

## COLONIALISM, POSTCOLONIALISM, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Conference at the GHI, May 5–6, 2006. Conveners: Karen Oslund (GHI), Christina Folke Ax (University of Copenhagen), Niels Brimnes (University of Aarhus), Niklas Thode Jensen (University of Copenhagen).

Participants: Peder Anker (University of Oslo), Greg Bankoff (University of Auckland), David Biggs (University of California, Riverside), Malcolm Draper (University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), Richard Grove (University of Sussex), Joseph Morgan Hodge (West Virginia University), Ann Johnson (University of South Carolina), Julia Lajus (European University at St. Petersburg), Elizabeth M. Lunstrum (University of Minnesota), Christopher Morris (University of Texas at Arlington), Thomas Neuhaus (Cambridge University), Albertus Hadi Pramono (University of Hawaii, Honolulu), Kavita Sivaramakrishnan (New Delhi), Daniel Rouven Steinbach (Humboldt University, Berlin), Phia Steyn (University of Stirling, Scotland), Paul S. Sutter (University of Georgia), Andrew Wear (University College London).

Although the study of what Richard Grove described in 1990 as “colonial ecological interventions” has flourished in recent decades, there is as yet no general understanding of how this study has contributed to our conceptions of colonialism, or how the study of colonialism and postcolonialism fits into the literature on environmental history. The conference “Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and the Environment” was convened in order to assess the state of scholarship in this field, to examine what the contributions of this scholarship have been, and to evaluate what potential it offers. The intent of the conference was to understand colonialism and postcolonialism as global phenomena, to examine how a single ideology acted on and within different environments, and to note how this ideology transformed these environments. From this, three main lines of inquiry emerged: the colonial and postcolonial management of physical environments, with the often dramatic changes that took place in landscapes and the immediate physical surroundings; the cultural encounters and disputes around environmental issues between colonizers or postcolonial bureaucracies and the colonized population; and developments in scientific disciplines connected to the environment (such as geology) and the circulation of these practices between colonial centers and the peripheries.

In the first session, "Towards a Healthy Environment: Colonial and Postcolonial Medicine," Andrew Wear's paper was summarized in his absence by the chair, Niels Brimnes. Wear's paper, entitled "The Prospective Colonist and Strange Environments: Advice on Health and Prosperity," took a bold long-term perspective, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, on the discourse about the health of prospective settlers in foreign environments. A distinction between temperate and tropical colonies emerged as crucial to the argument of the paper, because it was the temperate colonies which could be transformed from "alien places into the home-type environments." Wear identified a process by which new landscapes were "Europeanized" and thus perceived as healthier. The vehicle for this transformation was agriculture, and the settler literature was full of advice about how the individual could change the environment through agricultural activities. At the same time, allusions were made that the individual stood a good chance to improve his (or her) social position in the new environments. Thus, in a double sense, the new landscapes emerged as landscapes full of possibilities. This process did not work as well with tropical colonies, although Europeans did try to find landscapes that could be Europeanized (hill stations in India, highlands in East Africa). Wear concluded that temperate and tropical highlands were represented within the same discourse, but that European ideas about the two types of environment were different.

Kavita Sivaramakrishnan's paper, entitled "Recasting Disease and its Environment: Indigenous Medical Practitioners, the Plague, and Politics in Colonial Punjab (1898–1910)," used a range of vernacular sources to focus on the indigenous physicians in colonial Punjab. The paper analyzed the way they related to the crisis in colonial relations, emerging with the advent of the plague in urban Punjab in the late nineteenth century. Sivaramakrishnan avoided simple and generalized notions of a homogeneous (and hostile) indigenous response from the physicians, and instead highlighted the complexities among indigenous medical men. If anything, indigenous physicians seemed more in agreement with colonial authorities than with the general population, and the distinction between elite and popular understandings of disease was probably as important as differences between "Western" and "Indian" understandings. In some instances, indigenous physicians collaborated with colonial authorities and emerged as crucial links between the people of Punjab and the colonial administration. Sivaramakrishnan did not argue, however, that indigenous physicians simply became instruments in the hands of the British. They did criticize the colonial authorities and sometimes argued for a different understanding of disease.

