

HISTORY

Environmental history as 'root history'

By MEI XUEQIN

Environmental history emerged in the second half of the 20th century and has come to be regarded as a new field on a par with political, economic, social, and cultural history. After half a century of development, its distinctive character can now be considered more deeply and systematically. Environmental history can be understood as a form of "root history," and investigating this "root" provides a clearer way to grasp the field's essence and novelty.

Origins, foundations of environmental history

Understanding environmental history as "root history" first requires examining the field's origins and research foundations—that is, tracing its roots to clarify the basis for this characterization.

Environmental history is generally understood to have emerged in the 1960s and 1970s amid worsening environmental problems and the rise of environmental movements. Certain American historians began to move beyond established disciplinary boundaries, drawing on concepts, theories, and methods from ecology and other natural sciences. In doing so, they reconsidered the meaning of "human affairs" and recognized the "intrinsic value of nature." Roderick Nash, among the first historians to use the term "environmental history," pioneered its teaching and study in response to major pollution incidents affecting the places where he lived and worked. Like Nash, many American historians were spurred by the severity of environmental problems. J. Donald Hughes, John Opie, Donald Worster, Susan Flader, and other pioneers of the field witnessed the environmental crises of the 1960s and 1970s firsthand and participated in the environmental movement.

Worster therefore argued in his essay "Why We Need Environmental History" that historical research must respond to the times by engaging with the global environmental crisis. Hughes similarly observed in *What Is Environmental History?* that, just as women's, ethnic minority, and children's history are largely products of social and political movements, the roots of environmental history are beyond doubt inextricably intertwined with those that gave birth to conservationism and environmental movements. At its root, then, lies the grave environmental problem—or "our ecological crisis": a comprehensive crisis of life and death transcending race, nation, and even species, and raising fundamental questions about the survival of human civilization, life on Earth, and the living planet itself.

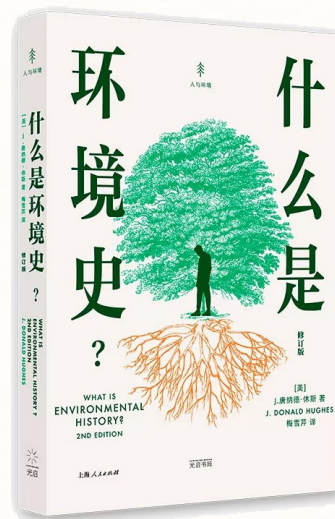
In reflecting on the ecological crisis, environmental historians began to examine interactions between past societies and the nonhuman world, exploring nature's role and place in human life. They inherited the social historians' principle of writing history "from the bottom up," but also directed their attention further downward, even seeking to "delve into the Earth." At the same time, they looked "from the Earth upward" to better understand these relationships. Starting from contemporary environmental problems, they gradually found various paths into the natural world of the past. Discover-

ing nature within history, or bringing "nature into history," thus became a new mission for the historical profession. Environmental historians also developed a distinctive intellectual orientation, recognizing the importance of learning from scientists, especially ecologists, to better understand nature and, on that basis, to analyze and write more comprehensively the history of human societies as interconnected with and interacting with the natural world. This orientation is fundamental to environmental history and helps explain why it can be understood as "root history."

How environmental history came to be 'root history'

How, then, does environmental history take shape as "root history" in research practice? A useful starting point is the definition of the field. Scholars in China and abroad have proposed numerous definitions. In terms of subject matter, environmental history can be understood succinctly as the history of relations between humans and nature. Historiographically, it is a new discipline that takes the socio-ecological system within a specific time and place as its basic category, examines changes in the interaction between human society and the natural environment, emphasizes the integrity of that system and its internal organic connections, and has integrative and transdisciplinary characteristics. This understanding has brought together scholars from the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences who share an interest in environmental questions, giving rise to a highly interdisciplinary scholarly community that might be called the "environmental history school." This community has also created broad platforms for academic exchange through environmental history societies and associations, related scholarly organizations, and journals such as *Environmental History* and *Environment and History*. Together, these institutions have given the field considerable vitality, producing a steady stream of books, articles, and new ideas.

