

On Becoming Relevant: Environmental History and National Park Management

David Louter, National Park Service, 909 First Avenue, Seattle, Washington 98104;
david_louter@nps.gov

About four years ago, I was driving around Point Reyes National Seashore with Gordon White, the park's new cultural resource manager. We were both relatively new to the seashore, and were fresh with the awe, hope, and optimism common to any new relationship with national parks. We believed we would make a difference. As we toured the park, Gordon related the story of the seashore, renowned for its natural environment, open space, and history of dairy ranching in the shadow of San Francisco. This was no typical park in which the distinction between wild nature and modified nature was starkly clear (in either a physical or intellectual sense). Here, no matter your professional interests, you could not argue for managing the area as if it were pristine nature. Ranching had left an indelible imprint on the Point Reyes landscape since the mid-19th century. It would be difficult for anyone to suggest that if we just pulled back the agricultural curtain we would find primordial nature intact.

To the contrary, the natural world we so enjoyed on that day—the smell of eucalyptus (exotic), the undulating open terrain (grazed lands), and the tranquil pastoral scene (market economy)—was the result of a long relationship between humans and nature on the Point. More importantly, it seemed that park managers were not trying to untangle people from natural systems but to understand how they affected those systems and why. We need to know how we got here, Gordon noted, so we can understand and manage nature that, in a sense, runs through this ranching country, while continuing to protect ranching as a viable way of life.

His observation, I thought, took the classic preservation paradox of national park management to another level, and I told Gordon that this would be a perfect place for an environmental history. He had described almost exactly what environmental history does: it studies the changing relationship between people and the natural world through time. It pays special attention to the intended and unintended consequences of human activities in nature, as well as the ways people have shaped and in turn been shaped by the natural world.

I felt confident in my declaration. I was, after all, an environmental historian and I wanted to see more environmental histories of national parks. But simply pronouncing the

virtues of environmental history was not enough, and I found myself unprepared for the enthusiasm and questions that followed. They were the questions that a manager, not an academic, would ask, for they centered on practical (and important) matters, such as:

- How do you use this kind of study?
- What is a good definition of environmental history for national parks?
- How do you do environmental history?
- What kind of topics do you address?
- What would we learn from them?
- How long does it take to do them?
- How much do they cost?
- How are they different than other histories and other reports the Park Service prepares? Not everything is a landscape.
- Last and most importantly: How would we apply this history to management questions about preserving ranch lands and restoring or maintaining biological processes?

Although I now have answers for these questions, I did not at the time. And while I worked to answer them and craft a definition of environmental history for national parks that did not sound bureaucratically bland, the environmental history program took off on its own.

Gordon contacted Richard White, who had been one of my advisors at the University

of Washington, and had recently left the history department there for Stanford. Along with historians such as Donald Worster and William Cronon, Richard was considered one of the founders of the field of environmental history and a leading American historian. Gordon invited him to come to the park and discuss the topic of environmental history and the prospects of developing an environmental history program with park staff. Among those at the initial and subsequent meetings were many from natural science backgrounds—biology, botany, range management, marine ecology, and geology.

The main theme of the sessions was that ecologists and historians had common interests and similar historical questions but different approaches to answering those questions. They were good discussions, and park managers were interested in incorporating environmental history into the research and education program associated with its new research station, the Pacific Coast Learning Center. Environmental history, along with other research in the natural sciences, found a place in the learning center's program. As part of his contribution, Richard White started a course at Stanford, an annual seminar on the history of the West and the environment at Point Reyes. The idea was to have students conduct research at the park, using it as their case study and working on topics relevant to park management. In doing so, they would produce an archive of research. Students in the course, now in its third year, have researched and written about a variety of topics, providing a kind of organic research collection that continues to grow and build off of previous years.

So it turns out that this was the beginning of the environmental history program, whether I had intended it or not. I decided at this point to show rather than tell what “applied” environmental history was. I prepared posters and powerpoint presentations for academic and National Park Service conferences. But of greater importance, I was able to develop and quite serendipitously fund three environmental histories and further “show” or “demonstrate” how we can apply

this kind of study to management issues within parks. One was a study of San Juan Island National Historical Park, a place where the tension between natural and historic scenes made it a good case study. For funding reasons, the other two projects were environmental history overviews, or prospectuses, that provided well-developed summaries of the relevant themes and topics for Point Reyes and for the fur trade in the Pacific Northwest and its effect on parks there. This summer we'll be starting our fourth, and first fully funded, environmental history, the subject of which will be Tomales Bay at Point Reyes National Seashore. We're carrying out all of these studies, I should add, through the University of Washington, using the Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit agreement.

