

James Rice

Native America: An Environmental History

During the 1970s and 1980s Native Americans figured very prominently in the burgeoning field of environmental history, but self-identified environmental historians in the last twenty years have devoted less attention to the subject. Anthropologists and historians of Native America, attorneys, journalists, environmental justice activists, and the First Nation's people themselves, however, have continued to produce a steady stream of new insights into Native environmental history. Meanwhile, there has been an explosion of scientific research that has direct relevance for the subject, particularly in climate history and genomics. Thus there is a substantial and highly diverse body of scholarly literature and other forms of knowledge that has yet to be adequately processed, fresh new source material waiting to be incorporated more fully into a historical study, and—invariably—some lacunae needing to be filled.

As a Carson fellow I am working on a synthesis of Native American environmental history since the first human occupation of North America. Presented in the form of a braided narrative with four main strands—natural history, knowledge and narrative, landscape and culture, and nature and power, the resulting book will explore the interplay between cultural, material, and political forces, balance diverse perspectives and approaches to the subject, incorporate the latest work in the relevant sciences, and share the fruits of fieldwork in several indigenous communities in Canada and the United States.

My hope is that putting those pieces together and taking the long view will make them visible to scholars who have been working largely independently of one another; bring into sharper relief deeper structures, processes, and historical forces that are not so evident when the focus remains on shorter and later time-frames; shed light on neglected areas such as urban Indians and the environment; and demonstrate to readers that colonialism is alive and well in the modern era.