

Historical Background of Environment Studies

Introduction

The Environment has been a prominent part of the political agenda since the 1960s. The expansion of the consumer society after the Second World War in North America and Europe increased the pressure on the environment to such an extent that it became alarming. A more affluent and better educated population showed its concern for the environment and demanded a cleaner and healthier environment. The environmental movement that originated from these concerns was not very historically oriented and regarded the contemporary problems as a unique product of 20th century capitalism and industrial progress. However, some realised that a historical perspective was needed to understand the origins of the contemporary environmental crisis. This is where environmental history came into being.

This looks in the way people thought about the natural world around them during particular different historical periods. But environmental history is not solely an intellectual history and is also about the impact of humankind on the natural world and the influence of the natural world on human history. The final part of this essay will therefore look at the development of agriculture and the impact on the landscape.

Environment History

What is environmental history and what does it mean? Historians studying natural sciences and scientists learning the language of history and the humanities? In 1959 the famous author and scientist, C.P. Snow presented a lecture in which he suggested that the critical intellectual weakness of the later period of 20th century was the separation of humanities from sciences. These were what he called the “two cultures”, and Snow suggested that in order to solve problems we need to bring sciences and humanities together. Donald Worster, one of the leading environmental historians in North America, used Snow’s ideas to show how environmental history in particular needs the talents of historians and scientists working together. In his book *The Wealth of Nature*, Worster also argues that the natural sciences and history have become two separate spheres and therefore historians are not expected to deal with the natural sciences. Historians must deal with people, society and culture and the

sciences on the other hand must be concerned with nature. In this way nature is set apart from culture creating two different worlds that are described in different languages.

The separation of nature from culture obscures the fact that culture is influenced by the nature surrounding it. But it is not a one-way street because culture is also asserting its influence on the natural world. Beinard and Coates included this ambivalent character into their definition of environmental history: "Environmental history deals with the various dialogues over time between people and the rest of nature, focussing on reciprocal impacts". To understand these reciprocal impacts we must try to bridge the gap between culture and nature, between science and history. Environmental history is an attempt to unite the two worlds of science and history. Donald Worster described the essence of environmental history as follows:

Once a historian discovers the connection between nature and culture, a whole field of new subjects opens up and history becomes more interdisciplinary than ever before. It is not only using other humanities and social sciences, but it also starts to use the natural sciences. It is true that environmental history brings many new "characters" on the stage of history. Among these are sciences such as geography, geophysics, biology, demography, botany, and ecology. This is a far from exhaustive list. But working with concepts from other sciences is very demanding for a historian and it demands that he or she is not only trained in history and the social sciences, but also in the natural sciences. Commanding all these various specialisms is a formidable task and may require a new type of academic training to produce a generalist.

But not only historians have to broaden their horizons. Scientists must include human history in their work and it seems that they have started to look at historical processes. That is not to say that time has not been a factor in their research because ever since Darwin scientists have recognised that the natural world, even the whole planet, is the product of a long historical process. However, they did not include human culture as an influence in these processes. Although humans are newcomers in the history of our planet, they have had a profound impact on the planet for at least two million years. That means that what we regard as nature is, to some extent, a product of human history. A good example is the use of fire by prehistoric hunters. We know now that the prairies of North America are the product of

deliberate burning by Native Americans for thousands of years. This type of management produced a unique ecosystem that European settlers found in the 18th and 19th centuries. For These reasons scientists must take seriously the impact of human action, in particularly during the modern period, the past 300 years, when human impact has become deeper and more far reaching than ever before.

References

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2. Beinard, William & Coates, Peter, *Environment and History: the Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (London, 1995), p. 1.
3. Beinard & Coates, *Environment and History*, pp. 2-3
4. Worster, D., "Path Across the Levee", pp. 24-25.