New Environmental Histories of Latin America and the Caribbean

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Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Conveners: Adrián Gustavo Zarrilli, John Soluri, José Augusto Pádua, and Claudia Leal

Participants

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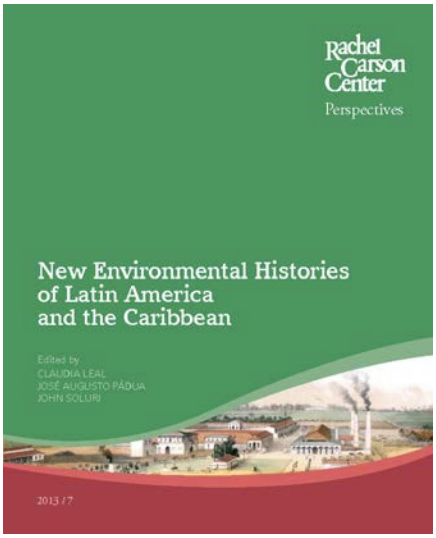
In this two-day workshop, scholars from eight different countries in Latin America, the USA and Canada discussed (in Spanish) complete drafts of the chapters –written in Spanish, English, and Portuguese– for an edited volume entitled New Environmental Histories of Latin America and the Caribbean. The workshop built on a previous meeting in June 2013 in Sasaima, Colombia, in which the authors discussed and revised ideas for their chapters, abstracts which were subsequently published in the RCC's journal *Perspectives*.

The book, to be published in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, will provide fresh interpretations of Latin American and Caribbean environmental history during the last 200 years, when the nation-states that today comprise the region formed. By drawing on the expertise of a dozen authors the project seeks to pull together dispersed scholarship while strengthening the network created by the Latin American and Caribbean Society for Environmental History, SOLCHA.



Over the course of two, intense days of conversation, the participants not only discussed the content and arguments of individual chapters, but also wrestled with identifying the characteristics that have defined the environmental history of Latin America and the Caribbean. Among the ideas that emerged were: (1) the novelty of nation-states; (2) a widely held perception of natural resource abundance; and (3) a twentieth-century marked by periods of both export-oriented economies and rising internal consumption linked to de-ruralization, population growth, and state-led "developmentalist" projects. However, this thought-process is far from over and indeed one the most stimulating aspects of the workshop was confronting the diversity of approaches and themes that comprise "Latin American" environmental history.

At the conclusion of the two-day workshop, the contributors agreed to the following time-line: revised chapters are to be submitted by 31 January 2015; the three editors will convene in March 2015 to evaluate the revised chapters; penultimate versions of chapters will be due at the end of April 2015. The full manuscript will therefore be ready for submission to academic presses in June

2015. Ideally, the published book will appear more or less simultaneously in Spanish and English and subsequently in Portuguese.

The book will be structured in two parts: the first part is organized geographically: two chapters are devoted to nation-states (Mexico and Brazil) and three chapters focus on regions defined by a sea (Caribbean), mountains (Andes), and rivers (La Plata). The second part of the book deals with themes that cut across space: forests and cities; agriculture, ranching, and mining; and the production of environmental knowledge.

Description of Chapters

The first chapter will provide an introduction to the book and the major themes of Latin American and Caribbean environmental history. The chapter will be crucial for orienting readers to both common themes and divergences in the chapters. In addition, the chapter will provide brief yet vital historical and ecological contextualization.

Part I: Histories of Countries and Regions

In "Mexico's Environmental Revolutions", **BOYER** and **CARIÑO** revisit modern Mexican history, which they depict as a series of ecological revolutions that altered the way people interacted with and conceived of the environment, and all of which occurred within the context of the increasing commodification of nature. The authors identify four ecological revolutions: the Liberal Revolution (1854), which launched the wholesale commodification of nature; the Social Revolution (1910), which partially reversed its predecessor by opening the way for alternative, peasant-based agriculture; the Green Revolution (1943), which mitigated its predecessor and favored the "muscular" control of land and nature; and the Neoliberal revolution (1982), which saw the state's virtual abdication of control over nature primarily in favor of corporate, though occasionally peasant, interests. Each of these revolutions had contradictory and unexpected effects. The novelty of the authors' approach is twofold. Firstly, it suggests that the idea of an ecological revolution, as first articulated by Carolyn Merchant, is more common and (in its modern iteration) more a function of political transformations than heretofore believed. Secondly, it presents a fresh take on traditional periodizations of Mexican history, both by insisting on the centrality of the Green Revolution and by suggesting that more commonplace periodizations (e.g. those that emphasize the 1910 revolution as a turning point) must take ecological issues into account as well.

