

Introduction to the Forum

In the inaugural issue of *World History Connected* (2003), William McNeill argued that a “consensus” for teaching world history had emerged: “That principle may be described as ecological: asking what it was, in successive ages, that was conducive to human survival and the expansion of our collective control and management of the world around us. And what, from time to time, acted in the opposite direction, depopulating some localities and disabling or diminishing various local civilized societies.”¹ This rationale resonates today, and in the context of accelerating climate change and the coronavirus pandemic, we present a forum of scholarship on “Ecology and the Environment in World History.”

This forum appears as an “anniversary” of sorts, arriving ten years to the month after a similar forum on environmental history in WHC.² That forum sought to “inspire world history teachers to find new ways of bringing environmental topics into the classroom, giving their students a historical perspective on today’s global environmental issues,” according to editor Micah Muscolino.³ The authors of this forum worked to rejuvenate that mission, not only because of its increasing importance, but also in defiance of the ecological challenges presented to the world in 2020–2021: Rapidly increasing cases of COVID-19 overlapped, and in some ways overshadowed, the 50th annual installment of Earth Day, an observance of ecology and environmentalism that is now recognized as the largest secular celebration in the world.⁴ The pandemic also resulted in the cancellation of the World History Association’s 2020 Annual Conference, which was scheduled to focus on “Sustainability and Preservation.”

My own article, “The Case for Ecology and the Environment in World History Instruction,” might serve as a more comprehensive introduction to this forum and my motivations for serving as its guest editor. I argue that teachers of world history in secondary education must confront a “cultural aversion” to environmental history that results from western, industrialized, democratic norms that shape our curriculum design and implementation. To me, world history’s transnational, mosaic approach to this earth and its peoples presents an opportune framework for contextualizing environmental history.

In response to accusations that environmental history inherently involves environmentalism, or activism which might inappropriately politicize our field, I counter that all

history is, in its own way, activism—an activation of memory and attention. In choosing to remember, record, narrate, and teach history, we reveal and advance our priorities and our ideals. I argue that our students' preparation for the tides of globalization and ecological change, waves which are amplified by technological accelerations of human processes and interconnectedness, demands a pivot: Rather than a peripheral topic, ecology that includes the environment must be a central theme permeating our world history courses to offer meaningful perspectives for climate change, sustainability, and conservation of our ecosphere. I then begin unpacking potential opportunities in secondary education for addressing these topics with our students.

Two instructors at the university level that frame their world history survey courses with environmental history are Elizabeth Drummond and Amy Woodson-Boulton, who authored "Teaching Modern World History, Or: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace the Urgency of Climate Change." Drummond and Woodson-Boulton articulate their historiography, methodology, and practical pedagogical approaches to engaging



Image 1: A visualization of the eventual demographic and environmental effects of the Neolithic Revolution, the Columbian Exchange, the Atlantic Slave Trade, and subsequent sugar cane production in the Caribbean. Source: Aquatint from "Ten Views of the Island of Antigua," by William Clark (1823). Provided by the British Library Collection under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Digging_the_Cane-holes_-_Ten_Views_in_the_Island_of_Antigua_\(1823\),_plate_II_-_BL.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Digging_the_Cane-holes_-_Ten_Views_in_the_Island_of_Antigua_(1823),_plate_II_-_BL.jpg)

students with ecological history—important context and cognitive training for students dealing with the consequences of colonialism or crises like covid, climate change, and the brushfires of Southern California near Loyola Marymount University, where Drummond and Woodson-Boulton teach. Incorporating environmental history, “specifically in the shadow and smoke of climate change and a global pandemic,” facilitates their students’ engagement with the nature of historical narratives, emplotment, causality, periodization, and historical agency. These instructors also share their course syllabi to exemplify framing a survey history course with environmental history.

Cynthia Ross contributes an article that specifically explores the environmental effects of colonization. Her work entitled, “Ecological Imperialism in an Occupied Landscape: Tangantangan and the Tropical Forest” focuses on the Pacific island of Guam, an “insular environment” altered by historical waves of human colonizers—the ancestors of the indigenous Chamorus, then Spanish, Japanese, and American arrivals. In particular, the article highlights “continuities of ecological domination by successive empires as they sought to control the Pacific” and “explores the intersection of Spanish and American ecological imperialism, the American civilizing mission, and post-war recovery through a study of one [tree] species, tangantangan.” Ross’ article examines multiple perspectives to the ecology of Guam—those of the colonizers, who sought raw materials and productivity, but also concerned themselves with sustainable use; and those of the colonized, who found sanctuary, physically and spiritually, in the forests.

Marsha Robinson’s contribution also uses an ecological lens for investigating colonization patterns, this time in West Africa. “Recharging the Sahara Desert for a Peace Dividend: No Longer Victor Levasseur’s 19th-Century Pipe Dream” traces the experiences of two men, Henri Duveyrier and Victor Levasseur, to illustrate a French colonial transition from mapping the waters of West Africa (hydrography), to manipulating and managing them (hydrology) in response to economic and social unrest in France during the 19th century. Robinson presents Duveyrier, the hydrographer, as a traveler-narrator resembling Ibn Battuta or Marco Polo. She then depicts the life and work of Levasseur, a hydrologist who recognized the importance of accessible, potable water and the potential for peace, then and now, resulting from stable resources. Additionally, Robinson utilizes French ecological imperialism to contextualize the relationships between water scarcity, economic stagnation, and sociopolitical turmoil in modern West Africa.

