

Editors' Introduction

In 1969 the U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wisc.) embarked on an improbable journey. Aided by the enthusiastic Denis Hayes, Nelson envisioned a series of environmental “teach-ins,” demonstrations, and other public events addressing concerns about pollution, the use of natural resources, environmental degradation, and governance. Nelson’s work led to one of the largest public demonstrations ever held concerning the state of the environment—Earth Day. Although the United States figured predominately in the events of April 22, 1970, the symbolism of Earth Day also called attention to the fact that environmental concerns were not confined within individual nations, but rather seeped across international boundaries to include the entire world. Indeed, the first Earth Day represented a pivotal moment in the way people thought not only about nature but, perhaps as importantly, also about political borders.¹

Although this issue of *Radical History Review* marks the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day, it does not revisit the politics of that event. Rather, the issue contends with a much broader, and perhaps more important, historical issue: the interrelationship between the political economy of nature and the political borders that continue to shape the global age. Today, as we consider the global impact of climate change and how individual nation-states respond to, or in the case of the United States ignore, this worldwide crisis, it seems more than appropriate to reconsider the historical connections between nation-states and nature in a global context. And since it has been ten years since *Radical History Review* produced a volume wrestling with the complexities of environments in history (“Environmental Politics and Human Geographies,” issue 74, spring 1999), the moment seemed right to reassess the politics of nature from a historical and perhaps radical perspective.

In developing this issue we returned to one of the more important, but relatively overlooked, essays in the field of environmental history—Donald Worster’s

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“World without Borders: The Internationalization of Environmental History.” Published in 1982, Worster’s essay proclaims that environmental history, because of its interest in material nature, offers a unique approach to historical inquiry that “move[s] easily across national boundaries.” Ecosystems, for example, not to mention the environmental problems plaguing them such as air and water pollution, often flow across international borders. Worster’s essay thus called on environmental historians, as well as on historians of other subdisciplines, to undertake “postnationalist” scholarship in which borders receded in importance through an examination of the ebbs and flows of nature and its history. In our interview with Donald Worster, which appears in this issue, he reflects on his 1982 essay and the state of environmental history today, addresses questions of borders and postnational history, and considers the relationship between nature and political borders in a global era. Environmental history, he concludes in this interview, was one of the first subdisciplines of history to “think globally.”²

Yet our current climate crisis reveals that national borders do, in fact, matter, and as editors of this issue we are acutely aware of this. Nation-states exercise extraordinary influence in determining the future of the environment both within their borders and beyond; much of the environmental damage occurring during the past two centuries has resulted from states securing natural resources both at home and abroad. With this in mind, instead of dedicating this issue on the environment to a discussion of the importance or the irrelevance of political boundaries, we instead asked our contributors to consider the nature and politics of borders in environmental history. In much the same way that *Radical History Review* played an influential role in expanding how historians understood the political dimensions of race, class, and gender, we hope this issue will lead to a richer discussion and analysis of the ways in which human societies shape and have been shaped by the natural world that transcends any one nation or region.

Conceptually, this issue also takes its cue from Richard White’s 1999 *Journal of American History* essay “The Nationalization of Nature.” Despite the decade between White’s essay and this current volume, as editors we want to continue to explore what White called the “problem of scales.”³ Even as many historians have moved beyond the nation-state model, the process of how one goes about writing within and beyond different analytical scales—local, regional, national, and global—continues to both confound and illuminate. White, however, maintained that environmental history’s methodological approach, which values interrelationships within both nature and culture, offers a model that can transcend these variances in scale. And while White’s essay undoubtedly encouraged many historians, especially environmental historians, to incorporate different levels of analysis into their work. Yet as editors of this issue we wanted to further encourage scholarship that engages and questions different analytical scales regarding, in particular, transborder politics, economics, and natural environments. We sought, in other words, environmental

histories that explored the interconnections between political economies and nature on local, regional, national, and global levels.