What I'd like to do now is discuss how the program has progressed over the last three years, present what I think is a statement of purpose for environmental history in national parks and talk about how this kind of work is becoming relevant, pointing when appropriate to some of the projects I just mentioned.

First, I don't want to give anyone the impression that environmental history is “new” and has never been done before in national parks. The field traces its roots to the 1930s, its professional debut to the 1970s and the formation of the professional organization, the American Society for Environmental History. Moreover, national parks are natural places for this kind of study, for their creation and management present the important and often problematic relationship Americans have with the natural world. During the last thirty years, national parks have been the subject of some of the best environmental histories for this reason.

Yet environmental history has rarely been applied to questions of park management. Thus, the purpose of the environmental history program is to promote the study of the changing relationship between people and nature through time in national parks. It operates under the notion that nature has a role in the human past, and that nature has a history. It asks some fundamental questions: What

were the ecological consequences—both intended and unintended—of human activities? How have people affected and in turn been affected by the natural world? What were the forces and motives for environmental change? Moreover, because this kind of study explores the on-going dialectic between humans and nature and attempts to help us understand, in the words of Cronon, “environmental change in relation to the actions of human beings, blending ... the insights of ecology and economics,” the goal of environmental history is to enrich our understanding of past events in a national park, reinterpret the history of that park (by adding complexity), or revise that history altogether.

For many, the story might seem familiar but the focus will be different. The general approach or analytical framework builds off of the questions noted above and is fairly straightforward. What were the forces of change? What attitudes or ideas (culture) influenced people’s perception of nature? How did capitalism (market economy) affect their decisions about and relationship with nature? And how can ecology help us understand nature and the changes we have caused? We also might consider material versus cultural notions of nature as part of the analytical approach. It’s important to keep in mind that these are at bottom land use histories and therefore rely on a more traditional kind of environmental history approach. But they should remain open to the kind of perspective that comes from more recent approaches such as those that consider the role of gender, race, class, environmental justice, and human health. Finally, the narrative, I believe, is an essential tool in crafting environmental histories of national parks. Understanding human connections to the natural world and their ecological consequences within the framework of a story—with a beginning, middle, and end—is as powerful as it is understated. People respond to this. It doesn’t mean the narrative has to be reductive or simplistic, but the gift of historians lies in their ability to provide perspective and context, to show change over time, to tell a story.

What makes environmental history rele-

vant for national parks? Perhaps the most obvious way is that it can provide park managers with a deeper understanding of the ecosystems under their care. I think as a general statement and in my own experience, most ecologists and land managers tend to acknowledge that there are no distinct boundaries between the human and nonhuman, between the natural and unnatural worlds. At the very least, most would agree that it would be profoundly problematic to make such a distinction. For example, as Mark Fiege’s work about the history of irrigation in southern Idaho suggests, one cannot imagine nature—the world we have not created—tamed, for it continues to influence the canals and dams that water that desert country in a variety of expected and unexpected ways. In this respect, we should consider that “landscapes are historical creations” influenced by natural and often human activities, and that knowledge of a landscape’s history should inform management.

In my discussions with park ecologists, botanists, marine ecologists, and geologists, we’ve concluded that scientific studies and environmental histories can proceed together profitably because many of our questions are historical; only our approach to answering them differs. Ecologists tend to look at two points in time and assume that what took place between them was the reason for change, but often it’s what occurred well before and even after that had a role. And that is a perspective historians can bring. Conducted in tandem with scientific studies, then, environmental history can reveal a broader picture of a landscape’s past in both a theoretical as well as a practical context. In this respect, thinking of ecosystems historically and abstractly—as products of their own past as well as products of nature’s timeless processes—resource managers will be better prepared to evaluate and respond to unexpected change, such as the 1997 floods in Yosemite Valley, Yosemite National Park. They will also be better prepared to develop long-term strategies for landscape management; for example, the removal of exotic species, the restoration of park ecosystems, or

perhaps the finding of ways to reconcile human-modified landscapes with biological processes.

Environmental history is also relevant for parks because it promotes a more interdisciplinary approach to resource stewardship. It helps bring perspective to changes in ecosystems that were the result of “natural” as well as “cultural” actions. It reveals the difficulty in separating the two. As Cronon asserts, environmental history in this regard encourages “resource managers and ecologists to work more closely with historians and other students of human culture” to find more creative approaches to the management of natural resources. Environmental history, I think, then supports a more holistic approach to resource management—one that considers cultural and natural resources as closely related.

