



[PROPUESTA]

The Nature and Practise of Environmental History

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Environmental history often seems highly disparate, but on a closer consideration of its own history and the way it is actually carried out and discussed one realizes that it is a particularly vital perdurable academic convergence on an implicit or explicit central question: the diachrony of human relationships with the environment. This is articulated in countless ways, with subtle differences in emphasis across a range of disciplines. One of the most succinct and eloquent expressions is in the title of Emily Russell's 1997 book, "People and the Land through Time". Within this convergence are raised some of the most interesting processual questions of the day, as well as pressing environmental concerns.

This presentation is based on a program of collaborative research at the Institute of Ecology in Xalapa, Mexico, which featured an international symposium on the state of the environmental historical art in spring of 2001, and which includes an ongoing personal experimentation with related concepts in an attractive, long settled and now ecologically problematic region, an "island" of volcanic mountains: The Tuxtlas, within the Gulf Coastal plain of Mexico.

For some time now, this human geographer finds himself among scientific ecologists, which has led to the realization that there remains "a great gulf fixed". The venture was intended to introduce considerations out of the social sciences and humanities into a natural scientific treatment of ecology and it has in fact resulted in most agreeable encounters. However, it is clear, in the words of Maria Eugenia Stolk of UNESCO, that "The importance of social sciences in relation with environmental matters has been largely undervalued in the Western world, mainly because environmental problems have been approached from a physical or biological perspective" (In press). On the other hand, one also hears the criticism that there is little scientific ecology in *environmental history*. This discussion touches on very basic epistemological issues; they are not easily grasped, but must be pursued.

One of the ironies of the consideration of environmental diachrony is chiseled into the lintels of countless museums of "natural history". There is very little history in what has long gone under this label, which brings with it an interesting chapter in the history of science. And not just any diachronic consideration of human - environmental interaction makes up *environmental history*. Fundamentally, as Enrique Leff has pointed out (In press), this academic direction needs to devolve on social constructions which shift and change or lock into positions, counterpoised, as for example: what is homeland for some is an arena for exploitation to others. This is more or less the sense in which *environmental history* has been applied in The Tuxtlas. We have focussed on landscapes, which can certainly be considered as social or even imaginative constructions, and have identified superimposed or sequential landscapes. It seems reasonable to consider this a process of "landscape succession". Tropical forest clearance in aid of agriculture and then ranching on the eastern perimeter of the Tuxtla mountains revealed a prehistoric landscape, complete with a dozen previously unsuspected ceremonial centers, flocks of habitational sites and an identifiable geographical logic, all of which was in turn eventually filmed over by a landscape of "pioneering" and then of ranching, each with their own logic. Such an analysis captures the dynamics of a region and throws up numerous critical issues, particularly those surrounding resource management.



Environmental history is realized in many other ways, such as a diachrony of leading contributions to constructions. José Augusto Padua has written about "Slavery as a Cause of Environmental Degradation: The Evolution of a Brazilian Debate [1786-1888]" (In press). Ramachandra Guha writes of the "Three Waves of Indian Environmentalism " (In press). Cautionary tales emerge from the columns of microscopic evidence obtained by paleoecologists, who are also welcome and indeed key contributors to the convergence; they often provide a spinal column to a discussion. Climates may remain stable for long periods, allowing cultural development, and then change suddenly, triggering declines.

I would submit finally that *environmental history* stimulates, indeed it requires, imaginative prose. The many interacting natural and cultural factors, the complicated chronologies, the subtleties of superimpositions, all this invites non-linear expositions and a liberal use of metaphors. The work of Stephen Pyne on the history of fire, for example, is expressed in some eloquent prose. Serious policy issues arise again and again, but the articulation itself sweeps like a grass fire, flickers through underbrush and bursts into the branches of a conifer as on a hot day in