

Introduction: Grassroots History: Global Environmental Histories from Below

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# Introduction:

Grassroots History: Global Environmental  
Histories from Below

ROBERT MICHAEL MORRISSEY AND  
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On January 21, 2016, the front page of the website for the *New York Times* featured an attention-grabbing headline. “The Hottest Year on Record,” bold letters declared, “Globally, 2015 Was the Warmest Year in Recorded History.”<sup>1</sup> Beneath the *Times*’ straightforward headline appeared a detailed discussion that touched on the various complexities surrounding the discussion of climate change: how scientists arrive at global averages, how broad trends have differential effects on local environments, the complex ways broad climate shifts manifest in extreme heat waves and droughts at the regional scale. Climate scientists, along with the journalists who translate their findings to a popular audience, are accustomed to explaining and exploring the complex relationship between local conditions and truly global environmental changes and processes. They are used to scaling up from local phenomena to global patterns. And they are increasingly effective at communicating a central point, which is that to understand the changing relationship between people and nonhuman nature, you need a global perspective. Sometimes the big scale is necessary.

For their part, historians have been making this point for decades. In the past generation, a dedicated branch of historical scholarship has brought together two approaches—environmental history and global, or world, history—to produce a new arena of inquiry. In a way, the resulting conversation within the humanities does for the past what

climate scientists have been doing for world climate conditions in the present: explaining and exploring the complex relationship between local histories and global environmental changes and processes. To be sure, climate change might be a dramatic example, and some now use the term *Anthropocene* to argue that we are living in a totally new era.<sup>2</sup> But it is not unprecedented that the human relationship with nature transcends nation-state and regional boundaries. For environmental historians, a global perspective has yielded new insights about events and processes that a regional or local perspective obscures. Whether examining commodification or capitalism, disease or scientific revolutions, colonization or conservation, a generation of environmental historians has recognized the possibilities and the fascination inherent in scaling up to global histories. And although environmental historiography mostly began with regional-scale stories about particular landscapes, predominantly in the North American West, this key insight about the global scale of many environmental phenomena has transformed the field in recent years.

The scale and mode of inquiry reflected in global environmental history clearly has its predecessors. For many decades, historical geographers in countries around the world have examined people's activities and relations in local environments.<sup>3</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, historians associated with the journal *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, particularly under the stewardship of Fernand Braudel, also found in the environment what Samuel Kinser has described as "geo-historical structures" of historical change.<sup>4</sup> In North America, where the self-conscious effort to create the field of environmental history has its oldest and deepest roots, a few of the earliest and most influential environmental histories were global in scope and anticipated regular calls for the field as a whole to become more international and global in its membership and coverage.<sup>5</sup> Many historians apparently heeded that call, with notable examples being the American Stephen Pyne's global history of fire and the Australian Richard Grove's history of conservation in the British empire.<sup>6</sup> Like Pyne and Grove, other historians have scaled up to big history, searching for broad patterns on a truly vast time scale or at the level of civilizations.<sup>7</sup> Still others have offered transnational histories of particular commodities or diseases.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, historians have written broad syntheses, provocative global histories of important eras, and offered histories of transnational and global

movements.<sup>9</sup> Now the field is even mature enough to feature its own introductory reader, several synthetic essays, and essay collections.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, given that many of the themes of global environmental history often involve colonialism, capitalist expansion, and global integration in the early modern and modern periods, this project can be prejudiced when it comes to perspective. Specifically, given the nature of the archives and still-entrenched dominant trajectories of global history, it is all too easy for historians to arrive at narratives that ignore or overshadow local and indigenous peoples or local patterns in favor of the assumed and often-unquestioned agents in history—the supposed movers, explorers, exploiters, and transformers.<sup>11</sup> When historians scale up to big history and explore themes such as the fate of empires, the quotidian experience of regular people living in their environments is often left out. Whether the action is colonization or conservation or commodification, a pernicious inertia guides narratives toward the inclusion of certain actors like industrialists and government officials to the exclusion of others like women and racial or religious minorities.

But this inertia is not irresistible, and other perspectives can enrich our histories of global environmental history. The premise of the essays in this volume is that global environmental history can be told best when good effort is made by historians to consider how this history looked “from below,” from the standpoint of subaltern, marginalized, and often-ignored actors. Taking inspiration from E. P. Thompson and others, this volume aims at exploring history from the perspective of regular people and even nonhuman actors, placing them at the center of the story of global-scale environmental changes and phenomena.<sup>12</sup> While the field is increasingly scaling up to offer new global environmental histories, our hope is to infuse this shift with an important exploration of bottom-up perspectives.

