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Environmental History of New England: William Cronon's Changes in the Land

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Environmental History of New England: William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (1983).[1]

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William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* presaged a radical turn in environmental thought. His seminal work dramatically reconstructed our view of pre-colonial New England. He dismissed entirely the received history that portrayed pre-colonial America as an uninhabited pristine wilderness. In the process he gave Native Americans agency, and forever blurred the line between humans and nature. Since *Changes* it has become impossible to realistically think about humans as distinct from the "environment."

Environmental history, as a distinct discipline, is relatively new, emerging as one of the many activist based histories[2] in the 1960s and 1970s (Cronon, 1993: 2). An explicit connection with environmentalism was evident in works such as Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1973), and Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy* (1977). Nash's *Wilderness*, for example, clearly advocates a particular type of environmentalism -- policy change through bureaucratic methods with the goal of protecting non-human nature. Bold agendas, such as Nash's are not inherently problematic, even in history. However, as the fledging discipline sought to further define itself, purpose and intent became more of an issue. Although provocative, history with an "edge" has the potential of losing its perceived objectivity and becoming simply an interesting story. Herein lies the beauty and distinctiveness of William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (1983). It is both simple and profound, easy to read yet sophisticated.

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[1] Published in *Organization & Environment*, Vol. 15, No. 3, September 2002: 296-300.
[2] e.g., Chicano, Feminist, and Afro-American.

In *Changes*, Cronon examines the ecological transformations that occurred from pre-colonial to post-colonial New England (1983, *vii*):

> My thesis is simple: the shift from Indian to European dominance in New England entailed important changes—well known to historians—in the ways these peoples organized their lives, but it also involved fundamental reorganizations—less well known to historians—in the region's plant and animal communities.

He argues against a simple before and after colonization perspective of the changes that occurred. Although now more commonplace, Cronon's conception of the human-nature relationship in *Changes* was a novel departure in a field formerly dominated by functionalist thinking. Prior to *Changes*, environmental historians tended toward uni-causal explanations[3] (Arnold, 1996). With a variety of illustrations, Cronon demonstrates that the transformations emerged from a *dialectical* relationship between human institutions and ecological availability (1983: 13):

> Environment may initially shape the range of choices available to a people at a given moment, but then culture reshapes environment in responding to those choices. The reshaped environment

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[3] Whether biological, environmental, or economic.

> presents a new set of possibilities for cultural reproduction, thus setting up a new cycle of mutual determination.

He thereby counters the claim that the lives of Native Americans in pre-colonial New England were ecologically determined. While it is true that their semi-nomadic lifestyles were governed primarily by the periodicity of their temperate climate, Native Americans frequently altered their environment for their own ends. Through the use of fire, for example, they cleared the forest underbrush to enhance hunting opportunities (Cronon, 1983: 48-51). Thus, according to Cronon, the transformations that occurred from pre-colonial to post-colonial New England were not simply a result of the colonizer's ability to "master," or manipulate the environment; Native Americans had been doing just that for centuries.

Through his dialectical lens, Cronon examines the massive loss of life suffered from the introduction of European diseases. Trading with the colonists lead to epidemics of small pox and other diseases among Native Americans. These outbreaks took an enormous toll on the indigenous peoples, reducing their population in the New England area from 70,000 to 12,000 in just 75 years (1600 to 1675) (1983: 88-9). Historians, such as Alfred W. Crosby (1972), attribute these changes strictly to biological or environmental mechanisms, claiming that no person, or persons were responsible. Native Americans were simply not biologically prepared for exposure to the new diseases. Cronon, on the other hand, points out that if it were not for the capitalist market system that facilitated the trading with the Native Americans in the first place, no “exposure” would have occurred. However, he acknowledges that the Native Americans’ agency did play a role. That is, they were not passive entities, but actively and willingly engaged the colonists for their own ends (at least initially).

Cronon claims that the colonists' mode of resource use (i.e., mercantile capitalism) was not forcefully imposed on the Native Americans. He argues that the Native Americans made choices in opting to extract pelts, and other "resources" from their lands. In Cronon's eyes, therefore, the Native Americans were an autonomous people who made choices that resulted in the demise of their traditional ways of life (1983: 164). He does not deny the role of the colonists' market economy, but his conception of the Native Americans diverges significantly from other historians. Carolyn Merchant, for example, portrays the Native Americans as being victims without agency, and, in fact, clearly romanticizes their way of life (1989).

Cronon makes the point that from the beginning of European colonization America was perceived as limitless and overflowing with abundance. “The colonists brought with them concepts of value and scarcity which had been shaped by the social and ecological circumstances of northern Europe, and so perceived New England as a landscape of great natural wealth” (1983: 168). In many respects, contemporary environmentalism originated as a response to this rhetoric, claiming that nature does, in fact, have limits.[4] Although most of the world has been long acquainted with scarcity in one form or another, the United States confrontation with the "limits of nature" is allegedly[5] a recent development (i.e., late nineteenth century). Cronon, however, demonstrates that pre-colonial Native Americans frequently faced periods of limited resources (e.g., most winters). This was largely a choice, but it also had to do with their perspective on property.

