

Environmental history dossier

Introduction to environmental history dossier

Presentación del dossier de Historia ambiental

DOI: 10.22517/25392662.25122

pp. 70-74

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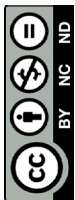
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In 1989, Augusto Ángel Maya, one of the pioneers of environmental studies in Colombia, highlighted the out of date historical method being used to examine environmental problems. In advocating the "need for an environmental history" he criticized that the old rationality detached social occurrence from its natural surroundings, and that the landscape signifies the explanatory root of social and symbolic activity. Since then, his reflections have become fertile ground for a discipline that has been carving out a new field of studies and reflections on critical past-present-future relationships in the context of increasingly pressing socio-environmental conditions for humanity and especially for the most vulnerable sectors of society.

This dossier is written precisely as a response to Angel Maya's demands and claims, presenting to readers the results of research in the field of environmental history, from a thematic and methodological point of view. It is proof that the acceptance of environmental history is not a fashion or a whim hailed by the threats of climate change or covid-19. On the contrary, today environmental history has an increasingly important place in the midst of new historiographies that impact both academic field and contexts of citizenship, as an incentive to the misadventures of progress, conflicts, and the teachings of past generations. Not only is it the "narrative that emerges from a conquered natural world," as one of the authors states, it is also the possibility of bringing to the present the agreements that various societies have made to survive.

In Latin America, research in the field of environmental history has grown steadily for the last two or three decades since the publication of the first self-identified works in the field, not counting the previous years in which it sought to reconstruct society-nature relations in a historical perspective without identifying within the environmental framework and name. Both the symposiums of the Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History (SOLCHA), and other academic events specialized in History, bring together more and more researchers who have moved beyond the vision of non-human nature only as a stage, to make it the protagonist of the future of societies. Spatial boundaries are progressively more novel or broad; while, within the framework of the reflections on the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene and the evidence of global environmental change, the temporalities that capture the greatest interest correspond to the last two centuries. This dossier is no exception in this trend. Whether the articles that are published here and those that were submitted but did not pass all stages required for their publication, the local and regional perspective predominates, in territories that mostly belong to Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and Bolivia, and focus their concern within the 19th and 20th centuries.

For the research line in Environmental History of the Master's Degree in History at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira, this dossier constitutes the culmination of a first stage of efforts aimed at seeing with a different perspective processes associated with social and environmental changes, and the ways in which to study them in order provoke new historiographical reflections that do not remain in the idyllic evocation, but rather in the critical

interpretation of these events, with a view to establishing new perspectives that allow decision-makers, including citizens, to take these variables into account, in the construction and destruction of the territories of which we participate in.

In *Dragons and Rivers: Latin American Travelers in "Red" China*, the author questions the cultural capacity of the Chinese people to undertake monumental projects, without appealing to the anti-colonial political context that mobilized revolutions like Mao's China. The thesis according to which Chinese voluntarism was key in changing the landscape will be attractive and provocative for readers. Moreover, it is considered that the relationship between revolutions and the landscape is mediated by an "ideological act." The epic narrative of "taming" rivers is inscribed in the dazzling perspective of the writers, who from 1950 to 1970 told the world what was happening in that Asian country; Colombia's Manuel Zapata Olivella was one of them. The text emphasizes a claim already made by Claudia Leal and Stefania Gallini, that travel diaries constitute an extraordinary source for those who wish to venture into environmental history. The author of the article Jaime Ortega further comments, that these notes register the characteristics through which the dynamics and changes experienced by societies in their eagerness to progress, trying to control "the forces of nature" are recorded.

During the global pandemic experienced by humanity during the last two years, the article *Putrid Waters are Healthy: Environment and epidemic in 19th century Buenos Aires*, aligns with the historiographical reflection on the lessons left by the 1871 epidemic in Buenos Aires. Beyond the mass of evidence exposed by Lucas Guiastrennec, the text suggests other hidden aspects in these cases, such as the "spatial reconfiguration suffered by the city during the plague" and the weather conditions before and after the disaster. Both aspects suggest a thematic and methodological perspective in which environmental historians venture to identify causalities and contexts that impact events such as the one analyzed.

