PREFACE

Environmental history has the potential to transform our understanding of the human past. Like the perspective of gender history, an environmental perspective is not readily contained within existing subdisciplines of history. By focusing on the impact of human activity on the biosphere, the environmental perspective not only opens new topics for investigation but also changes our understanding of the emergence of the modern world. Environmental history has developed its own distinctive vocabulary and methodologies. Yet most environmental historians, while aware that ecology is a global and holistic science, have tended to frame their work more narrowly and to focus on the impact of anthropogenic change on ecological regions or even particular eco-niches. Few have sought to make broader connections to world-historical forces. Perhaps as a result, most world history textbooks relegate environmental history to a polite few paragraphs, if that much. Recently some environmental historians, among them Alfred Crosby, Richard Drayton, Richard Grove, John McNeill, Carolyn Merchant, John Richards, and Richard Tucker, have been seeking to inscribe their work in larger, even global, contexts. Yet such large perspectives remain atypical.¹

Moreover, because of the geographic origins of the field, environmental history has been strongly dominated by accounts of the experience of the United States and Western Europe. United States environmental historians, in particular, have been slow to recognize that the emerging environmental histories of other areas might cast American events in a different light. However, a recent survey by Paul

Sutter provides a good example of what might be gained from a wider perspective.² Viewed from the perspective of South Asia, Sutter argues, the environmental history of the United States appears preoccupied with the impact of capitalism on wild nature, and with conservation movements as the means of redressing the balance. By contrast, historians of the South Asian environment have emphasized the impact of colonialism on their societies and the agency of peasant social movements against both the colonial and postcolonial states.³

Here the American unconsciousness of the presence of empire in westward expansion is suddenly visible. Whereas U.S. settlers regarded North America (and particularly the U.S. West) as an unpopulated space, the realm of "nature," and the home of the "ecological" Indian, British colonialists in South Asia could not miss the fact that they were intruding into a landscape crowded with preexisting local uses and claims, and so they made explicit their goals and rationales for subordinating those claims.⁴ From the South Asian perspective, U.S. conservation and preservationist movements resemble nineteenth- and twentieth-century British colonial policies that sought to police marginal (often indigenous) people and delegitimize their modes of land use on behalf of major agricultural interests. Confirmation of this insight is provided by Mark Spence, whose study of U.S. national parks suggests that the creation of national parks was shaped not only by preservationist imperatives but also by struggles with the indigenous populations and American dominion over the continent.⁵ The comparative gaze we find in Sutter's stimulating essay has much to offer those interested in constructing an environmental history of the United States that integrates the history of colonialism. A central purpose of this book is to encourage precisely this type of comparative thinking, which results in reframing and deprovincializing familiar national or regional narratives.

Meanwhile, the new world history that has emerged over the last thirty years also has the potential to reframe the way we think about history in general, rather than simply becoming another discrete subfield. In particular, it challenges us to rethink modern history not as the history of Europe at large, but as a shared history of conflict and collaboration in which Asians, Africans, and Americans have also participated. Notable strides have been made in some areas, such as understanding the early modern emergence of a world economy and the crucial roles of non-European collaborators in the formation of what became formal European empires. In this enterprise, world history, like environmental history, can help us revisit the significance of any particular history—including that of Europe, whose entry into modernity is often represented as independent of events anywhere else on the globe. Thus far, however, civilizations, states, and cultures have remained

the dominant units of analysis, even in world history—both because of the need to maintain dialogue with historians who are deeply attached to those units and because of the intrinsic difficulties of imagining and implementing alternatives. Thus, despite its promise, world history has thus far done better at comparing regional-scale phenomena than at providing new narratives in which the globe itself is the unit under consideration. We do not argue for privileging either of these levels of analysis at the expense of the other, but we suggest that both are necessary if either global or environmental history is to influence how we think, both about history and about our current global dilemmas.

Given the shared intellectual potential of environmental history and world history, as well as the parallel intellectual agendas that call for reframing the relationship of parts and wholes, it is surprising that a global environmental history, incorporating the strengths of both perspectives, has been slow to emerge. Instead, the two disciplines have tended to proceed down separate tracks. Most world historians have relegated the environment to the margins of actually existing world histories as a kind of afterthought, rather than considering it as a factor informing the analysis from the outset. At a time when the consequences of human environmental impacts are becoming increasingly evident, a more global environmental history and a more environmentally conscious world history have much to offer us. Environmental histories, with their attention to global, regional, and local ecologies, offer world history the possibility of breaking out of its traditional civilizational and national frameworks. The knowledge that human development has real, and increasingly ascertainable, limits, and that these are in large measure ecological, must inevitably shape the kinds of histories we write and the kinds of shared lives we imagine. We do not know just when a particular species will expire, or particular ecological niches will be terminally polluted, or the atmosphere irrevocably poisoned; we do know, however, that imagining these limits is not fanciful but a vital necessity. Putting the environment into world history is therefore an urgent intellectual project.

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NOTES TO PREFACE

1. See, for example, Alfred W. Crosby, Ecological Imperialism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Richard Drayton, Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Richard H. Grove, Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1995); John R. McNeill, Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); John F. Richards, The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Richard P. Tucker, Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

- 2. Paul Sutter, "Reflections: What Can U.S. Environmental Historians Learn From Non-environmental Historiography?" *Environmental History* 8, no. 1 (2003): 109–29.
- 3. See, for example, Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 4. For a critique of this position, see Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999). For a more balanced view, see Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 5. Mark David Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks (New York: Oxford, 2000).
- 6. For a stimulating recent overview, see Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
- 7. On the world economy, see, for example, R. Bin Wong, China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kenneth Pomeranz, The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Kaoru Sugihara, "The East Asian Path of Economic Development: A Long-term Perspective," in The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives, ed. Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita, and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2003), 78–123. At least two large collaborative projects have emerged from this rethinking so far: the Global Price and Income History Group (headquartered at the University of California, Davis) and the Global Economic History network (headquartered at the London School of Economics).

For three of the many works that have helped reframe the emergence of European empires in ways that allow more agency to non-European actors—each dealing with a different period—see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*, 1500–1700 (London: Longman, 1993); C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World*, 1780–1830 (London: Longman, 1989); and Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Culture in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

8. In an otherwise impressive recent survey, C.A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World*, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), the environment is still missing in action.