The differing views on land and property ownership were at the center of the conflict between Native Americans and colonists: "More than anything else, it was the treatment of land and property as commodities traded at market that distinguished English conceptions of ownership from Indian ones" (1983: 75). Europeans came to the new world seeking merchantable commodities. It was, in fact, the driving motivation for coming. What they observed, and extracted was to a large extent framed by this motivation. Nature was not a system or even a community of relations, but objects to be taken and sold for profit (1983: 20-1). It was not the case, however, that this property system some how freed the colonists from ecological constraints (1983: 53):

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[4] Although the term limits is itself ambiguous and potentially loaded with various kinds of political baggage, it nonetheless makes the point that nature (or the lack of it) can dramatically alter or affect our lives.

[5] Many have argued that the rise of conservationism at the turn of the nineteenth century is a response to this recognition of limits. See for example Bryan G. Norton. 1991. *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists.* New York: Oxford University Press.

> The ecological relationships, which the English sought to reproduce in New England, were no less cyclical than those of the Indians; they were only simpler and more concentrated … English fixity sought to replace Indian mobility; here was the central conflict in the ways Indians and colonists interacted with their environments.

For the Native Americans, the idea of land ownership was not even comprehensible. Land was something that provided – in various ways and at various times – what they needed to live. They had a transient relationship with the land based on their needs and on what the land had to offer at a given time, or season. Consequently, when they made land deals with the colonists, the Native Americans thought they were trading rights to land *use* (e.g., hunting, farming, or grazing), and not the land itself (1983: 67). In essence, Native Americans lost their land because their conception of property ownership was so radically different from the colonists'.

The loss of land in conjunction with a corresponding decrease in game animals left the Native Americans dependent on the white settlers (1983: 102). The colonists, however, provided a means for them to survive. In response to the insatiable demand of Europeans, Native Americans trapped vast numbers of beaver and other fur bearing animals. The dramatic loss of beaver had a profound impact on the ecology of New England. Beaver dams provided a natural alteration of the ecosystem. Eliminating the dam makers meant recreating the environment. Dry land appeared where there were once small lakes and bogs. More arable land, however, lead to more colonists. The cycle continued (1983: 107).

Although Cronon's views on the human-nature relationship in *Changes* are not always explicit, they become fully articulated in his more recent works. Themes birthed in *Changes* are expounded in his second book, *Nature's Metropolis*: "my deepest intellectual agenda in this book is to suggest that the boundary between human and non-human, natural and unnatural, is profoundly problematic" (1991: *xix*). *Nature's Metropolis* trumpets the theme of interconnectedness (1991: 19):

> We cannot understand the urban history of Chicago apart from the natural history of the vast North American region to which it became connected: Nature's Metropolis and the Great West are in fact different labels for a single region and the relationships that defined it. By erasing the false boundary between them, we can begin to recover their common past.

He carries this boundary blurring over to the line between city and country. "Although we often tend to associate ecological changes primarily with the cities and factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it should by now be clear that changes with similar roots took place just as profoundly in the farms and countrysides of the colonial period" (1991: 170). In other words, Cronon is claiming that our relationship with nature is bound up with the growth and development of the American West, and the process of urbanization in general. The two cannot be separated, if we are to fully comprehend the historical roots of our contemporary environmental problems.

In *Uncommon Ground* (1996), Cronon's third book,[6] he takes on mainstream environmentalism's obsession with wilderness, which has tended to focus on the protection of non-human nature, or "wilderness." By accentuating wilderness over all other forms of nature, the human-nature dichotomy becomes reified. "Nature must be protected from the evil humans!" However, the effort to identify and protect non-human nature is misguided, because, as Cronon states in *Changes,* "there has been no timeless wilderness in a state of perfect changelessness, no climax forest in permanent stasis" (1983: 11). According to Cronon, defining nature as uninhabited, pristine, and in need of protection from humans creates a paradox. The very definition excludes humans, and perpetuates the culture-nature dualism that lies at the root of our maladaptive relationship with nature (Cronon, 1996: 80). Carried to its logical end, all that will be left is a wasteland with a few islands of untouched wilderness.[7] Moreover, exulting wilderness in this way reproduces the same values that environmentalists seek to reject. It feigns responsibility for the way we live in the nature that we do inhabit. The irony is that "only a people whose relationship to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature" (Cronon, 1996: 80).

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[6] An edited volume built around the following themes.

[7] In fact, this is exactly what did happen. Those places that were commodified by landscape art were ultimately protected, whereas the most of the rest were developed in some form or another (Hargrove, 1989).

Today, environmentalists at least acknowledge that the problems are pervasive. That is, they are more inclined to see humans as part of nature, and that environmentalism must address the human inhabited environment, as well as the uninhabited. Cronon's *Changes* came at a time when few were attempting to blur these established boundaries. He states (1983: 12):

> The choice is not between two landscapes, one with and one without a human influence; it is between two human ways of living, two ways of belonging to an ecosystem. The riddle of this book is to explore why these different ways of living had such different effects on New England ecosystems.

This is the riddle that we still face today – *how to live* sustainably on this planet. Environmentalists must be willing question their foundations if they are to contribute anything meaningful to this riddle. In this vein, Cronon has done a monumental service. His work is undoubtedly provocative, but more importantly it causes us to question assumptions that have kept us on the present course of ecological destruction. Opening our eyes to the entrenched dogmas about our relationship with nature is a good thing. We do need to concentrate more on where we *live*, rather than on nature *out there*. Indications are that, in fact, at least some eyes have been opened. The rise of grassroots of environmental justice movements, and their recognition by mainstream-national environmental organizations is evidence of this fact (Dowie, 1995). It is reasonable to say that Cronon's thought provoking work played a part in this important shift.

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