

Preface

This book is the result of an ambition to formulate an environmental history that cares for the environment, cares for the salience of all knowledge including the sciences and cares for a history that is ultimately about the human condition.

With this book we try to say two things. The first is that environmental history is expanding the realm of history to comprise nature and the environment and to weave together as far as possible human experience with the workings of nature into a fuller understanding of the past and how it affects human decisions and destinations. In this regard environmental history is changing historiography and has the potential to change history as well by providing narratives that are novel and different, with more explanatory factors, and more vivid images: a new understanding. The second thing we try to say is that this can only be done if environmental history retains and relentlessly refines its status as history, belonging in the humanist tradition of studying complex phenomena with respect for humans as, ultimately, persons with intentions and morals, and belonging in the realm of the polity.

It is this dual ambition that has guided us as editors. We wanted to see if it was possible to embrace the widening agenda, and the broadening scales, of environmental history and at the same time allow it to address the issues as 'history', in frames and with concepts that make sense to the historical community in its largest extent and that will attract both scholars and students. A further ambition has been to make the end result accessible in a form that should be readable not just to historians, but to anyone in the social sciences or the sciences with an interest in how we could re-articulate the ways and means that we use to understand what we, as humanity, are up to in the never ending coexistence with nature.

We set out during 2004 and 2005 when we were both affiliated with the Centre for History and Economics at Cambridge University and organized a series of seminars and workshops to which we invited a range of eminent speakers and commentators. We also presented a paper that summed up our own position, subsequently published in the journal *Environmental History* (2007:1) as 'The Problem of the Problem of Environmental History: A Re-reading of the Field'. Finally, we invited some of the best people we could think of to help us and asked them to present papers at a workshop in Cambridge in January 2006 which was co-hosted by the Centre for Research in the Arts and the Social Sciences, CRASSH, and by the Department of Geography. After the workshop we continued working with several of the contributors who put in tremendous

efforts into revising the papers to serve the purpose and design of this volume. As we went along we invited more contributors to get a reasonable coverage of themes and world regions.

Without trying to be exhaustive we would like to thank several people who have contributed, with papers, comments, or as referees, to help shape the project and this volume to what it finally became. Apart from the authors of this volume, who deserve our special gratitude, we are thinking of: Peter Alagona, Alan Baker, Dorothee Brantz, Peter Burke, Christopher Bayly, Michael T. Bravo, Mark Cioc, Stefania Gallini, Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Gerry Kearns, Mike Lewis, Emma Rothschild, Chris Smout, and Gareth Stedman Jones. For economic support we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to CRASSH and the Centre for History and Economics, where Inga Markan tirelessly served us with all kinds of logistical, and emotional!, support.

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