Finally, Paul Sutter's paper "Mosquito Control in Panama: Entomologists and Environmental Change during the Construction of the Panama

Canal" closed the session. Sutter's paper discussed the "U.S. conquest of tropical nature in Panama" and the triumphalist rhetoric employed there. In this sense, Sutter's paper began where Wear's ended: at the point where it became possible—through "heroic engineering"—for Americans to transform the tropics into a place where they could live healthily. Sutter argued that the Americans in Panama had three choices in their attempt to control malaria: first, they could eliminate the disease vector (the mosquito); second, they could segregate their own bodies from the bodies of the workers believed to transmit the disease; and third, they could attack the disease at the micro-level through mass-quinization. The Americans decided to attack the mosquito. Providing a detailed account of the work and approaches of the entomologists, Sutter argued that the construction work actually amplified the malaria problem in the Canal Zone and that some of the entomologists were aware of this. This illustrated, in Sutter's own words, "the limited power of careful environmental observation in overturning dominant environmental ideologies."

In the second session, "The State and the Environment," Daniel Steinbach's paper, "The African Nature as Source of Identity and Suppression in German South West and German East Africa before 1914," used the concept of *Heimat* to examine how German colonists understood nature in Africa. Steinbach argued that the German settlers dealt with their experience of the transformation of their surrounding landscape by reimagining the African nature as German nature. Following the ideology of *Heimat*, they believed that the character of people was shaped by the landscape in which they lived. The barren deserts of South West Africa (Namibia), therefore, were interpreted as being an inhospitable climate where the strong, healthy German character would be nurtured. The forests of tropical East Africa (Tanzania), on the other hand, gave rise to a debate among the German colonists, some arguing that the climate would weaken the German character, and therefore new settlers should be brought from Europe frequently. Other settlers, however, were also able to construct this landscape as part of the mental landscape of the Reich. Steinbach also discussed nature preservation societies and the legislation of hunting as means by which the German settlers made themselves at home in Africa.

Elizabeth Lunstrum's paper, "State Rationality, Development, and the Making of Sovereign Territory: From Colonial Extraction to Postcolonial Conservation in Mozambique's Massingir District," also dealt with the notion of "homeland" in Africa. Her example was the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, established in 2002 on the borders of Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Lunstrum pointed out that the establishment of this park meant the relocation of its population from their homes for the third time in thirty years. She traced the history of this territory

through the building of the Massingir Dam under the Portuguese, Frelimo's "socialization of the countryside" into collective villages post-independence, and the civil war between Frelimo and the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) in the 1970s and 1980s. After such a tumultuous history, the establishment of Limpopo as a "Peace Park" on the borders of previously hostile nations was intended to turn the area into a neutral "wilderness" with the potential to "heal old wounds." Lunstrum noted, however, that many of the local people see the park as yet another attempt by the government to steal their land, and argued that such places have to be understood not as new creations, but in the context of their history.

Closing the session, Joseph Hodge's paper "From Colonial Experts to Postcolonial Consultants: Development and Environmental Doctrines and the Legacies of Late British Colonialism" examined the careers of key British colonial officials to show how these individuals shaped the doctrine of development in the 1950s. Hodge looked at the "crucial role British colonial agricultural and natural science experts played in the institutionalization of globalization of colonial scientific knowledge and authority in the postcolonial epoch." The professional standing these men had gained in the colonial service enabled the continuity of their ideals and practices in the postcolonial world.

The third session, "Representing and Classifying the Colonial Environment," began with Ann Johnson presenting her paper, "Surveying British North America: Natural History and the Management of Colonial Resources, 1750–1900." Johnson's theoretical starting point was James C. Scott's claim in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*: that from the perspective of the state, maps work because detail is absent. To the bureaucrats of the metropole, the many locally valuable characteristics of the land are confusing, and accordingly the officials constructed another way of seeing to be able to control the land. Scott uses the term "métis" to signify the local, practical knowledge of the land in the colonies and "techné" to signify the abstract, verbal knowledge of the land seen from the metropole. Johnson explored the difference between these points of view by characterizing surveying in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "métis" because it was local, practical work that resisted the standards imposed by the metropole. Johnson examined land surveys in two different contexts, the United States Rectangular Survey and the British North American surveys in Canada, in order to show the ways that land itself, via forests, mountains, and swamps, resisted the surveying process.

The central argument of Thomas Neuhaus's paper, "'Seeking Escape from the Plains of Commerce': British and German Representations of Tibet and the Himalayas, 1929–1953," was that during this period the two

recurring themes of conquest and romanticism were integrated into a common discursive framework. Neuhaus attempted to see how connections between attitudes to nature and development in twentieth-century Europe were played out in European encounters with the imperial or semi-imperial periphery. He revealed how scientific and physical conquest remained part of the motivation for European travelers in the region in the early twentieth century. Especially among German mountaineers there was a continuing prevalence of rhetoric of “conquest” and masculinity. After the First World War, perceptions changed, and Neuhaus analyzed how the growth of romanticized images of the region as “unspoiled” after the late 1920s was a part of the rhetoric of modernity. Thus, the rhetoric of conquest acquired a new framework, which was often resolutely against war, against urbanization, and against environmental degradation.

