

Environmental History of the Ocean

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Knowledge about the sea was forged as much by culture as by science and technology, while people's encounters with coasts and oceans created ripples that carried through society and global geopolitics. Environmental history offers an avenue for considering the mutual relationship between people and oceans. The proposed project involves the completion of two papers related to environmental history of the ocean that contribute to the emerging field of ocean history, but also represent environmental history shaping other fields of historical scholarship.

"Wild Blue: Legacy of the Post-World War II Perception of Ocean as Frontier"

Ocean boosters, scientists, popular writers, industrialists, and others embraced the metaphor of the frontier in the decades after World War II to signal their aim to intensify traditional uses of the ocean and especially to pursue novel plans for the ocean's depths. Boosters celebrated the ocean frontier for its apparent promise to yield vast resources and foster science-based industries, even as they recognized and bemoaned its lawless state. At the moment when the ocean appeared to hold virtually inexhaustible riches, the Law of the Sea (LOS) process began, with conferences held in 1958 and 1960 and powerfully punctuated by the 1967 call by Arvid Pardo to consider the high seas "the Common Heritage of Mankind" (now "Humankind"). This paper explores how the powerful "ocean frontier" metaphor moved from the context of American economic and cultural imagination to become a tool for developing nations to try to secure claims to an ocean whose resources were, briefly but at a pivotal moment in the LOS process, understood as virtually endless.

"Frontiers of Discovery: Changing Meanings of 'Frontier' from Frederick Jackson Turner to John F. Kennedy and Beyond"

Today, there are many rich and interdisciplinary explorations of frontier as a metaphor, of frontier denoting borders, and especially boundary zones—but no scholarship that charts the history of changing meanings and uses of this resonant term, which has come to be associated with progress, the future, and especially science. An initial shift in meaning created the American association of western lands with a word that had previously, in a European context, denoted boundaries or borderlands. Over the course of the twentieth century, "frontier" shifted again from referring to the western United States to characterizing other geographic places, such as Alaska or the polar regions and, later, also the atmosphere, the ocean, and outer space. "Frontier" also, along the way, took on metaphoric meaning as it extended to include non-places, such as the human mind, the economy, and new knowledge. The paper contributes to environmental history by charting how a cultural concept of geographic space shaped American understandings of science and progress.