The Promise of Ocean History for Environmental History

Helen M. Rozwadowski

Paul Sutter closes his essay on the state of the field of environmental history by calling attention to the relatively short time during which humans have transformed the planet—a point that certainly applies to the ocean. Anthropogenically induced global climate change is affecting ocean temperature and acidity. Overfishing has not only decimated marine populations but has emptied entire levels of the marine food web. Bottom trawling has scarred virtually all the commercially reachable seafloor. Attention to marine environmental issues has lagged behind similar attention to land by a century or more; only since the 1990s has the ocean’s environmental status gripped the attention of mainstream media and ordinary people.¹

Although the ocean seems remote, marine environmental activists and ocean boosters rightly note the many ways that all people are tightly connected to it. The seas provide food, energy, communication, and transportation of the goods and raw materials that fuel the global economy. Threats to oceans and the uses made of ocean space and ocean resources have prompted the formation of international legal regimes and agreements. The majority of the world’s population lives along coasts—and the proportion of coastal dwellers is on the increase—therefore even more people will be involved in the challenges associated with sea-level rise and the increasing frequency and intensity of storms.²

Such interactions between people and ocean are grist for historical scholarship. Sutter acknowledges environmental history’s terrestrial bias and notes the small but growing body of literature that recognizes the ocean’s place in history. This notice has happened at an auspicious time, because environmental history’s embrace of hybridity opens a space for the sea and other environments like it. Like land, the ocean is a natural environment that is—perhaps to a greater degree even than terra firma—knowable through cultural lenses. Technology necessarily mediates understanding of the vast depths of the ocean and even

Helen M. Rozwadowski is an associate professor of history and maritime studies at the University of Connecticut, Avery Point.

Readers may contact Rozwadowski at helen.rozwadowski@uconn.edu.

¹ On calls for ocean ethics and activism in response to ocean-related environmental issues and events, see Carl Safina, “Launching a Sea Ethic,” Wild Earth, 12 (Winter 2002–2003), 2–5; and David Helvarg, Blue Frontier: Saving America’s Living Seas (New York, 2001).

of its surface. Imagination—whether existing knowledge systems, preconceived notions, or desires—influences ideas about and uses of the ocean. Hybridity invites recognition that humans have left imprints in places that seem remote from civilization—indeed, places that challenge human survival.

Adding such environments to the compendium of subjects appropriate to environmental history represents a dramatic expansion of the geographic territory available to historians. Ocean history also promises to extend areas of inquiry outlined by Sutter and to contribute to burgeoning fields such as deep history, big history, spatial history, envirotech, energy history, and disaster history.

Although Sutter’s treatment of agroenvironmental history did not explicitly include fishing, it might well do so, as fish are a major global protein source. Even so, fish are the only remaining wild-caught source of food for large numbers of people, thereby putting fishing in a somewhat different historical category. One commonality of land and sea is the profound length of time that humans have been using resources from both and the correspondingly long time during which human activities have left their mark. Like history, prehistory may reflect a terrestrial bias, reinforced by the fact that seacoasts, which early humans might have inhabited during the last glaciation, are now inundated and thus unavailable for traditional archaeological investigation. Historical attention has focused on industrial-era fishing, while innovative, interdisciplinary partnerships between scientists and historians have yielded results demonstrating human impact on marine resources reaching back hundreds, even thousands, of years. Such studies suggest that the ocean, like Brian Donahue’s New England, is a place where “there was no land before history.”

Yet ocean history must not be limited to fisheries history. Even a brief consideration of the range of activities enumerated above should make clear the relevance of ocean history to Sutter’s study of the environmental-management state. The history and legacy of who controls ocean space and ocean resources promises to add profoundly international and spatial dimensions to existing histories that focus on nation-states. Many, if not most, ocean resources prompt bilateral or multilateral negotiations over control and use. Increasingly, private corporations—and oil companies in particular—are joining nation-states as key players in the process.

The growth of the offshore oil-drilling industry has turned large swaths of ocean space into places more closely resembling land than ever before, especially with the installation of permanent and semipermanent structures. The burgeoning wind-energy movement promises to extend this trajectory. There have been efforts, as well, to create working and living spaces on and in the ocean, such as the Cold War–era Texas Towers radar facilities, plans for floating airports and cities, or submersible underwater habitats such as the series


4 Joseph A. Pratt, Tyler Priest, and Christopher J. Castaneda, Offshore Pioneers: Brown & Root and the History of Offshore Oil and Gas (Houston, 1997); Tyler Priest, The Offshore Imperative: Shell Oil’s Search for Petroleum in Postwar America (College Station, 2009).
of Sealabs developed during the 1960s. In addition, activities involving vessels and fishing gear, certain technologies such as telegraph cables, and most activities that take place at the sea’s margins deserve the consideration of envirotech scholars and others who attend to the human-built world.5

Historical focus on efforts to work and live on and in the sea prompts consideration of the human body. Exploration history almost always includes attention to bodies placed in trying circumstances. The undersea environment precludes human visits of more than a few minutes without the use of breathing technology, although ocean enthusiasts in the 1960s anticipated the bioengineering of human bodies to enable oxygen extraction from seawater. Boosters at that time envisioned combining oceanography, physiology, and engineering to create a new regime for intensive use of ocean resources. Explorers today insist on the need to involve human bodies in ocean exploration, paralleling the debate about space. Consideration of extreme environments such as the ocean, space, the polar regions, the atmosphere, and underground necessarily involve bodies—including their limits, the extent to which technology can extend those limits, the costs of exploration by humans instead of robots, and the ethics of putting humans at risk.6

Most know that the oceans cover about three-quarters of the earth’s surface. Fewer recognize that, volumetrically, the sea makes up 99 percent of the earth’s living space. Traditional historical attention to the ocean—through maritime history—focused on activities such as trade, naval warfare, exploration, or fishing, which took place on the surface. Attention to the entirety of the ocean environment dramatically increases the territory available for historical inquiry and, in so doing, adds the vertical dimension to the more familiar horizontal orientation of historians. Oceans are not unique in offering a vertical perspective; mountains, and also underground environments such as mines, draw historians upward and downward from the horizontal. Even so, the sheer volume of the ocean environment invites a vertical perspective more obviously, perhaps, than other environments.7

Although few historians so far have embraced the vertical seriously, ocean history does seem to be rather naturally oriented toward consideration of categories of space. While history traditionally addresses a particular geographic location, a specific time period, and finite groups of historical actors, environments such as oceans seem to require a different approach. Perhaps histories of gyres, or trade-wind belts, or seamounts, or the deep sea, or tides might produce insights that histories of specific places such as Long Island Sound or the Grand Banks cannot.8

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5 On efforts to create working and living spaces in and on the ocean, see Helen M. Rozwadowski and David Van Keuren, eds., The Machine in Neptune’s Garden: Historical Perspectives on Technology (Canton, 2004).


However ocean history develops, it is likely to engage with environmental advocacy, if only because so many current environmental issues are tied to the sea. Merely insisting that the ocean has a history already provides a start; the long and stubbornly held idea of the ocean as a timeless place contributed to the long delay in recognizing environmental crises associated with the ocean. Environmental history of the ocean can contribute in another way, too. My maritime studies classes fill with students who say they love the ocean. As my literary colleagues remind me, however, the ocean does not, and cannot, return that love. Ocean history written in the context of the unfolding field of environmental history holds the promise of recognizing the hybridity of the ocean and, through that awareness, finding an appropriate balance of nature and culture.