In their effort to explore the political economy of the environment in a global context, the authors in this issue have undertaken methodologies that are as varied as the natural environments they are examining. Our two feature articles, for instance, explore the environmental history of borders quite differently. In their essay "Latex and Blood: Science, Markets, and American Empire," Gregg Mitman and Paul Erickson examine how corporate, state, and scientific interests from the United States joined forces during the early twentieth century to locate, own, and develop natural resources in the West African republic of Liberia. Relying on film records from the 1926 Harvard African Expedition, Mitman and Erickson illustrate how a medical and scientific mission ultimately helped economic interests document and define a landscape for future economic development by U.S. rubber conglomerates.

While "Latex and Blood" takes a transnational approach to the historic connections between science and economic development, Jennifer L. Gaynor's insightful essay, "Flexible Fishing: Gender and the New Spatial Division of Labor in Eastern Indonesia's Rural Littoral," constitutes a more regional study on the local impact of economic globalization. According to Gaynor, the rise of a global market for Southeast Asia's fish resources dramatically altered the local fishing strategies and practices of the Sama people, who are linked by similar cultural and linguistic practices stretching across thousands of ocean miles. Yet rather than being overwhelmed by such transformations, this littoral society, as Gaynor shows, has altered its economic and social practices as a means of adjusting to a new geography of production. Not only did fishing methods change as a result of foreign capital influx, but Gaynor also suggests that new forms of labor, especially female labor, altered the social and cultural links of the Sama people across vast distances. Thus while Gaynor's methodology embraces the regional scale and Mitman and Erickson's adheres to a more transnational approach, both essays draw on the global movement of capital, knowledge, and labor as a way to better understand the material changes affecting land and sea resources in very specific locations.

The two essays in this issue's "Interventions" section instead reflect a more global methodology. In his article titled "Can Capitalism Save the Planet? On the Origins of Green Liberalism," Ted Steinberg examines the shift in environmental politics from the original Earth Day era, when environmentalists sought to regulate the market as a means of minimizing the destructive impact of economic development, to the contemporary period, when the market has emerged as the principal instrument for both environmental stewardship and economic growth. While Steinberg's essay focuses on the rise of green liberalism in the United States, he argues that this ideology is spreading worldwide and that its emergence in the United States has serious implications for global politics. Mart A. Stewart similarly exam-

ines green markets in his essay “Swapping Air, Trading Places: Carbon Exchange, Climate Change Policy, and Naturalizing Markets,” which argues that the international exchange of carbon offsets has created a complex and perhaps ill-suited mechanism for environmental regulation. In both essays worldwide markets emerge as one of the driving forces of environmental politics in the global era.

In his essay written for this issue’s “Reflections” section, Michael Egan builds on Steinberg’s and Stewart’s global approach by employing the metaphor of an interconnected web as a theoretical framework through which to highlight the spatial and temporal scales of international trade. In “Mercury’s Web: Some Reflections on Following Nature across Time and Place,” Egan revisits the political and ecological legacy resulting from the deaths of thousands of Iraqis due to mercury poisoning in 1972. Yet rather than depict this as a national tragedy, Egan complicates the narrative by illustrating that while the people of one nation suffered, the cause of this suffering was due to a global network that linked humans in far-off countries with mercury traveling between those countries in decidedly different ways. The deaths from mercury poisoning in Iraq in 1972, Egan shows, were not simply a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time; instead, they formed part of an economic and political web of connections that spanned many years and numerous boundaries. As Egan clearly illustrates, political power and scientific knowledge within and beyond Iraq had grave consequences for those Iraqis with little or no economic or political autonomy.

