Uses of Environmental History: Sandra Swart

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"Feral Historians?"

By Sandra Swart

The greatest strength we have as historians—our secret superpower—is the ability to take an apparently immutable existing *status quo* and show that "it was not always so." We can look at the present and expose the seemingly "natural order" for just how "unnatural" (how anthropogenically constructed) it really is. For example, gender historians have exploded the static, apparently unchanging, and ostensibly biological dualism between men and women—thereby opening up new ways of understanding the social order. After all, a key value of learning about the past is to defamiliarize the present. To simply know that "it was not always so" is amazingly potent. It can empower humans to challenge the existing order that we are otherwise taught to believe is "natural," "biological," "incontrovertible." If it has changed before, it can be changed further.

Yet if this ability to complicate the seemingly natural is our superpower, it is also our kryptonite. Many historians have been effectively self-silenced in today's debate over critical environmental issues simply because we do not think or communicate in soundbites. We're trained to understand nuance, uncover complexity, and eschew partisanship. These are some of our fundamental values as a discipline and I am not suggesting we jettison them—but I do think we leave too much of our research to be interpreted by interlocutors and politicians. Instead, we need to insert ourselves into those public debates. The role of professional historians in the making of public policy is a

contested terrain. We need to extend our home ranges and escape the safely domesticated university, where we feel at home and where there's always a warm fire and a bowl of milk. We must run feral in the wilder public spaces.

This starts with explaining our own work to a wider audience. More importantly, however, it means influencing both decision makers and the public (who are *de facto* decision makers, too, in democracies). Policy makers who fail to ground new initiatives in past experiences are more prone to error repetition and *ad hocery*, implementing provisional plans rather than consistent, durable programs. This places history-sensitive environmental authorities in a relatively better position to effect sound policies for present and future generations. Equally, environmental policy can sometimes best be rooted in (or fundamentally altered by) an understanding of the *longue durée*.

Among prominent environmental degrdation in Africa is desertification and deforestation. Photo: Silus Grok, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Flickr.

Deforestation. By Dikshajhingan, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The 1996 classic *The* **Lie of The Land**, edited by Leach and Mearns, offers a good example of this. These authors interrogated pervasive narratives of environmental degradation, exposing the mendacity of much expert wisdom buttressing "the lie of the land." Hyperbolic, one-sided, apocalyptic explanations of environmental change are evident in much twentieth-century thinking—like the colonial panic over nature's degradation by profligate African land use. Leach and Mearns showed how developments in post-colonial Africa actually sustained such fears of impending doom. Thus, paternalistic interventionist policies by state and international aid agencies continued. Of course, these authors were not the first to challenge crude degradationist metanarratives. What made their book different was its boldness: a lack of equivocation, and clarity of both purpose and prose. It wasn't perfect—it works better as a kind of erudite policy intervention than conventional history—but the book certainly changed perceptions of what professional historians can do. It certainly made me think: "Wait a minute. This actually matters! This could make a *difference*."

To make a difference, we need to wander from the coziness of the seminar room; to allow ourselves—no, force ourselves!—to fight the pleasures of the recondite and the comfort of knowing our peers understand us. In making our message known to a broader public, we may occasionally have to eschew the finer subtleties. I know every academic's

Parthian shot is: “Yes, but it is more complicated than that…” We need to express ourselves with nuance while focusing on intelligibility. We should be writing op- ed pieces in the press, engaging with policy makers, and commenting publicly on pressing socioenvironmental issues. Now. (Not after we finish our book, get tenure or finally find the chimera of work-life balance.)

The olde English adage notes, “A jack-of-all-trades is a master of none.” I’m not asking historians to become geographers, paleoanthropologists, geologists, meteorologists, biologists or physicists. This isn’t a plea for the impossible—single person interdisciplinarity, which is mere illusion—nor a plea that we become Scientists Lite. Instead, we must embrace our singular role as historians. After all, we are skilled at finding and evaluating sources, creating and critiquing context, building and dissecting narratives. But we should never forget the seldom-cited second line that follows “A jack-of-all-trades is a master of none.” It runs: “Often times better than a master of one.” Already most of us are omnivorous readers and many are forging cross-disciplinary research relationships with natural scientists. As feral historians, we can occupy the dangerous badlands where environment, society, politics, and economics meet in the over-arching goal of “sustainability.” This means leaving refined academic discourse for the rough and tumble of public debate, which may result in intellectual fisticuffs.

Though many of us are already working to bridge the gap between academe and community, more of us should be focusing on operating strategically in an era of waning research funding: forging strategic alliances with NGOs, policy institutes and, yes, sometimes even industry. But at the same time, we need to beware unequal relationships and not let our research agendas be dictated to us. Our own (corporatizing) institutions should be made much more aware that our research is of practical utility. The term “environmental” now carries with it a portmanteau suggestion of contemporary societal relevance, and thereby wins concomitant institutional funding in the global corporatization of academia. Many of us still need to politicize, in the sense of critiquing past the center-periphery model and finding new comparative frameworks. “Northern” or “Western” environmental historiography can mistakenly seem to offer the only model of the inevitable path to the present. It may necessitate our working more in teams despite the discipline’s single-author tradition. We need to be consciously political, then, for intellectual as well as practical reasons.

The English historian A. *J. P. Taylor* noted wistfully: “We historians are dull creatures and women sometimes notice this.” Perhaps we need to be sexier—but we also need to

be careful: we could easily debase the currency of our ideas by trying to enter a new market. I think it is entirely possible to express our ideas simply but not simplistically. In the public arena, social media (like Facebook) can be really useful in presenting key ideas briefly, often accompanied with enticing explanatory visuals. Verena Winiwarter and Bill Cronon do this very effectively, peppering personal status updates with environmental history. Discussion forums follow beneath, creating a globalized, updated version of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century coffee house—a place of intellectual information, fulmination, and fomentation. In doing so, historians can bring knowledge to the public in the language of the public without making grand claims to authority.

Almost a generation ago, pioneering environmental historian Donald Worster exhorted us to (literally) leave the office and enter the field. He called for environmental historians to get mud on their shoes. I am advocating a different kind of foray for us. He told us to get our boots dirty. I think it's time we got our hands—and maybe even our minds—a little dirty.

This piece draws on Sandra Swart, "'Dangerous People' or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love being an Historian," *South African Historical Journal* 68, no. 3 (2016) and Sandra Swart, "Feral Historians?" (桀骜不逊的历史学家?). *Journal for Ecological History* (½£态史ç ”究) 1 (2016): 169–71.