“Sustaining Thermal Water in Early Modern Tuscany,” by Beth Petitjean, advances a theme of water as “a source of power—economic, political, and social—for those who control it and for those who use it.” Petitjean shares research on human use of a unique natural resource, thermal bath waters, and explores case studies in Tuscany to illustrate human tendencies to overuse and degrade natural resources as well as the success of local regulations to restore, sustain, and preserve such resources. This article includes a lesson module designed for world history teachers to engage students with a common ecological

experience pursued by humans across time, space, and culture: “vibrant bath-going activities, whether for medical treatments, as part of religious practices, or simply for rest, relaxation, and entertainment . . .”

Italy remains in the spotlight as the setting for Chris Tiegreen’s “Following the Template of Heaven: Environmental Policies in Medieval Italy.” Tiegreen argues that “[Christian] impulses that cultivated a concern for the urban and natural environment should serve as a counterweight to claims that environmental destruction is inherent in the Christian worldview.” In contrast to arguments by Lynn White, Jr., Stephen Mosley, and others who argue that Abrahamic faiths sanctioned human dominance over the rest of creation, Tiegreen elaborates on Christian urbanization practices designed to balance man-made order with the preservation of resources, Edenic paradise, and God’s creation.⁵ According to Tiegreen, cities needed to be pristine, beautiful, and sustainable, not just epicenters of human production and consumption. Italian cities in this time period provide examples of “legislative and popular efforts to sanitize the urban environment and, as these city-states controlled significant lands beyond their walls, manage the natural resources surrounding it.” For increased world history context, both Tiegreen and Petitjean’s articles can be paired with Thomas Mounkhal’s contribution to this issue—“Northern Italy and Venice in World History Perspective.”

Turning to pedagogy, Matthew Herbst’s article, “God, Satan, and Freshmen in the Southern Californian Desert,” reveals the details of a seminar history course that involves experiential learning in the desert, an environment prone to scarcity, but inhabited by plants, animals, and humans, nonetheless. Beyond the history of humans in deserts like those in the American Southwest, Herbst engages students to investigate changing human perceptions of arid lands and our complex relationships with the desert as an “unforgiving obstacle” or as an opportunity for resource extraction, seclusion, or spiritual development. The seminar culminates with an excursion into the western portion of the Sonoran Desert, at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, offering students the opportunity to connect, physically and intellectually, with the environmental history and ecology they study over the course of the seminar.

Finally, our forum includes “Digital Resources for Teaching the Environment, Sustainability, and Ecology in World History,” a catalogue procured by John Maunu. Maunu’s career as a teacher and mentor to world history students and developing faculty alike embodies the spirit of *World History Connected*—constructing bridges between people who navigate the complexities and interdisciplinary nature of world history. Subdivisions for this extensive collection of practical content include: Teaching Sustainability and Environmental History, Teaching Environment and Collapse of Civilization, Environmental Racism/Justice, Ecofeminism, Queer Ecology, Far Right Environmentalism, Global Sustainability and Environment Resources, the Environment and Nature in Art and Architecture, and Religion and Environment.

Comparing Maunu’s collections from 2011 to 2021 reveals growing interest in ecological perspectives of world history. There is a universal appeal to better understanding the ecology of our food, fuel, and other forms of energy that power our existence and our interactions. There is also increasing pressure to better understand the environmental ramifications of those interactions. Regarding the incorporation of environmental lenses to viewing world history and the inclusion of the environment as a “historical actor,” Maunu’s contribution to the forum of ten years ago suggested, “As the number of these works increase and the need to translate this scholarship into the classroom becomes an even greater challenge, the editors at *World History Connected* have pledged themselves to address this dilemma . . .”⁶ It has been an honor to contribute to this pledge.

Brian Holstrom has taught world history courses including AP World History: Modern for the past fifteen years at Salpointe Catholic High School in Tucson, Arizona. He is a contributor as well as the guest editor for the Forum on “Ecology and the Environment in World History” published in *World History Connected* (the University of Illinois Press). He wishes to extend his appreciation to *World History Connected*’s Editor, Marc Jason Gilbert, as well as contributing editors John Maunu and Nikki Magie, for encouragement and professional guidance. He would also like to thank John McNeill, Richard Tucker, William Cronon, Donald Worster, Robert Marks, Andrea Duffy, Paolo Squatriti, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, Lawrence Culver, and Thomas Mounkhal for inspiration, for their work in environmental history, and, in several cases, their assistance in reviewing the articles presented in this forum. He can be contacted at bholstrom@salpointe.org.

NOTES

¹ William McNeill, “An Emerging Consensus About World History?” *World History Connected* 1, no. 1 (2003), accessed February 27, <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/1.1/mcneill.html>.

² See *World History Connected* 8, vol. 2 (2011), accessed February 20, 2021, <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/8.2/index.html>.

³ Micah S. Muscolino, “Introduction: Reading and Using the Forum on the Environment in World History,” *World History Connected* 8, no. 2 (2011), accessed April 20, 2021, https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/8.2/forum_muscolino.html.

⁴ “History of Earth Day,” Earth Day: The Official Site, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.earthday.org/history/#:~:text=Today%2C%20Earth%20Day%20is%20widely,national%20and%20local%20policy%20changes>.

⁵ See Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, Vol. 155 (March 10, 1967): 203-1207; Stephen Mosley, *The Environment in World History* (New York: Rutledge, 2010), 40, 10.

⁶ John Maunu, “The Environment as a Historical Actor: Web Resources,” *World History Connected* 8, no. 2 (2011), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/8.2/maunu.html>.