

Pulling the Teeth of the Tropics

Paul S. Sutter

Between 1904 and 1914, the United States built the Panama Canal, an ambitious engineering project undertaken two decades after an unsuccessful attempt by the French.

The French experience taught American administrators several lessons, but none was more potent than the need to mitigate the destructiveness of tropical diseases, such as malaria and yellow fever. The United States responded with a sanitary program, informed by several critical mosquito vector discoveries at the end of the nineteenth century, that seemed to respond successfully to that threat. Indeed, in a fit of tropical triumphalism, many Americans claimed to have solved one of the vexing medical—and imperial—problems of the era: the settling of white temperate peoples in tropical environments. The Americans had, to use the words of a contemporary commentator, “pulled the teeth of the tropics.”

My current book project, “Pulling the Teeth of the Tropics,” is an environmental and medical history of American public health efforts during the construction of the Panama Canal. The manuscript examines American perceptions of the tropics and tropical nature, how those perceptions informed US sanitary and other administrative practices in Panama, and how those practices in turn resulted in the creation of a Canal Zone landscape that experienced significant public health improvements, but also profound racial and medical inequalities. I also argue that the environmental changes wrought by canal construction created many of the conditions conducive to malaria and yellow fever transmission, conditions that were often naturalized as tropical. The manuscript concludes by tracing the diverse legacies of this pivotal moment in the history of US public health administration.