



NATION-STATES AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

*NEW APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL
ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY*

EDITED BY

Erika Marie Bsumek

David Kinkela

Mark Atwood Lawrence

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Preface

This book rests on two convictions—that global environmental problems deserve urgent attention and that historians can play a productive role in thinking about effective responses. In fundamental ways, after all, present-day problems are nothing new. For centuries, national governments as well as local authorities, international bodies, activist groups, and indigenous communities have sought to regulate features of the natural environment that refuse to recognize political boundaries. Through the case studies presented in this book, we hope to show that historians, too often wary of “presentism” and cautious about drawing out the implications of their work, have something of great importance to add to contemporary debates.

In pursuing this agenda, we have benefited enormously from the enthusiastic support of the Institute for Historical Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, which, since its founding in 2008, has grown into a leading center for innovative scholarship. Perhaps most important to the present volume, the Institute has placed a high value on discussions and research with the potential to cross the boundaries separating the academy from a wider readership. This book grew out of one of the Institute’s first public events, a major conference entitled “The Nation-State and the Transnational Environment,” which took place in Austin in April 2009.

Our thanks go first and foremost to Institute director Julie Hardwick, who deserves credit not just for our project but for making the entire IHS initiative a great success. We also owe heartfelt thanks

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Introduction

*Mark Atwood Lawrence, David Kinkela,
and Erika Marie Bsumek*

The coincidence was striking when negotiators from around the world gathered at Cancún, Mexico, in late 2010 to make progress on an agreement to curb emissions of greenhouse gases. The last time the globe had experienced significant warming—about 120,000 years ago—the Cancún coastline had been deluged by a seven-foot rise in ocean levels over several decades.¹ Would governments, after years of inaction, embrace a binding deal to head off rising sea levels, extreme weather, disruptions of food production, and other potentially cataclysmic results of a warmer atmosphere? Predictably, the answer was no. Despite abundant evidence of impending disaster for many low-lying parts of the world, the representatives from 194 nations agreed to only minor, face-saving new provisions to encourage cooperation. The reasons for this disappointing result were the same ones that have bedeviled climate-change negotiations since they began under United Nations auspices in 1990: differences over strategies for combating emissions, disagreements over how large reductions should be, and, above all, divisions among the nations of the developed world, which have reaped the benefits of fossil-fuel-based industrialization for many years, and less-developed nations, which view restrictions as an unfair limitation on their economic growth.

Such disputes are merely outward manifestations of a more fundamental problem at the root of the climate-change talks. A meaningful solution to global warming, deforestation, species extinctions, and other major environmental problems will require global commitments

to common policies. Yet nation-states, the basic building blocks of the international order, have great difficulty prioritizing the general good over their narrower interests. Global problems, in other words, require a kind of cooperation inconsistent with the jealously guarded sovereign prerogatives and economic concerns of individual nations. Activists and supranational institutions have clearly recognized the problem and consistently urged national governments to look beyond their own interests. "I have been urging them to speak and to act as global leaders; just go beyond their national boundaries," UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon asserted in 2009 before a major climate meeting in Copenhagen.² But such appeals have produced few results. As flows of pollution—not to mention people, money, goods, and information—have become increasingly global, national governments have failed to keep pace by establishing new cooperative regimes or ceding authority to supranational regulatory institutions. As journalist Fareed Zakaria succinctly summarized in 2008, "Formal political power remains firmly tethered to the nation-state, even as the nation-state has become less able to solve most... problems unilaterally."³ The human future seems likely to depend on how the international community manages what has often been called the "global commons," but striking a new balance between global priorities and those of the nation-state will continue to be a key challenge for years to come.⁴

As this book demonstrates, the predicament is not nearly as new as some recent commentary on climate change and other global challenges suggests. In fact, understanding present-day dilemmas may be as much a matter for historians as for natural and social scientists, journalists, and futurologists. Nations have long confronted the need to manage features of the natural environment, whether disagreeable pollutants, fragile habitats, or desirable resources, which, acting with a kind of agency of their own, pay little or no heed to artificial geopolitical boundaries drawn and defended by humans. Nation-states have, for example, long sought agreements to manage migratory wildlife, just as they have negotiated conventions governing the release of toxic materials or the exploitation of rivers and other bodies of water. Similarly, nation-states have long attempted to exert influence over resources that lie beyond their borders, to impose their standards of proper environmental use on others, and to import expertise developed elsewhere to cope with domestic environmental problems. To be sure, the scale, urgency, and visibility of such endeavors have increased dramatically in recent times. But present-day efforts to find international solutions to transboundary environmental challenges unquestionably have historical precedents. As environmental historian William Cronon has eloquently observed, "Current environmental problems almost always have historical analogues from which we have much to learn if only we pay attention both to discontinuities *and* continuities that link past, present, and future."⁵

This collection aspires to draw attention to some of these analogues by exploring the complex interplay between nation-states and the global environment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Uncovering these histories provides context, reference points, and perhaps even lessons that can inform ongoing debates about how to close the yawning gap between environmental problems and the political mechanisms that are available to address them. The authors of some chapters, especially in the first half of the book, are directly concerned with understanding the reasons for the successes and failures of past regulatory regimes. But the collection as a whole does not advance any single policy agenda or line of argument, and some chapters may even contradict each other in their implications. Indeed, the most important point to emerge may be the maddening complexity of the political, social, cultural, and technological issues at hand and the impossibility of simple solutions. Various chapters highlight an array of barriers to effective cooperation inherent in the nature of nation-states—their parochial range of vision, their tendencies to set short-term concerns above long-term interests, their desires for competitive advantage in a world mostly lacking in recognized legal norms, and their responsiveness to domestic rather than global constituencies.

