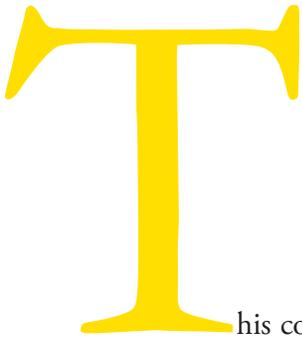


# introduction



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**Vimbai C. Kwashirai**

his collection consists of seven articles on environmental history contributed by eight scholars from across the world. The volume explores a variety of themes in the environmental history of Africa, Australia and New Zealand, Europe, North America and Russia. The significance of this research collaboration to scholarship is that the papers add and contribute new knowledge and understanding to the historiography of environmental history at not only the general and specific but also the continental and state levels. To most observers and readers, environmental history is a new field that emerged in the United States in the 1970s as a product of the American environmental movement. To some extent there is evidence supporting this claim and narrative regarding the origins of environmental history. Environmental history newsletters and journals began to appear in the United States public domain in the mid-1970s. The American Society for Environmental History promotes this creation story on its website, placing emphasis on the field's recent roots. Environmental history has also been classified among many new historiographies born or re-written beginning in the 1960s-women's

history, African-American history, gay and lesbian history, and the new social history in general.

In this volume, Andrew Isenburg argues that American environmental history neither emerged in the 1970s nor was it catalysed by the environmental movement, though environmentalism lent it greater visibility, focus, and sense of purpose. Isenburg states that the roots of environmental history are actually traceable to the nineteenth century in its earliest articulation by the frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner. At that time, Turner's version of environmental history took centre stage narrating the history of the United States as a progressive transformation of wilderness to civilization, the so-called "frontier thesis". According to Isenburg, the frontier thesis was so popular that Canadian and Latin American historians developed their own versions of it. In the 1930s, Turner's critics dismissed his frontier thesis for its vagueness and inaccuracy. Elsewhere in the world, studies on the environment, some emphasizing material approaches, others cultural perspectives, remained largely on the margins of professional historical practice. Historians working on the environment remained isolated within history departments, and their work was largely interdisciplinary, overlapping with the work of economists, ecologists and geographers. The re-emergence of environmental history in the 1970s and its spread across the world was the combined outcome of the material and cultural approaches as well as the influence of the spread of environmental movements around the world.

The contributors to this collection discuss not only the genesis of environmental history, but also similar environmental history themes, irrespective of their geographical areas of expertise. They show us that the role and impact of the state, whether in an exploitative or a conservationist capacity, remained central from pre-colonial times to the present. Also, they highlight the pivotal character of the relationship between economic development, nature and conservation, given that the main axiom of world conservation strategy is that development depends upon conservation, and lasting development is impossible without conservation. Warwick Frost and Jennifer Laing point out the important role played by the state in

the creation and preservation of national parks in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Brian Bonhomme examines the concept of *zapovedniki*, gardens of Eden or nature preserves in Russia, in whose establishment and protection the state played a central part. Bonhomme suggests that Russian environmental history has been re-written and revised to correct past misconceptions regarding Soviet and Russian bureaucracies, namely, the notion that they were essentially non-monolithic and conservationist as in the West, but undemocratic in their manner of controlling and managing the environment. Turning to European environmental history, Martin Kalb highlights the combined role of the state, political movements and academic institutions in the conservation of nature, wilderness, forests and water. Vimbai Kwashirai and Isenburg also discuss the concept of Eden, in Africa and the United States, respectively. The narrative of Eden portrays humans' exploitative tendencies as a fall into sin with a promise of salvation in a future paradise in cases where state interventions sought to demarcate and protect nature reserves and legislate for soil, wildlife and forest conservation. Before contact with colonizers, indigenous people in Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the United States were believed to practice sensible resource strategies, but this presumed harmony with nature has often been overplayed and romanticised. The encounter between natives and colonists; the emergence of industrialisation in the world; and the rise of environmentalism in culture and politics have all shaped our understanding of environmental history, but pre-colonial peoples in Australia, Africa, New Zealand and North America were hardly environmental saints who lived in timeless and perpetual harmony with nature.

Linda Ivey's work contributes to the debate on the ways in which societies have struggled to be in harmony with nature. Ivey looks at modern agricultural practices in Santa Cruz County, California, analysing the term sustainability. Throughout her discussion this concept is explored and tested as a "mobile and elusive target" dependent on "ever changing social-economic, political and environmental conditions". Over time, the development of a commercial horticultural industry of apple production, marketing and selling in

