Uses of Environmental History: Paul Josephson

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This is the third in a series of posts exploring the uses of environmental history. The series has been adapted from contributions to a roundtable forum published in the first issue of the new **Journal for Ecological History**, edited by Renmin University's **Center for Ecological History**.

"The Need for Public Environmental History"

By **Paul Josephson**

It is difficult to quantify, but surely both the extent and pace of environmental change have accelerated in the last century? Historians debate the nature of change and its causes, but rarely turn to larger audiences to inform them of their findings. Among the usual explanations they offer are the rapid industrialization of all processes, including in agriculture, with significant capital inputs of chemicals and GMOs; the universality and extent of large-scale technological systems; excessive consumption, especially in North America and Europe, but also growing consumption in China, India, and elsewhere; and power generation based on nonrenewables, especially fossil fuels that contribute to greenhouse gas formation and global warming. Some individuals blame population growth as the major factor in environmental change, among them notably Garrett Hardin in his seminal, if misguided "**The Tragedy of the Commons**" (1968) that, together with his later works, revealed deep-seated racism.

In the way that historians must respond to racism, classicism, and sexism, shouldn't environmental historians also consider nature, nature's agency, and the wrongheadedness of many human activities that have accelerated environmental degradation? And should they not do so in accessible forums? Otherwise, our children will continue to pay in horrible ways for our unwillingness to confront environmental problems more systematically, and they may face insurmountable obstacles in remediation.

In addition to our academic writings, I urge that we take a much more public voice in describing problems and setting the agenda, and engage a greater number and diversity of audiences through Public Environmental History. Let me offer a few practical suggestions how:

1. **Embrace every opportunity to create a public persona through the press, the Internet, radio, and television.**

I find it useful to write 500-word editorials that summarize my thoughts on big subjects. (Selfishly, these also help me to finish big writing assignments—books and articles—and to be bolder in my analysis.) I've published a number of editorials in major US newspapers and a few Russian ones on nuclear power and environmentalism. I admit that virtually all of my submissions have been rejected—and editors acknowledge very few of the submissions. But I keep writing them, and rejection alone is no reason to avoid addressing such crucial problems as climate change, intensified food production, and biodiversity loss. When you finish a book or an article, write that hard-hitting, short, and direct version. For a good model, see Jake Hamblin's **"Ecology Lessons from the Cold War"** (*New York Times*, May 30, 2013, A23). In addition, create a blog—and keep it newsworthy and rigorous.

2. **Use the Communications Office of your institution to reach out to local and regional media.**

I have offered a series of public comments over the years on public radio and elsewhere on Russia's war in Ukraine and Crimea; on agribusiness, public health, and the environment; nuclear power; and other topics. Not only are staff happy to help out; it also enhances the publicity of your institution.

3. **Give a public talk.**

Find your local or regional "Ted" and give a Tedtalk. Write them that you want to give a talk about the "Karma of the Bicycle," "Why Beef Is More Dangerous to the Environment than the Automobile," or some other provocative theme that will draw in an audience and allow you to speak about environmental issues. We are professional lecturers and performers; we know how to reach public and academic audiences. Follow through with education and outreach presentations. Meet with high school groups. Educators at high-school level love having professors talk to their classes. Contact the League of Women

Voters and other similar groups where you live. Join NGOs; give them not only your dues, but also offer speaking engagements.

Don't deny yourself the opportunity to engage the public. The Heartland Institute, funded by the petroleum industry, uses its money and influence to peddle climate change denial (see Oreskes and Conway's **Merchants of Doubt**, 2010). Major corporations and trade organizations pretend "greenness" and obfuscate meanings of safety and efficacy in a variety of unsustainable and risky practices. British Petroleum, the company liable for the Deep Water Horizon April 2010 technogenic disaster that leaked 4.9 million barrels into the Gulf of Mexico and killed a number of workers, celebrates its environmental consciousness through a new logo of a bright sun surrounded by green intended to look like a sunflower. A US senator recently cited the Bible and threw snowballs in chambers to deny the "hoax" of global warming. Shouldn't educated, thoughtful, and well-intended social scientists—in particular historians and environmental historians—respond in service of public education? We have the benefit of rigorous analysis and comprehension of trends and contexts to set the terms of the debate more accurately.

I often look to Rachel Carson for my inspiration because her work is easy to read, ahead of its time, and profound—and she insisted on asking difficult questions. Her work is timeless, not only because of its message, but because she spoke to such a large audience through her wondrous prose. I shall never forget her words from the CBS Reports in 1963 on **Silent Spring**: "We still talk in terms of conquest. We still haven't become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. Man's attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself." Let's use our words to join Carson in the public battle to frame properly this "war against nature" for the benefit of our children, communities, nations, and the globe.