Memoirs, medical theses, pamphlets, newspaper graphics as well as official documents (such as municipal decrees), provide a diverse repertoire of sources from which the researcher draws evidence to characterize and analyze a phenomenon beyond the strictly sanitary. So where does the environmental element appear in this scenario? In the putrid creek? In the significant pollution burden of a city that demographically experienced a rapid population growth after the second half of the 19th century. One key detail: the role of the tenements; those blocks of rooms where migrants were crowded together amid the scarcity of drinking water and clean air. The putrid streams and the septic tanks became the main sources of infection, within the framework of "a city with little oxygen from its birth", while "its layout was an attack on public health."

In *An urban and environmental historical approximation of the Paseo Bravo in the city of Puebla at the beginning of the 19th century and the end of the 20th*, we find a refined analysis of the environmental implications of the social production of space within the framework of urban history from an environmental perspective. An influence that goes back to the European presence in colonial America are the parks, promenades and avenues that not only ex-

pressed the urban sociability of that time, but also provided "environmental services" to their population; providing a new way of living in the midst of inequalities and ecological diversity.

The case of Puebla, Mexico, is emblematic because with the passage of time, the old embankments became "coexistence parks for all urban groups", proposing a political dimension of environmental history associated with public spaces, as suggested in the beginning of the last century. In this sense, the article describes in detail the future of urban facilities in which enjoyment stands out as the main priority of local authorities. The walks, mediated by the San Francisco River, were registered under the planning processes and represented a common purpose often forgotten today in many Colombian cities: "to add aesthetic elements and restore the cityscape." The evidence and other details exposed by the author Natalia de Gortari, show that the frontier of environmental history has yet to be colonized; she proposes a methodological path of how to do it from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The struggle for water in the middle of the desert is a challenge about which we know little about. In the article *Opportunity and Maintenance of Water Resources in the Atacama Province (Bolivia, 1825-1879)*, Kathya Jemio Arnez makes an effort to bring us the feat task of a society resistant to harsh environmental conditions for human survival. The rich description of the process plunges us into a story of hardships and struggles that the community undergoes in their ongoing quest for survival. Environmental colonization around fresh water reveals a story of how a society organizes and mobilizes to solve a life or death problem.

The efforts to overcome the scarcity of fresh water in a Bolivian province are not only limited to the study area, but are understood in a larger context of hydraulic plans that spread through several of the young Latin American republics, either to alleviate the thirst or to drain land and, ultimately, boost activities such as agriculture or mining. The author is not limited by the material aspect that is usually addressed in studies on the domestication of water, but rather explores the normative aspects and the necessary consensus for the supply efforts to bear fruit.

The hidden life of land and property rights has been the common denominator of one of the bloodiest disputes that Colombian society has experienced. The case of La Bella, to the east of Pereira in the Department of Risaralda in Colombia, is an example in which social dimensions such as the stories based from the voices of peasants and environmental factors are intertwined. For at least the last half century the struggle for land has also been tied to the survival of peasant economies in permanent tension with plantation economies.

An issue that is explored in the article *Tenure and Struggle for Land in the Upper Part of La Bella. From Traditional Agriculture to Long Onion Monoculture. Pereira 1970-1980* by Elsa Villegas is the approach to rural history that has largely ignored the environmental dimension from a social perspective. In this sense, the article, based on an examination of sources, including oral ones, seeks to present the process of agrarian disputes between peasants, landowners and the State, under the magnifying glass of the socio-ecological transformations in



this territory, in the context of the world-economy, and its degree of influence at the local level. For those who study this subject, the author demonstrates that behind the environmental past is a range of actors, struggles, networks and conflicts that reveal significant complexity.

We hope that the readers will find in the texts additional contributions to those indicated here by way of introduction, and above all, that the results presented by the authors generate new research questions within the expanding field of environmental investigation.