Environmental history is relevant for more than illustrating the intimate connections between, rather than the separation of, humanity and nature. It also allows us to re-interpret—or to read nature back into—the history and stories we tell about national parks. What should we interpret to the public? One obvious subject would be the changing ideals Americans have about nature as symbolized by the parks themselves. Perhaps a less-obvious topic would be the history of exotic and native plant species; this would support current management projects such as weed eradication and native plant restoration. But we could also interpret the subject within a larger context to inform the public about the history of weeds in America. As Fiege notes, “[T]he movement of exotics into and across the continent, [was] one of the great ecological shifts ... so crucial to hemispheric and world history.” Describing weeds as part of the nation’s historic legacy of European colonialism, U.S. manifest destiny, westward expansion, and so on would provide Americans with an opportunity to learn not only about native species found within parks. It would also call attention to issues of biodiversity at a much larger scale, inspiring visitors to see the link between history and ecology and to ponder their own roles in shaping and changing America’s ecology. Environmental history can

also yield new insights into subjects such as colonial New England, slavery, the Civil War, industrialization, and westward expansion, among others. At Civil War battlefields such as Gettysburg, for example, park interpreters could enhance more conventional histories of the conflict (if they don’t already) with discussions about the way military planners viewed the terrain; the role of resources—food, fuel, and the like; the effect of weather, climate, and disease; the use of animals and animal power; and vegetation, especially forests. Already, Gettysburg managers are employing a kind of environmental history to inform a plan for a large-scale restoration of the historic battle “scene” or landscape through, among other things, the removal of forest cover and other vegetation.

The current environmental history projects cannot claim, as yet, such a role in park management, but the potential is there. The environmental history of San Juan Island National Historical Park, a National Historic Landmark, brings an important perspective to a park that commemorates the international boundary dispute between the United States and Great Britain during the mid-19th century. Like other historical parks, there is a tight bond between the park’s natural and historic scenes as well as a great deal of tension surrounding what preservation of the natural and historic landscape entails. The study has been well received by park staff for enhancing their understanding of this subject. But what was surprising and rewarding to me was that the research has helped inform discussions surrounding issues raised by prairie restoration and forest thinning projects. Moreover, the study (and the historian working on it) has become part of an interdisciplinary project with the park’s vegetation monitoring program. Using the environmental history, we’re developing a series of historic maps in GIS to illustrate changes in land cover and use. Finally, research in the park’s environmental history has helped inform another interdisciplinary project that is focusing on the cultivation and use of camas by native peoples in this and other Northwest parks.

I selected the fur trade because it was rele-

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vant to so many parks in the Pacific Northwest (and even Hawaii), and though obviously a subject for environmental history, the fur trade seemed under-represented from this perspective. It seemed we knew more about the tangible evidence of the fur trade enterprise—forts and other properties—than we did about the environmental effects of the trade. The overview we're writing should also intrigue academic historians because it's a subject ripe for re-interpretation. Through the lens of environmental history, we will perhaps place greater emphasis on the global network of trade and the movement and transformation of animals, fish, timber and other materials harvested and produced in the Northwest as part of this larger market. We could, according to Cronon, "reconstruct the linkages between the commodities of our economy and the resources of our ecosystem." Such an approach could alter how we conceptualize the way fur trade enterprises such as the Hudson's Bay Company managed nature in the Pacific Northwest.

At Point Reyes, an environmental history might expand upon this notion. Ranching has been the primary focus of popular interest and historical inquiry, but the prospectus we're preparing should offer a framework that considers ranching within a larger model of "nature's metropolis." It's a framework that considers Point Reyes within its proximity to the larger urban center of San Francisco. We'll

incorporate this overview with the work Stanford students have prepared as a road map for a more focused history of an important body of water in the park, Tomales Bay. This will not only be a history of environmental change, but also a project that will support current scientific investigations of the bay being conducted by the National Park Service as part of its inventory and monitoring program. Having historians and ecologists at work on similar topics, indeed having them in the field together, should generate a greater awareness of the changes to and condition of natural systems.

Environmental history, whether as a special study or as part of a larger research project, can serve as a tool for park management. By placing nature at the center of the story, it can bring a fresh view to traditional interpretations of the past, especially those that focus on the built environments and on the human and administrative histories of parks. It can also yield insights into and the context for the condition of park resources, ecological restoration projects, and inventory and monitoring programs. (Like these programs, it is baseline documentation.) Likewise, it can provide insights for park planning and environmental impact statements. Perhaps its greatest use will be in how the National Park Service interprets environmental change to the public.