The chapters also show, however, that nation-states are neither self-contained nor equal units when it comes to dealing with the global environment. Even as governments have tried to pursue national priorities, they have been challenged by activists, scientists, and other nonstate groups seeking in different ways to subvert, coopt, or constrain the ability of nation-states to make decisions about the environment. Such groups, explored in the second half of this collection, have long shaped—just as they do in the present era of globalization—the ability of nation-states to erect and defend meaningful boundaries and insist on strictly national priorities. This book, then, depicts nation-states as doubly challenged in their attempts to regulate natural processes and enforce those regulations. In some of the historical case studies offered in this volume, authors demonstrate different ways in which nation-states have channeled and represented their interests, even as they processed and “domesticated” pressures, sometimes from subnational groups but increasingly from transnational networks, to alter their environmental practices.

In pursuing this agenda, we aim to contribute to the fields of international history and environmental history, but we especially aim to push ahead the important work of combining these two fields. International/diplomatic history and environmental history have been extraordinarily dynamic fields of historical scholarship in recent years. Yet the work of building bridges between them and developing what might be called “international/diplomatic environmental history” has only just begun. This is not to say that no outstanding work

in this genre has yet appeared. On the contrary, as we show in this introduction, a number of scholars, including several contributors to this collection, have published pioneering studies since the 1990s. Our goal in this book is to reinforce the point that environmental and international historians can learn a great deal from each other and build on earlier accomplishments by offering new case studies that might offer models for further work. Collectively, the chapters consider not just how nation-states have sought to control and regulate nature but also how cultural, ideological, and economic forces have shaped and constrained the options available to nation-states as they have struggled to master an ever-changing global environment.

One might reasonably argue that the latter forces are so powerful that the nation-state is now obsolete as a unit of analysis. Within the academy, many scholars have certainly questioned the utility of studying the history of nations, arguing that a focus on the nation-state tends to naturalize “imagined communities” and obscure broader transnational or global processes.⁶ Meanwhile, journalists and policy analysts have repeatedly observed the ways in which globalization has eroded the once unquestioned authority of nation-states in policy arenas ranging from economics to culture.⁷ For some indigenous groups, moreover, the term is contested on philosophical and ideological grounds. A book focusing on the nation-state—even using the term in its title—may therefore seem out of touch with important intellectual trends. Still, the concept of the nation-state is undeniably central to the existing world order, and its decline can be easily exaggerated. Over the past two hundred years, national governments have played a pivotal role in regulating, damaging, and sometimes protecting the environment, and they retain much of their power in the twenty-first century. We take up the question posed by the environmental historian Joachim Radkau in 2008: “If one recognizes that environmental protection cannot do without the state, what lessons does history offer us in this regard?”⁸ The challenge is to examine the role of the nation-state alongside both local and supranational entities that increasingly make their influence felt in environmental matters and always have, to one degree or another.

While this book aims to sweep across the spectrum from the local to the transnational and address a broad range of environmental issues, it is less ambitious with respect to chronology and geography. Chronologically, the chapters cover only the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This approach admittedly excludes periods deserving just as much attention, but it carries the benefit of analytical cohesion that flows from a focus solely on the industrial and postindustrial eras. The recent time span also enables contributors to draw relatively tight links between historical studies and the present, contributing to the goal of drawing out implications for the twenty-first century. Geographically, the

following chapters deal in depth with only a few countries and regions, and the United States receives especially heavy attention, to the exclusion of other areas that merit just as much scrutiny. The United States has had an unusually global reach, but this disproportionate attention mostly reflects the fact that international and environmental historians have concentrated so much of their work on the trans-Atlantic arena. This imbalance, however, is not intended to let the United States stand in for other countries or to exclude other perspectives.

I

The field of international environmental history grows from various strands of historical inquiry rooted in questions about diplomacy, state formation, environmental politics, human impacts on ecology, the shifting cultural meanings associated with nature, and the flow of people, plants, animals, and diseases across the world. Existing scholarship in all these areas is both expansive and rich with insight, but it has not often addressed the central questions of this volume. In this section, the introduction maps out influential strands of such work, examining the ways in which diplomats and diplomatic historians have written about environmental issues and how environmental historians have explored transnational themes. Consideration is also given to the problems and questions scholars have identified as they have moved the field forward. While limits on space prohibit us from offering a comprehensive survey of diverse subfields, we seek to introduce key themes that have drawn scholarly interest as they relate to this book.