## Genesis of This Special Volume

This special volume grew out of a broader intellectual project aimed at better incorporating these bottom-up perspectives into the writing of global histories. Initiated by Antoinette Burton and the Center for Historical Interpretation at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in 2011, these from-below histories first addressed theoretical frameworks and urban histories before turning to the newer field of en-

vironmental history. Beginning in the fall of 2013, scholars at UIUC held monthly meetings to discuss readings aimed at developing our understanding of what “the below” means in terms of global environmental history. In the spring of 2014, these meetings culminated in the symposium “Grassroots Histories: Global Environmental Histories from Below” at UIUC. At the symposium, contributors from UIUC and elsewhere presented original papers that offered distinctive approaches to addressing this theme. This volume includes articles from many of that symposium’s original participants, namely Tariq Ali, Andrew Bauer, David Bello, Mark Frank, Zachery Poppel, and Roderick Wilson. Desiring to extend the topical and institutional scope of this volume, we announced a call for papers that resulted in ten additional contributions to this volume.

In each of the iterations that led to the publication of this special volume, both the organizers and the contributors have grappled with what it means to tell histories from below and, at the same time, what it means to tell truly global histories. All along, scale has been a key problem. By scaling up, we lose specificity, and as Anna L. Tsing argues, we risk excluding both cultural and biological diversity.<sup>13</sup> By scaling down to work mostly in local archives, we potentially lose the global perspective that can potentially shed light on obscured relations between often-distant phenomena. In other words, we need to emphasize the dialogic relationship between the global and the local as well as hold on to specific scales, for comparisons to make sense. Meanwhile, for historians interested in this kind of inquiry, we also face a technical problem—how to write about places outside our own expertise?

While these issues have surely been on the minds of the contributors to this volume, the authors do not pretend to have solved these shared dilemmas of global history and environmental history. Indeed, few of them explicitly tackle the global as such. Instead, most write from a local perspective about questions and phenomena that are global in their scope. In that sense, the project here is comparative and cumulative—viewing these essays together is one way by which we can arrive at the global, even if few of the articles try to tackle a global perspective on their own. At the same time, the authors approach the local with specific attention to often-marginalized historical actors, adding this important dimension of history from below. Taken together, these articles show that global environmental history needs to take account of histor-

ical agency and the tensions at the grassroots level. To help organize the individual themes of this special volume, we have divided the articles into the below four sections.

### Local Practices and Global Processes

The first group of essays explores the tensions between local communities and the forces that tried to integrate them into global processes, whether economic, cultural, or governmental. These essays show the important ways in which a from-below history can complicate top-down narratives and force their revision.

David Bello explores the formation of fugitive environmental relationships that developed on so-called “sand flats” in the Lower Yangzi River valley of Jiangsu Province during the late Qing Dynasty. While state efforts at water control were intended to expand arable lands and the imperial tax base, Bello shows that both people and insects—particularly locusts—exploited for their own purposes the unintentional landscapes that resulted from silted riverbeds, undermining expert efforts and complicating the power dimensions of environmental engineering. His study not only calls into question the notion of water control, which is too often taken for granted, but shows how such state efforts floundered on their own contradictions and specifically because they did not take into account the actors from below.

In Yan Gao’s article, “The Revolt of the Commons’: Resilience and Conflicts in the Water Management of Jiangnan Plain in Late Imperial China,” water management is once again an issue. In this case, however, it was not state efforts at water control, but rather an increasing population and extensive land reclamation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that put a strain on local networks of resource management. As Gao shows, local knowledge and local networks were the key to a resilient and stable system of land use in this flood-prone landscape, but the knowledge and networks were increasingly undermined as the local population dependent on this riparian environment grew. It was amid these challenges and the resulting conflict over diminishing resources that a system of unified water management and stronger private property rights emerged from below. Moreover, the violence surrounding access to and control over water both foreshadowed and exacerbated the revolutionary changes that led to the collapse of the Qing empire in the early twentieth century.

If water attracted attempts to centralize and control environments, so too did fire. In the next essay, Andrea Duffy explores how the tensions of colonialism played out through competing uses of fire in French Algeria in the nineteenth century. For French colonial administrators in Algeria, fire was dangerous, and its suppression was an important part of rational land management—the way to save what they viewed as a “ruined” landscape. For mobile pastoralists indigenous to the forests and pasture of the country, fire was a useful tool. In the nineteenth century, colonizers and the colonized clashed in their competing views of fire. Duffy recovers a fire regime from the bottom up and uses it to tell the story of indigenous resistance to colonialism.

Tariq Ali tells a similar story about centralizing state experts and a resistant colonial hinterland. In his essay, he explores how a statist and capitalist effort to transform the mofussil, or up-country, of the Bengal delta into a productive hinterland of the postcolonial Pakistani state met the realities of a resistant ecology on the ground. In this case, like others, a centralizing and capitalistic state tried to maximize the production and export of a marketable commodity—jute. But as in the previous case studies, this was easier to imagine than to realize; in the mofussil, state efforts ultimately ran against the unpredictable and uncontrollable shifting ecology of the delta. Thwarting the techniques of governmentality, the delta thus emerged as a more complicated hinterland with its own logic, one that did not match the centralizing logic of the emergent nation-state.