the Pajaro Valley and elsewhere in Santa Cruz County shows both stability and instability of the sector, influenced by relations between orchardists/growers with government agro-expert scientists on the one hand and, on the other, by the ecological impacts of the negotiated new knowledge of planters and university or state scientists on cultivation practices and choices. As in Europe, Africa, the United States and Russia, the issue of soil erosion and fertility was a major concern in California, since it directly affected production levels and livelihoods. The key argument of Ivey's paper is ultimately that agricultural and environmental sustainability and knowledge were both 'constantly changing and evolving' in California, embracing the health of the soil, society and economy. Old agricultural methods such as clean cultivation also promoted at different times and spaces in colonial Africa and North America were abandoned and replaced with new ones as their long term ecological impacts became apparent. Soil consciousness is a key theme touched upon by the contributors. Ivey argues that advocates of sustainable agriculture posit that the twenty-first century food industry needs to recover from the inadequate agricultural methods of the pioneers of chemical dependency, who used capitalist market-driven cultivation techniques which ushered in an age of industrial agriculture at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These environmentally abusive cultivation techniques reveal a history of the food industry driven by a coalition of ambitious growers and, increasingly, by state agricultural bureaucrats working to create a "brand name" emphasising cultivation approaches that buoyed the local industry with expanding production and expanded markets.

One important global consequence of rapacious agricultural and logging practices across the world has been widespread deforestation. Bonhomme explores Russian and USSR environmental history debates on many key issues, including deforestation. The relationship between ideology, economic development and environmental outcomes in Russian environmental history is particularly fascinating. Bonhomme argues that, socialism or capitalism, the environmental consequences of breakneck speed industrialisation were the same: deforestation, soil erosion and pollution, among others. Randall

Dills' review of David Moon's work informs us that settlements by the Steppe inhabitants viewed as outsiders provide an international understanding of soil and forest or grassland denudation regardless of the concerted efforts by the settlers to 'work with the environment'. Deforestation still occurred in grasslands, in African savannah woodland as in European temperate forests, where woody species were ravenously cut down for agricultural, energy and timber requirements. Dills also reviews a book by Jane Costlow's that shows us how Russians were at home in the forest because they depended on it for sustenance and livelihoods. One can draw parallels with other continents but, like other peoples in the world, Russians weaned themselves from direct dependence on hunting and gathering in forests. In Bonhomme's opinion, the character of such transitions show that industrialisation, urbanisation and technological change rather than political culture and systems were the dominant determinants of environmental change. According to Bonhomme, the environmental problems of the East and the West were just as bad, using the yardsticks of rampant soil erosion, deforestation and wildlife depletion. Bonhomme also makes the bold assertion that the Soviet Union collapsed due to environmental damage and problems.

Kwashirai's environmental degradation narrative on Africa resonates with Bonhomme's discussion. Kwashirai maintains that the theory of human destructiveness has been a dominant strand in African environmental history fuelled by environmentalism. In the interwar-period there was a well-developed British and French colonial narrative of African profligacy and degradation of the environment. Colonial and post-colonial foresters acted as agricultural supervisors and blamed Africans for the "wanton" or indiscriminate destruction of vegetation and soil erosion. With their attitudes and actions, foresters sought to project an image of themselves as policemen guarding natural resources from illegal exploitation. They also acted as tax collectors, gathering revenue from fines and cutting permits. The chief causes of environmental degradation, according to foresters, were deforestation, overstocking, cultivation of slopes, over-cultivation, ploughing, increases in cultivated areas, road drain-

age, and damage by livestock and wildlife. However, Fairhead and Leach have argued that the presence of large numbers of cattle on west African savannahs, far from being sources of degradation, actually increased woody vegetation. These authors argue that human action was the primary cause of forest re-growth because settlements were protected from fire as villagers planted shade-loving, commercially lucrative trees such as kola, banana and coffee. The main cause of vegetative changes was the introduction of new world crops such as groundnuts, maize, cassava and chilies, which broke the thirty-year fallow cycle of rice production that had allowed the full growth of moist forest. However, generalisations across the vast African continent are difficult, given the diversity of climates, forest mosaics and human settlements, which produce unique local environmental outcomes.

A uniqueness of local conditions also characterized the establishment of the world's first national park at Yellowstone United States in 1872. Laing and Frost show that the national park concept was adopted in and adapted to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the rest of the world. Yellowstone provided the inspiration for further national parks and protected areas, which were different from the American template. Some were primarily orientated towards recreation, others focused on protecting specific ecosystems and wildlife. The internationalisation of the national parks concept fits in with Kalb's discussion of the globalisation of environmental history within Europe and beyond. Kalb traces recent developments and conversations in environmental history within various national and continental institutions regardless of language barriers and accessibility of materials. Kalb highlights recent discussions and future opportunities for collaboration across nations, arguing for more transnational cooperation within the field of environmental history. Such cooperation would also be desirable in debates, examined by Isenburg, Laing, Frost, Dills, Kwashirai and Bonhomme, on the taming of nature, ecological determinism, the fear of the wilderness and the artificial creation of various types of wilderness, environmentalism and urban environmental history. Ivey and Bonhomme's discussions on the ecological impacts of agricultural and industrial

development address what could be important areas for research cooperation in the future.