

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 2

Issue 3 Volume 2, Number 3 (Summer 1993)

Article 7

6-1-1993

Edited by Harold K. Steen and Richard P. Tucker, Changing Tropical Forests: Historical Perspectives on Today's Challenges in Central and South America

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Rick B.. "Edited by Harold K. Steen and Richard P. Tucker, Changing Tropical Forests: Historical Perspectives on Today's Challenges in Central and South America." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 2, 3 (1993): 373.
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol2/iss3/7>

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Changing Tropical Forests: Historical Perspectives on Today's Challenges in Central and South America. Edited by Harold K. Steen and Richard P. Tucker. Proceedings of a conference sponsored by the Forest History Society and IUFRO History Group. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992. viii + 303 pp. Maps, tables, graphs, notes, bibliographies. \$29.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

In 1990, the History Group of the International Union of Forestry Research Organizations (IUFRO) sponsored the second conference on tropical forests in San José, Costa Rica. Twenty-three papers from this conference are collected in this volume, published by the Forest History Society and IUFRO.

These papers, two of which are in Spanish, deal with the rapid change that is taking place in Latin American tropical forests. Some of the papers are site-specific, charting the changes occurring in discrete areas in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Brazil. Others are more general, looking at the influences of the attitudes of indigenous people and colonial Spanish and Portuguese settlers toward the exploitation of forest resources in the area. Almost all the authors agree that the issues relating to tropical forests are serious and merit the kind of increased world attention that they are receiving.

As the various authors point out, many historians have taken a simplistic view of the land-use patterns practiced by Amerindians. While some indigenous populations may have indeed lived in harmony with their environment, others certainly did not. Most anthropologists agree that the collapse of the Mayan civilizations at Tikal and Copán were partially the result of over-exploitation of the land base used for agricultural production and forest resources. The story at Copán is especially striking. As nonproductive inhabitants of Copán expanded their living areas, they forced the farmers to utilize the marginal lands on the surrounding hillsides. When Copán could no longer feed itself; its rulers were forced to deal with surrounding nobles, ending Copán's self-sufficiency, the first step toward eventual decline and collapse.

In many respects, the early Spanish colonists followed this pattern, exploiting peasant producers for the basis of their subsistence. The rapidly growing Spanish population needed to be fed, and the colonists ruthlessly cleared additional land for agricultural purposes. They added an important component, moreover, which led to much more rapid deforestation than had occurred during pre-Columbian time:

domestic and semiferal Eurasian animals. Grazing practices and improved agricultural techniques forever changed land-use patterns in Central and South America, changes that continue unabated today.

As the authors point out, the common assumption is that the twentieth-century world is rapidly losing its tropical forests to unbridled consumption. While some environmentalists choose to call this trend "irrational consumption," the authors of these papers shy away from the use of this value-laden phrase. Instead, they note that a combination of factors contributes to the losses. Among those discussed in the papers are government-sponsored programs to conquer their frontiers, provide land-ownership to landless *campesinos* (peasants), and increase the production of export crops such as bananas and coffee. The authors also attribute the losses to poor management of protected areas in Latin America by government agencies, which often leads to the invasion of these areas by people desperate for space upon which to practice subsistence farming, and failures of reforestation projects which are often underfunded and inadequate. The results are the gloomy statistics so often cited at the Rio Conference's Earth Summit: an alarming rate of deforestation in tropical forests, estimated, for instance, in Costa Rica to be in excess of 50,000 hectares per year.

The authors agree that there needs to be a fundamental change in conservation efforts in Latin America if these trends are to be reversed. The most important change is for conservation groups and the government agencies they are trying to influence to provide conservation incentives for the segments of Central and South American populations which are most responsible for causing these unwelcome changes. They must become shareholders in the process of slowing deforestation and promoting sustainable conservation.

Costa Rica, long a leader in Latin American conservation efforts, has recognized this fact. In 1991, the government consolidated its conservation efforts within the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining. It established a National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC), which includes national parks, wildlife refuges, forest reserves, and other miscellaneous protected areas. Each conservation area has established an advisory council, made up of local people who have a stake in the programs the area undertakes. The emphasis outside the core areas, the national parks, is on sustainable development so that local, rural populations will learn that conservation of resources is not inimical to their personal interests. Once fully developed, SINAC will

provide extension services to assist these people so that they can coexist with protected areas and learn new agricultural and forestry techniques that will promote the wise use of natural resources.

Many readers will find some of the technical information in this book a bit overwhelming. Nonetheless, they will be intrigued by the articles dealing with the history of the exploitation of natural resources in Latin America and the analysis of governmental and nongovernmental efforts to study and understand its consequences. Tropical forests are important to us all. The more we understand what is happening in the Latin American forests, the more effectively we can lobby for their protection and conservation.

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Native Society and Disease in Colonial Ecuador. By Suzanne Austin Alchon. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. viii + 151 pp. Map, tables, notes, bibliography, glossary, index. \$39.50 cloth.)

In this slim volume (only 133 pages of text) Suzanne Alchon examines the demographic history of colonial Ecuador, and native and European concepts of disease and healing. She engages in the "numbers game," trying to estimate the size of Indian populations when first encountered by Europeans, an intellectual exercise based upon imprecise assumptions and evidence that is circumstantial at best. She estimates a population of some 1,080,000 in the north central highlands of Ecuador in 1520, the period immediately prior to the outbreak of the first epidemic of Euroasiatic disease in the region. Three hundred years later only 197,000 Indians continued to live in the same region. European-introduced diseases such as smallpox and measles—maladies very different from the illnesses prevalent in the pre-Hispanic Andes—coupled with other factors caused drastic population decline in the sixteenth century following the Spanish conquest of Ecuador. The native population recovered and grew in the seventeenth century, and then stagnated during the eighteenth century following major mortality crises in the 1690s.