View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by DSpace@MIT

Broader Horizons?

For very good reasons, obvious every time we hear the news, it is difficult to separate the future of environmental history from the future of the environment. The long record of our species' engagement with the global environment offers strong suggestions about the likely consequences of present actions and inactions. We are eager to share our insights with politicians and with the general public. Historians are naturally aware—probably more aware than anyone else—of the force of George Santayana's well-known comment that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But we may be less aware of the frequent force of an alternative comment: that those who can remember the past are nevertheless condemned to repeat it, for one reason or another. Some of the attributes of good historical scholarship may actually undermine its potential as grist for the political mill. These are the same attributes that often produce problems when we try to distill complicated arguments or interpretations into an interview sound bite. (Of course, this predicament is not the exclusive preserve of environmental historians; we share it with academics in many other fields.)

So it is probably a good thing that the future of environmental history does not depend on the future of the environment, except in the most general sense. Indeed, in the short term, they may vary inversely. The flowering of environmental history over the last three decades surely echoes increasing concern about the environmental present. And it has become increasingly obvious that very few environmental problems can be solved within a national political context. In this respect, environmental history has not followed the contemporary trend. Like that in other historical subdisciplines, most scholarship in environmental history reflects the human boundaries constructed by

nations, languages, and cultures. This is very understandable, since evidence is likely to reflect similar boundaries, and since human interaction with the environment is and has been heavily influenced by law.

The environment itself is not, however, constrained by such limits, and therefore environmental history also offers an unusual opportunity to transcend them. That this opportunity is also a challenge is suggested by the infrequency with which it has been embraced. For example, the US-Canadian border has effectively bounded the work of most environmental historians who study its vicinity, even though, to a greater extent than many national boundaries, it is only a line on a map. Along most of its five thousand miles, it separates very similar terrains, languages, and people.

Comparative history offers one solution to this problem (or, actually, several). In A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico, Elinor Melville supplemented her discussion of colonial land use in central Mexico with a discussion of the impact of sheep on the arid landscape of a very different time and place (nineteenth-century Australia). In his recent Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914, John McNeill took a different tack, focusing on a region defined by a shared disease environment rather than by kings and presidents. And comparison can be a matter of consumption as well as of production. Since environmental issues and environmental changes have often provoked similar responses in widely separated places, much scholarship in environmental history can be considered latently comparative—that is, comparative in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps the increasingly global content of our conferences and our journals will encourage us to internationalize our priorities as we decide what to read, not just in our own field but also

in fields like geography, paleontology, and evolutionary biology, which incorporate alternative assumptions about how to divide up the world.

Harriet Ritvo
Massachusetts Institute of Technology