In "The Dilemma of the 'Splendid Cradle': Nature and Territory in the Construction of Brazil," PADUA reexamines the country's formation by focusing on how networks developed, since the 19th century, to connect the initial cores of socioeconomic activity; in this manner the enormous territory inherited from the Portuguese colony was slowly occupied and its unity assured. The author emphasizes that the *sertões* (areas with little occupation by people of European ancestry) were not empty spaces, but places rich in natural diversity and indigenous cultures. The postcolonial occupation was based on the exploitation of abundant natural resources, which led to a series of regional environmental histories articulated within a unifying process of nation-building. The process of territorial expansion from relatively small settled areas was common to all Latin American countries, but in the Brazilian case, the enormity of the territory and of its ecological assets – including 60% of the Amazon rainforest – stands out.

The three remaining chapters in the first part of the book adopt regional perspectives on environmental history. In "The Greater Caribbean: Tropicalism, Plantations and Tourism," FUNES

studies a region which was one of the early centers of globalization, as its complex mix of cultures testifies. In this space of struggle between imperial navies, both colonial domination and the idea of tropicality have been long-lasting. Two socio-economic and environmental complexes have tied the Caribbean to the outside world. The first is the plantation, which produced tropical commodities, especially sugar and coffee (mostly in the Antilles) and, from the end of the 19th century, bananas (more so along the continental rim). From the mid-20th century, the slow decline of the plantation economy gave way to a second economic focus: international tourism. Shifting ideas of tropicality resignifed the Caribbean as edenic paradise rather than an exotic producer of colonial foodstuffs; and modern transportation facilities, along with increasing consumption of exosomatic energy, enabled tourists to consume the region's tropical nature, especially its sun, heat, beaches, and crystaline waters.

In the chapter, "The Legacies that Configure the Tropical Andes," **CUVI** analyzes the environmental history of the Andean mountains as they transverse four countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. What gives cohesion to this territory are environmental factors (shared climate and biodiversity) and the presence of a dense indigenous population, in addition to creoles, who have lived in the valleys and on mountainsides generally above 2,000 meters. **CUVI** argues that the environmental history of this region has been profoundly shaped by the co-existence and negotiation, sometimes pacific, at other times violent, between two worldviews, an indigenous and a creole (and all the hybrids that have formed between them). The result has been a range of particular types of property rights, agrobiodiversity and

livestock, mechanisms of exchange through and beyond the market, and relationships between states and local populations. In other words, analyzing the ideas and traditions, sometimes radically different, of the different people who have closely shared these mountains are key to relating and explaining their material transformation.

In his chapter, "Plate River Basin: Rivers and Flood Plains in the Southern Cone, **ZARRILLI** traces the environmental history of three of South America's most important river systems: the Paraguay, Paraná, and Uruguay the confluence of which creates the Plate River. The immense drainage basin extends into southern Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and the Center-North of Argentina. The chapter focuses on key socio-environmental transformations associated with cattle raising, logging, capitalistic agriculture, and dam building. The changes were simultaneously associated with processes of integration and fragmentation that is, the interactions of human activities with an environment defined by its rivers and floodplains. The chapter's contribution then will be to offer an integrated analysis of processes initiated within nation-states yet that played out in more complex ecological contexts.

Part II: Thematic Histories

By examining two topics that have marked the region's history – forests and frontier expansion – **LEAL** provides an environmental and global perspective on the construction of Latin American national geographies. In "Threatening and Threatened Jungles" she offers the first general history of Latin American tropical forests, spaces that in the early 19th century were largely beyond the control of the emerging nation states. Tropical jungles became more integrated during the late 19th century through the production of export commodities. Coffee, banana and cacao plantations began the process of deforestation in coastal jungles, while extractive economies (such as rubber) transformed but did not destroy forests elsewhere. Tropical forest deforestation accelerated around the 1960s primarily due to the twin processes of frontier setttlement and ranching. Preoccupation about this rapid transformation lead to the creation of conservation areas and ethnic territories that have diminished but not halted the onslaught on these ecosystems. While

some jungles almost disappeared, 80% of the Amazon basin is still standing. Jungle areas – thoroughly or scarcely transformed – have been physically and symbolically integrated into nations and global processes and discourses. But these areas have not shed their frontier character, leading to the formation of unequal national geographies.