Like Ali, Mark Frank explores a local population and hinterland resistant to central state administration in the short-lived Xikang Province of the Republic of China. Building off James C. Scott’s idea that pastoralists are refugees from the state, Frank nuances this idea by arguing that pastoralism actually counteracted state efforts at fostering agricultural practices. For Frank the assemblage of people, topography, and nonhuman agents in the distinctive region created a history from below that challenges simple narratives of modernization and progress.

## Environmental Politics from Below

A second group of essays looks closely at not just environmental practices but also politics more generally; and in so doing, the articles uncover important stories of environmental activism around the world.

As these papers show, the view from below—whether from marginalized communities or from complicated hybrid spaces—forces us to tell more-complicated stories about the history of environmental activism.

Diana J. Fox and Jillian M. Smith analyze an interesting social movement in Trinidad, a fascinating example of ecological restoration from below. Telling the story of Fondes Amandes, a village in the foothills north of the country's capital, Smith and Fox explain how a small Afro-Trinidadian community managed to create and sustain a vibrant ecomovement under the guidance of women leaders beginning in the 1970s. Locating the origins of this community in a combination of social movements—feminism, black power, and Rastafarianism—Smith and Fox show how an alternative community took root within a nation dominated by the legacies of a plantation economy, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Rupert Medd explores an initiative sponsored by various stakeholders in Peru's Amazon region to promote and archive environmental journalism online. Arguing that the writer-activists of the Premio Reportaje sobre Biodiversidad (PRB), and particularly women journalists, represented an important form of resistance to negative effects of globalism and the legacy of colonialism, Medd brings to light a little-known example of what Joan Martinez-Alier calls "the environmentalism of the poor."<sup>14</sup> Contextualizing this latter-day environmental journalism in a long tradition of travel writing and nature literature in the region, Medd shows how the PRB was an important turning point in consciousness building and testimony from below.

If Medd explores self-conscious environmentalists emerging in the Peruvian Amazon, Traci Brynne Voyles ponders the lack of environmentalist activism at California's Salton Sea. As Voyles points out, the Salton Sea plays important roles as a stopover for bird migrations and habitat for important aquatic species, and yet it attracts little attention from environmental activists. To explain this conundrum, Voyles considers the origins of the sea, which she describes as being neither natural nor human made. Clearly not an untouched wilderness that still resonates at the roots of much of American environmentalism, the Salton Sea ecosystem challenges environmentalists to rethink the nature-verses-culture view of the environment, a feat of imagination many have so far been unable to accomplish. For Voyles, considering the relationship between humans and nonhumans from below requires recognizing that the division between humans and nonhumans can of-



ten not be sharply drawn in places like the Salton Sea and so many others. In this way, Voyles's environmental history from below challenges the very categories through which we view human relationships with local environments.

## Methods and Models of Global Environmental History from Below

Another group of essays adds to the conversation by proposing new methodologies or approaches. First, Roderick Wilson critiques the popular perception that people in preindustrial Edo (Tokyo) and Japan had a particularly harmonious relationship with their environment by examining the transformation of Edomae—a toponym used to describe a local fishery that in the early modern period expanded to include fish and shellfish caught throughout the region surrounding the massive city of Edo. In exploring this history, he also questions the modernist worldview on which these kinds of popular histories depend—namely, that places like Edomae have an a priori objective existence that is later ascribed with meaning by the people who encounter and interact with them. In lieu of this commonplace perspective, he uses an alternative ontology that he calls “environmental relations” to argue that places are constantly being produced and reproduced through the activities of assemblages constituted of both humans and nonhumans. In this way, the below in Wilson's account focuses on the activities of boat pilots, merchants, fishers, fish, shellfish, and the tides and currents of the very ocean itself.

Like Wilson, Gregory Rosenthal offers a self-conscious exploration of how to pursue environmental history from below, but he takes on a huge challenge when he contemplates a bottom-up method to environmental history in the nineteenth-century Pacific Ocean. Recognizing the fundamental ways in which the Pacific was a world in motion, he argues that a focus on workers and indigenous peoples can counterbalance historical narratives too often told over the shoulder of colonialists, capitalists, and Western explorers. In contemplating and modeling such a history from below, Rosenthal conducts three case studies and defines a new environmental history defined by distinctive spaces—ship holds, mines, plantations, and prisons. From these places, a new perspective on environmental history is possible, one that weaves to-

gether massive environmental change with tremendous human mobility, diverse encounters, and large-scale social dislocation and conflict.