Peder Anker’s paper “Ecological Communication at the Oxford Imperial Forestry Institute” discussed how the ethic of environmentally sensitive forestry shaped the architecture of the Imperial Forestry Institute at Oxford University. The institute’s building was a meeting ground for scientists, forest managers, students, timber dealers, and university administrators, and Anker interpreted it in view of their different agencies and interests. These different agents of the building came to construe nature as an “Oriental economy” juxtaposed with the “Occidental research” represented in the design and outline of its architecture. In this way, Anker argued, the building came to represent a mirror image of British imperial forests and values. This was because the building was constructed as a living museum of different kinds of wood. Gifts of wood were organized in the new institute’s interior according to the geographical location of the patrons. This arrangement created a stream of assumptions teaching Occidental visitors and students how to rule Oriental nature. In line with this imperial spatial and conceptual arrangement, the building was organized so that British oak was used in the rooms designed for negotiations and decision-making. The oak has long been the symbol of British solidity and strength, and thus these rooms offered a “home-grown” oak environment where forest managers could discuss the management and research of forests in the British domains and colonies.

Finally, David Biggs’s paper “Aerial Photography and its Role in Shifting Colonial Discourse on Peasants and Land Management in Late-Colonial Indochina, 1930–1945” addressed the role that aerial photography, in the hands of human geographers and other social scientists, played in the formation of two colonial ideals, that is: two dominant ways of “reading” nature in the intensely complex, human-altered hydraulic environments of the Red River and the Mekong River. According to

Biggs's comparisons, aerial photography between the two river deltas produced an Orientalist reading of human nature by comparing the ways northern and southern farmers managed water in the two deltas: namely, the myth that the genius of the intricate landscapes in the Red River Delta was resident within northern peasants and that by contrast the failure of flood dikes and canals in the Mekong Delta was due to the inherent "laziness" of southern peasants. Another "reading" was an equally potent misreading of built landscapes, where social scientists assumed that the cellular system of locally managed dikes in the north could be reproduced with the same effects in the south regardless of very different hydraulic conditions in these two environments. Because colonial scientists chose to rely on the optic of aerial photography and failed to understand social and economic conditions among the farmers on the ground, the results of their efforts were flooding and famine.

The fourth session, "Interactions with Indigenous and Local Knowledge," opened with Julia Lajus presenting her paper "Colonization of the Russian North: A Frozen Frontier." She discussed the Russian colonization of the European Arctic and sub-Arctic regions between the Barents Sea and the White Sea from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. Distinctive to the region was the coexistence of many different ethnic groups, both indigenous groups and settlers from Scandinavian and Slavic areas. The driving force behind the colonization of the Russian North was the use of the natural resources, and successive governments used different models to gain and keep control over the area and collect revenues from the population. The early rulers had mainly imposed taxes, but from the eighteenth century, the state was inspired by Western colonial states to let trade monopolies manage the natural resources in the area. From the 1860s, Finns and Norwegians were invited to settle and serve as a good example for the local population for the modernization of the timber, mining, and fishing industries. The modernization was, however, considered to be too slow compared to other countries, and the government's general faith in progress meant the locals were seen as part of the problem because they were perceived as backwards and not able to make the most of the resources. In the 1920s, the government tried to apply a Canadian model, where focus was on bringing new technologies to the area and educating the people instead of replacing them. With the "Great Break" in the 1930s, which heralded industrialization and collectivization of the peasants, the government lost interest in the local groups and instead moved people to the area to supply cheap labor to the fishing and mining industry, with the result of greater exploitation of natural resources.