SEDREZ proposes an environmental history of cities in which the diversity of the urban experience in the continent is connected to the transformation of the landscapes at large. In this way, she explores both the impact that the two large waves of urbanization, in the 19th and 20th centuries, had on natural resources, by demanding more water, more energy, more food from the hinterland, and the complex transformation of urban nature, in which access to safe water, air and green spaces was distributed unequally, eventually leading to fierce disputes. Narratives of boom and bust, common in the colonial era, took new form as the voracity of the world markets demanded Latin American products. In particular port cities, through which these products were exported, expanded their networks through the hinterland, often occasioning the emergence of new urban centers in the late 19th century. The dynamic role of cities in the Latin American economy attracted a huge population, both international and domestic, and the cities' territory expanded over hills, mangroves, rivers, shorelines. A second dramatic urbanization wave in the mid-20th century would turn Latin America into an urban continent, in which 80% of its population lives in cities. This urban growth came with a huge environmental price. Industrialization, modern transportation, services increased consumption of energy and water, often brought from far away, while pollution, overcrowding and precarious housing for the most vulnerable population pose critical challenges to national states.

In "Campesinos, Cuisine and Hidden Histories of Agrodiversity" **SOLURI** explores the histories of agrodiversity, campesinos and cuisine in the context of two processes that affected nearly all of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America: the emergence of agroexports and rural-to-urban migrations. In so doing, the chapter both challenges economic histories that underestimate the resiliency of "family farms" and enriches environmental histories that focus on wild biodiversity. Drawing upon examples of export crops (bananas and coffee) and internally consumed ones (maize, potatoes, and dry beans), the author argues that the persistence of agrodiversity is less the result of static cultural traditions than the outcome of campesinos' varied responses to state policies that have historically favored large landholders, urban residents, and export markets.

In "Hoofprints: Ranching and Landscape Transformation" **VAN AUSDAL** and **WILCOX** argue that cattle ranching, by transforming native savannas and clearing tropical forests, has been one of the primary drivers of landscape change in Latin America. While cattle were widespread since the colonial era, it was only from the mid-19th century that the environmental impact of ranching began to gather force as herds multiplied along with economic growth and ranchers pushed into seasonal tropical forests, set fires to tropical savannas, and plowed under vast areas of the pampas to plant alfalfa. In this way, they situate the well-known advance of cattle into humid tropical forests since the 1960s within a broader historical narrative as well as highlight its link to the changing genetic makeup of Latin American cattle. That the vast majority of the region's cattle were consumed domestically adds a twist the traditional export-oriented focus of Latin American historiography. This demand-centered focus also helps better contextualize efforts to explain the spatial predominance of ranching. Contrary to the common attempt to explain the "success" of ranching in Latin America in terms of status, territorial monopolization, political power, and state subsides, it was market demand and the biological advantages of cattle and grass that underwrote these alternatives uses.


In “Extraction Stories: Workers, Communities and Nature in the Mining and Oil Industries,” **SANTIAGO** addresses the combined environmental and social histories of mining substances as guano, copper, and oil. She demonstrates how these extractive industries, which do not choose their location, have led to a deep exploitation of both landscapes and workers’ bodies. These impacts, in turn, led workers to organize and have an impact in the course of national politics and public policies in the twentieth century. As globalization has intensified extraction and its ecological effects, new voices have emerged to challenge projects and state policies throughout Latin America, including indigenous groups, environmentalists, and transnational non-governmental organizations.

In "Prodigality and Sustainability: the Environmental Sciences," **McCOOK** talks about the role of the environmental sciences in shaping how people in Latin America understood their environments, and engaged with them. The environmental sciences include a diverse cluster of theoretical and applied disciplines — including natural history, agronomy, conservation biology,

medicine, atmospheric chemistry, climatology, economic entomology, and many others. Since the early nineteenth century, the environmental sciences have developed considerable power, and have become a privileged form of knowledge. The scientists — and institutions — succeeded because of their ability to align their research with the needs of other powerful social groups in Latin America. These other groups included governments (at various levels), but also many other social groups besides: agricultural societies; independent museums and entities, national and international NGOs, and national and multinational corporations. For much of the long nineteenth century, the ecological sciences were profoundly shaped by the idea of abundance — their task was to map and catalogue the riches of Latin America's natural world, and to make nature as productive as possible. By the 1930s, Latin America entered a long crisis of abundance — soil exhaustion, epidemic diseases, catastrophic air pollution, loss of biodiversity, among others. Over time, these have produced a new paradigm of sustainability, which informs almost all the contemporary environmental sciences, albeit in different ways. The paradigm of sustainability has not, however, completely supplanted the paradigm of abundance, which is still visible in enterprises such as mining, and the rapid expansion of soybean cultivation.

Right after the workshop ended, authors attended the VII Symposium of the Latin American and Caribbean Society for Environmental History (Quilmes, Argentina). There, they presented their project in a two session panel to an avid audience.

John Soluri presenting the project in Quilmes

Pictures by Stuart McCook

Report by all workshop participants