Rather than tracing global webs connecting economic markets with ecological toxics, Samer Alatout and Chelsea Schelly in their essay, “Rural Electrification as a ‘Bioterritorial’ Technology: Redefining Space, Citizenship, and Power during the New Deal,” reflect instead on the shifting categories of national territory and regional populations within the United States. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of biopolitics and governmentality, they argue in their case study of rural electrification during the New Deal era that the federal government during the 1930s reconfigured certain populations and specific territories in an effort to expand federal governmental power. These authors thereby complicate the local, national, and global scales of analysis put forth by Worster, illustrating how these categories are themselves historically constituted, in this case through the federal government’s use of a new technology. The push to electrify rural areas through federal programs such as the Rural Electrification Administration, Alatout and Schelly conclude, not only augmented state power and control over rural regions and their populations but also suggests the tenuous and contested character of seemingly fixed political boundaries and accepted forms of national citizenship.

While all these essays will remind readers of the linkages between the human and the nonhuman world, such connections often remain more difficult to discern in spaces such as cities, which are often considered “unnatural.” Yet urban populations, as many environmental historians have recently shown, have always

depended on, and in turn greatly influenced, the natural world. Rivers and lakes, for instance, laid the foundation for modern metropolises from New York to Nairobi, while these same cities polluted local waterways and undermined urban health. This interconnection between city and nature is the focus of the two essays in this issue's "Curated Spaces" section, both of which take a comparative approach. In his breathtaking photo essay, Gary Braasch captures the varied and unexpected mingling of the natural and the artificial in urban spaces around the world. Matthew Gandy's corresponding essay also takes a global and comparative approach by contrasting the historical linkages between cities and nature in the southern and northern hemispheres. By adding this comparative analysis to global history, and by tracing economic inequities between these two regions to both colonialism and globalization, Gandy's essay, like Braasch's, reminds readers that environmental injustice, while rooted in the local, often blossoms transnationally.

Finally, in the "Teaching Radical History" section, Thomas G. Andrews attempts to transcend pedagogies related to any one nation by incorporating "contemplative practices" into his instruction. In his essay "Contemplating Animal Histories: Pedagogy and Politics across Borders," Andrews describes the process of creating, and then teaching twice, a course on animal history that also incorporated Buddhist meditation into the class curriculum. By asking students to meditate and freewrite during each class session, Andrews found that his course had "succeeded at ushering two dozen students far beyond the pale of nation-states and the political-economic narratives that have long defined Euro-American conceptions of history," while simultaneously helping them think more creatively about "the bestiaries that human kind has learned to dominate but never to transcend." Andrews's course, in other words, helped students grapple with the deeper implications of animal histories that transcend any one nation.

We conclude this issue with a series of book reviews that critically assess some of the most recent works in environmental history. Here, too, we were interested in scholarship that engaged environmental history on a variety of scales, in this case regional, transnational, and global. We then asked three historians to review the books in each of these categories. Our first review by Mark Carey examines recent environmental history monographs on Latin America, an area often defined regionally despite a wealth of scholarship focusing on Latin American nation-states. Sterling Evans, who undertakes an assessment of several new transnational histories, focuses instead on the various ways in which environmental historians trace connections—whether economic, social, political, or ecological—between countries that are next door to one another or thousands of miles apart. Finally, Robert B. Marks analyzes the recent work of environmental historians taking a global approach and concludes that there is still much to understand about the human impact on the natural world across continents and oceans.

Together the essays in this issue offer environmental historians and those

interested in environmental history different models for grappling with the complexity of nature and the problem of scale. They also remind us of the contested relationship between the human and the nonhuman world. Nature is not a static backdrop on which human history unfolds, but an integral component influencing how human societies function. To be sure, the material realities of the natural world continue to shape and define human culture throughout the world in profound and often unexplained ways. Nature, therefore, on all scales, must join the once radical positions of race, class, and gender as useful categories for understanding our past.⁴

—David Kinkela and Neil M. Maher

Notes

1. Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005), 148–58.
2. Donald Worster, “World without Borders: The Internationalization of Environmental History,” *Environmental Review* 6 (1982): 8–16.
3. Richard White, “The Nationalization of Nature,” *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 976–86. White’s essay was part of a special issue on transnational history.
4. We are not alone in this assessment. See, for example, Ellen Stroud, “Does Nature Always Matter? Following Dirt through History,” *History and Theory* 42 (2003): 75–81.