Phia Steyn in her paper "Changing Times, Changing Palates: The Dietary Impacts of Basuto Adaptation to New Rulers, Courts, and Markets

since the 1830s" focused on the main characteristics of the change of diet among the Basuto of Lesotho that occurred during the missionary phase from the 1830s. One of these was a shift from a sorghum-based diet to a diet based on maize. The white settlers had created a market for grain (maize and wheat) and expanded their maize production, which in turn increased the importance of maize in the Basuto diet. Maize was substituted for sorghum in recipes, while the introduction of ploughs also meant that the Basuto expanded their agricultural production. During the colonial period, starting in 1868, the Basuto diet did not change much, but the Basuto started to settle in the highlands. This meant that they had to adapt to only one growing season. They could not grow maize adequately, but wheat, potatoes, and lentils did well. In the lowlands, the closer contact with Europeans and the presence of slaughterhouses meant an increase in the consumption of meat. In the 1930s, Basutoland changed status from being the granary of the region to being the supplier of unskilled labor for the South African mines. Basutoland became a food importer, and many South African dishes became popular and were in time perceived as "traditional."

Albertus Hadi Pramono gave the final paper in the session, "Cartographic Encounters in the Counter-Mapping Movement in Postcolonial West Kalimantan (Indonesia)," focusing on the counter-mapping movement among the Dayak people there. Counter-mapping is used by dispossessed peoples to resist the erasure of their existence on modern maps by reconstructing and mapping indigenous knowledge about the environment. This means that they may be able to regain their land, but they have to adopt the language and practice of the state, which is not always compatible with the indigenous spatial knowledge traditions. In the colonial period, the Dayak were seen as a backward and primitive people, and, during Suharto's New Order, the state wanted to exploit the Dayak territory for commercial timber extraction. The postcolonial state, on the other hand, sees Dayak peoples as forest destroyers because they live on land that is now claimed by the state. In 1981, Dayak intellectuals began to try to reconstruct Dayak identity and regain control over the land by employing counter-mapping strategies. The activities are anchored in a discourse of indigenous rights, environmentalism, and development, but they draw on Western knowledge traditions. Since the Dayak peoples began to plant Para rubber at the beginning of the twentieth century, its importance as a commodity on the global market means that the right to use land and forest is central to the existence of the Dayaks. Pramono called for the creation of a third space with equal power relations between the indigenous and the Western knowledge systems in order for the counter-mapping to be successful.

The final session of the conference, "Global Circulations of Environmental Knowledge in the Colonial and Postcolonial World," opened with a paper by Christopher Morris entitled "Wetland Colonies: Louisiana, Guangzhou, Pondicherry, and Senegal." Morris compared four eighteenth-century French colonies with similar natural environments. He argued that, as much as Europeans acted upon the natural environments they found, the European experiences in one region of the world set patterns that determined their activities in "environmentally familiar" environments. According to Morris, "River environments...influenced the history of colonialism to the extent that they determined where Europeans would go, what they would find, and what they would do and not do once they got there."

The theme of the circulation of environmental knowledge was taken up by Greg Bankoff in his "The Science of Nature and the Nature of Science in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines," which focused on the sciences of acclimatization and meteorology. Bankoff argued that the science practiced in the Spanish Philippines was of a high standard for its time, but these practices were undervalued by the Americans after their occupation in 1899. This devaluation, part of an American colonial strategy of dominance, was due in part to the reliance of the Spanish in the Philippines on non-Darwinian concepts, such as those of George Buffon and Jean Baptiste Lamarck.

Finally, Malcolm Draper's "The Salmonization of the South: Colonization, Acclimatization, and Conservation in New Zealand and South Africa" compared two cases of the acclimatization of the *salmonidae*—a family of fish including both trout and salmon—in New Zealand and South Africa. The introduction of *salmonidae* was much easier in New Zealand than in South Africa due to the fragile nature of the water supply in the latter country. This led, as Draper demonstrated, to the "trout wars" in South Africa, where Scottish settlers saw the establishment of their totem species of fish as a sign of ecological health. In New Zealand, on the other hand, salmon were well-established as both wild and farmed populations, but there were great controversies over the commercial farming of trout.

In the final session, "Reflections on the Historiography of Colonial Environmental History," Richard Grove brought the contributions of the conference together by offering comments on the individual papers. One of the most important themes to emerge from the discussion that followed was the realization that the study of the ecological impacts of empires should be recognized as an integral part of the study of global environmental history. Within the study of colonial environmental history itself, Grove called for more attention to be paid to the impact of colonial states on environments located outside of the tropical zone, and

sought to place the study of colonial environmental history within a history of global climate change. The discussion concluded by noting the remarkable continuities shown in these papers of the interactions of pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial states with the environment. This suggests that the ideology of colonialism can be interpreted within environmental history much more broadly than has been the case in other fields of study. The conference therefore provided good opportunity to examine debates on colonialism theory, reassess the current state of the field, and look toward promising future directions for studies of colonialism and environment.

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