Finally, we are proud to include an essay by the pioneering environmental historian Cynthia Radding, who offers a methodological reflection focused on recovering perceptions of the natural world from below. Author of several books including the topically and methodologically influential *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic*, Radding shows in her essay how indigenous peasants in eighteenth-century northern New Spain maintained their own perceptions of the landscape rooted in subsistence strategies and the labor at the center of those strategies.<sup>15</sup> Reading an archive of legal proceedings and land claims against the grain in order to recover indigenous meanings of the land, Radding explores how indigenous actors shaped long-standing subsistence patterns and defended them against Spanish claims and competing uses of mining and agriculture. Radding not only recovers an interesting story of colonial contestation but provides a model for scholars looking to recover perceptions of the environment from below.

### Recovering Agency from Below

A fourth group of essays is more explicitly focused on recovering the complex agency of historical actors. While many environmental histories cast marginalized and subaltern peoples in simple roles as victims or resisters, these histories from below reveal that a more nuanced story is possible when we examine the story closely. For instance, as Colin Fisher shows in his essay about the Back of the Yards neighborhood, located around Chicago's notorious industrial-food powerhouse, the Union Stock Yards, workers were not just downtrodden victims of social and environmental inequalities. Surely, historians have not been wrong to focus on the exploitation of human labor in the service of the exploitation of nature on the famous "disassembly lines" of the Armour factories and other landmark meatpackers. And yet, as Fisher argues, the workers were not defined by this exploitation; a history from below reveals the many ways in which stockyard families used urban parks and wild green spaces in the city as an antidote to their marginalized position. As Fisher concludes, the worst human victims of "the Jungle" had another side to their lives.

Rebecca Jones writes about local traditions with a similar sensibility for reconstructing environmental relationships from below. In her article “Possums, Quandongs and Kurrajongs: Wild Harvesting as a Strategy for Farming through Drought in Australia,” she examines how Australian settler farmers between 1890 and the 1940s used wild harvesting as a way to cope with their drought-prone environment. While these strategies have been eliminated and forgotten in today’s industrial agriculture, they were an important means by which farm families raised cash and calories in dire times. Recapturing these resilient strategies is a fascinating example of environmental history from below.

Zachary Poppel explores another case study of resilience when he writes about local residents who capitalized on a development project in twentieth-century rural Sierra Leone. When the government of Sierra Leone partnered with University of Illinois professors to build a new research university after the model of the American land-grant university, much of the project was conducted in a top-down manner, even extending to the depopulation of an already-existing British colonial college near Njala. At the same time, Poppel shows how local populations in the village of Njala participated and in many ways benefited by the agricultural experiments of the development-focused institution. In particular, Poppel demonstrates how local residents resisted some of the agendas of the new university by cultivating ginger, an option-making root that allowed local farmers to continue their own priorities in the face of the powerful new institution in their midst.

### The Anthropocene from Below

The final essay in the collection is a critical assessment of the much-discussed concept of the Anthropocene from a philosophical and political standpoint. In particular, Andrew Bauer’s essay highlights ways in which the Anthropocene concept imagines our own time as distinctive from a romanticized past age in which humans had no great effect on nonhuman nature. Objecting to this view of human history for the way it reifies the very binary that it seeks to dissolve, Bauer critiques the concept of the Anthropocene in a way that reminds us of the important continuities of history—the ways in which humans and other life forms have always shaped their environments in profound ways. A powerful argument against what he sees as a presentist concept, Bauer’s essay also

provides a framework for appreciating the agency of humans across time in ways that dovetail with the from-below project.

In a final contribution to this volume, Robert Roupail provides a review of a recent and popular introductory reader in the field of global environmental history. Taken together, we hope these essays and this volume will be a useful resource for the emerging field of global environmental history, even as they push the field forward toward more complex narratives and richer perspectives.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Robert Michael Morrissey** is an associate professor of history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He is the author of *Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) and several articles about the social and environmental history of the colonial Mississippi Valley and Great Lakes regions. He is currently at work on a new environmental history of the tallgrass prairie region of North America and its indigenous inhabitants from 1200 through the early 1800s.

**Roderick Wilson** earned a PhD in East Asian history from Stanford University in 2011 and is an assistant professor with a joint appointment in the Department of History and the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He regularly teaches a course on global environmental history as well as a variety of courses about the history of Japan and East Asia. His research focuses on people's interactions with their local environments in early modern and modern Japan with a particular focus on rivers, cities, and science and technology. Most recently, he has published a review of two documentary films about the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster and an essay on the artist Yoshida Hatsusaburo. Currently, he is working on a book manuscript entitled "Turbulent Stream: Reengineering Environmental Relations along the Rivers of Japan, 1750-1950" as well as a second book-length project about the urban and environmental history of Tokyo.

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