Some of the concerns of this collection have been addressed in previous studies about the formation of global environmental agreements. In 1981, for instance, political scientist Robert Boardman charted new terrain by examining how state and non-governmental organizations forged a series of international accords to protect endangered species. A decade later, Richard Elliot Benedict, a US Foreign Service officer, described diplomatic efforts to regulate the use of chlorofluorocarbons, one of the leading causes of ozone depletion. Lawrence Susskind's 1994 *Environmental Diplomacy* offered one of the earliest critiques of global environmental governance, explaining why international environmental agreements often failed to produce desired results. Susskind proposed a multistep policy solution that he dubbed "sequenced negotiations" as a way to solve complex environmental problems and preserve the sovereignty of individual nations. In his 1998 book *Global Environmental Diplomacy*, Mostafa K. Tolba, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme from 1976 to 1992, provided a critical account of his leadership

on a number of international agreements, including the Montreal Protocol, the Basel Convention on Hazardous Wastes, and the Biodiversity Convention.⁹ Political scientists and environmental policy makers have continued to produce important books in this field of study that examine the failure or difficulties in forging international environmental agreement among nation-states and illustrate the influence of non-government organizations in environmental policy making at national and international levels.¹⁰

Recent years have also seen a steady flow of new publications by historians in the field of environmental diplomacy. Mark Lytle did as much as anyone to jump-start the trend with his seminal 1996 article "An Environmental Approach to American Diplomatic History."¹¹ The subfield continued to gather momentum two years later with publication of Kurkpatrick Dorsey's *The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy*.¹² Robert Darst and Marc Cioc have made additional contributions with their studies on, respectively, transboundary air pollution and protection of migratory animals.¹³ In 2008, editors of the journal *Diplomatic History* published a series of short articles examining the intersection of international history and environmental history.¹⁴

The recent volume edited by J. R. McNeill and Corinna Unger, *Environmental Histories of the Cold War* (2010), furthers this research agenda, adding new insight to our understanding of Cold War historiography and environmental diplomacy.¹⁵ In that volume, for example, Kai Hünemörder argues that the concept of "environmental crisis" created a framework in which diplomats on both side of the Cold War divide could work together in a new spirit of détente in the 1970s. Many of the contributors to *Environmental Histories of the Cold War* are environmental historians working in the field of diplomatic history, rather than diplomatic historians exploring environmental issues. It remains to be seen whether diplomatic historians will pick up on these important environmental themes.

To be sure, several scholars have successfully examined the geopolitical dimensions of certain natural resources that have proved both valuable and scarce. Authors such as Daniel Yergin, Michael Stoff, David Painter, and Kevin Phillips, for instance, have explored the global struggle for oil.¹⁶ Others have examined conflicts over water, timber, fish, and rubber.¹⁷ These authors have done much to advance the field and have set the stage for explorations of how nations have coped more generally with transnational environmental challenges that stemmed from resource extraction, management, and transportation. Given both the contemporary and historical crises associated with such issues, we consider this area to be especially ripe for further scholarly assessment.¹⁸ The history of disease has also opened fresh analytical terrain, particularly in connection with national-security concerns.¹⁹

For their part, environmental historians have been much more interested in transnational and/or international themes than diplomatic historians have been interested in the environment. This greater attention surely results from the obvious ways in which the histories of land use, domesticated and wild animals, water, and disease lend themselves to approaches that cut across borders. Indeed, the emergence of environmental history in the early 1970s was fueled by strong interest in big questions and broad themes. Alfred Crosby's pathbreaking 1972 book *The Columbian Exchange* offered an early model of transborder history that explored the ecological consequences of human and nonhuman migration. The book established environmental history as a field that is both interdisciplinary (drawing on ecology, evolutionary biology, and historical geography, among other approaches) and global in the sense that it was not bounded by any one nation or region. Moreover, Crosby forced historians to reckon with a series of questions that remain relevant today. How has human activity shaped the environment? What constitutes "natural" patterns of change? How have humans valued or decried such changes?

Crosby laid out a research agenda that other scholars have taken up. The eminent environmental historian Donald Worster has been most vocal in challenging environmental historians to embrace transnational themes, arguing that national borders impose artificial barriers that limit the scope of historical analysis. His 1982 essay "World without Borders" made this argument especially forcefully. Worster questioned the importance of the nation-state as the focus of historical inquiry, emphasizing the movement of human, plant, and animal life as well as the movement of ideas about the natural world around the globe.²⁰

Clearly, environmental historians were at the forefront of the transnational turn, and they have continued to push spatial and temporal boundaries. J. Donald Hughes's *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind's Changing Role in the Community of Life* (2002), J. R. and William McNeill's *The Human Web* (2003), and I. G. Simmons's *Global Environmental History* (2008), for instance, not only capture the intertwined histories of humans and nature across time and space but also emphasize the destructive capacity of people and societies, focusing on agricultural production, resource depletion, and capital accumulation. Such an approach has been replicated by a number of innovative European, Asian, South American, and North American scholars who continue to work on a global, rather than strictly national, scale.²¹

David Christian's *Maps of Time* aspires to go even further than world history will take him. Christian's notion of "Big History" transforms the idea of time and the concept of nature by looking at the past from the Big Bang and the beginning of the universe to the present. For Christian, the planetary limits