *American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 341–62.