This new scholarly community has constructed a multifaceted system of historical knowledge, reflected in the many new concepts that have emerged since environmental history became established as a field. Environmental history is therefore not only distinctive and internally coherent, but has also spurred innovation across established areas of historical research, demonstrating its contribution to the development of historical scholarship. As Hughes put it, environmental history is useful because it can add grounding and perspective to more traditional concerns of historians, such as war, diplomacy, politics, law, economics, technology, science, philosophy, art, and literature; it can also reveal relationships between these concerns and underlying processes of the physical and living world. From this perspective, environmental history resembles a "latitude" that can intersect with virtually any historical field or discipline as a corresponding "longitude," generating new subfields and branches of inquiry. This function may be described as "integrating roots and connecting veins": Environmental history brings a new perspective to familiar objects and themes of historical research, renewing and transforming



FILE PHOTO: The Chinese edition of *What Is Environmental History?* by J. Donald Hughes, translated by Mei Xueqin

the discipline in the process. In this process, environmental historians have developed various new forms of history, including world, regional, national, and specialized histories. Broadly speaking, what makes these histories new is their focus on changes in human-nature relations and their examination of human affairs from an ecological perspective. They consider how the shifting forces of nature leave their mark on different societies, how societies use and control the natural environment, how human understandings and perceptions of the environment have changed, how knowledge of particular places has developed, and how social values and conflicts have shaped ecosystems from the local to the global level. These histories differ from earlier approaches focused primarily on the internal workings of human society. Instead, they reveal dimensions of the past in which social relations are intertwined with human interactions with nature.

These diverse new histories, shaped by the imprint of human interaction with nature, reveal how environmental history as "root history" has transformed historiographical theory. This transformation extends beyond the expansion of research topics to the philosophical foundations of history itself, offering new answers to fundamental questions in the philosophy of history: What is history? How can history be known? How should history be studied?

Reconfiguring historical ontology, epistemology, methodology

Traditional philosophies of history generally regard history as the product of human will and action, with nature serving as either the stage for human activity or a resource to be exploited. Environmental history has challenged this anthropocentric ontology by rejecting the idea that humans are the sole protagonists and absolute measure of history. Instead, it treats nonhuman nature as possessing agency and therefore as a participant in history. The subject of history consequently shifts from humanity alone to a composite of "humans and nature," reshaping both historical conceptions of time and the logic of historical narrative. "Deep time," including geological and climatic time, enters historical analysis, making the rise and fall of human dynasties appear fleeting and fragile against the fundamental rhythms of the natural world. Historical narrative is no longer simply a story of

political or economic rise and decline, but also one of the evolution of Earth's living systems. The basic plot of history thus becomes the interaction and exchange of energy between human societies and the natural environment.

As the ontology of history changes, so too does historical understanding. From the perspective of environmental history, historical events are no longer seen as the products of a single political or economic cause, but as the result of interactions among human and nonhuman factors. A pandemic, for example, may arise from the combined effects of bacteria or viruses (nature), environmental change (ecology), and human activity (society). Historical understanding therefore shifts from the search for a single root cause or universal law toward the analysis of complex networks of agents and interactions. Because "silent" nature cannot speak through historical documents, historical inquiry must also move beyond an excessive reliance on textual sources and incorporate non-textual evidence, including data from natural-scientific techniques such as ice-core, tree-ring, and pollen analysis, interpreted through a humanistic lens. This requires historians to move beyond purely cultural constructions and recognize a material nature that exists independently and both responds to and constrains human activity.

These ontological and epistemological changes ultimately find expression in methodological innovation. With its distinctive intellectual orientation, environmental history crosses the boundary between human society and the natural world and embraces interdisciplinary historical practice. Historical research is therefore no longer confined to the humanities and social sciences. Historians must also collaborate closely with geologists, climatologists, biologists, and other natural scientists, building a bridge between scientific data and humanistic narrative.

The foregoing discussion highlights innovations in the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of history, suggesting that environmental history is helping move the philosophy of history toward a paradigm increasingly informed by ecological consciousness. It also serves as a reminder that the boundary between nature and society is human-made, while history itself unfolds at their intersection. The historian's task is therefore not to observe events from a safe distance, but to investigate this intersection directly. The ultimate test of historical knowledge lies not merely in the internal coherence of its texts, but also in its capacity to help people understand and respond to real-world ecological predicaments.

To understand environmental history as a "root" is therefore to see it not merely as a branch of historical scholarship, but as an underlying logic of historical research and narrative. It serves as a reminder that every human story is also part of the story of the Earth. In this sense, environmental history as "root history" offers a more complex, humble, and truthful vision of the past. Even as it carefully examines the entanglement of nature and society, its concern ultimately extends to the fate of humanity.

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