

Report Resources in Environmental History: the past and the present

Jan Oosthoek

The annual meeting of EAEH-UK Branch held at the Open University in

Milton Keynes on 19 May 2006

The title of the meeting was Resources, the past and the present. The meeting examined two different aspects of resources in environmental history. At one level it considered environmental history as the study of the exploitation of physical resources by humans in the past. This includes straightforward examples of past resource use, or more theoretical reflections on the nature of environmental history.

The other very different level considers the past and its study as a resource for current understanding of environmental topics and issues. Out of this arises the question of what resources exist that provide evidence for past interactions of society and the environment that are of particular interest to environmental historians.

These two aspects of resources in environmental history was discussed in a diversity of papers on topics including water pollution and management, resource man management, planning, land use, environmentalism and history of science.

The day started on a watery note: the two morning sessions were entirely devoted to themes related to water and water management.

The first paper by Jouni Paavola of the University of East Anglia, was about interstate water pollution and its control in the United States from the turn of the 20th century until after the Second World War. During this period, state water pollution control policies developed but were mostly ineffective. This was because states were unwilling to take unilateral action to control water pollution since it would have mainly benefited downstream states but also because of a threat of industrial flight. Paavola discusses how the states first sought to resolve conflicts over the pollution of interstate waters by litigating in the Supreme Court of the United States. He also showed how they failed to obtain federal water pollution control legislation before the Second World War. However, the federal government endorsed the use of interstate co-operation to manage water quality in interstate waters. Many interstate initiatives were ineffective and did not eliminate the threat of industrial flight which was an obstacle for water pollution control in state waters. Things started to move during the New Deal period when federal funding became available. This had more lasting impact on water quality, by becoming an element of federal water pollution policies after the Second World War.

The second paper of the morning was by Jan Oosthoek of the University of Newcastle. He talked about the use of records related to fisheries on the River Forth in Scotland. The paper examined how a complete time series of fish prices from the 17th and 18th centuries can be used to reconstruct fish stocks and development of fish markets. In addition the paper looked at how records relating to the Fishing Court in Stirling provides a wonderful source that illuminates the way the fisheries on the Forth intersected with the wide range of interests along the river.

After a short break the morning continued with a paper by James Porter, a PhD student at King's College London. In his paper entitled The co-production of hydrological practices and flood defence policy, he explored Defra's new flood strategy, "Making Space for Water", which signals an entirely new direction in the government's quest for sustainable flood risk management. He argued that applying adaptive and flexible risk-based tools and shifts in government to governance has seen the blurring of traditional boundaries of state and civil society, as individuals are expected to play an active role in flood reduction. An interesting question is how the government decided on this course of action. A partial answer lies in the use of science. Since the 1950s science has played a

pivotal role in the practical formation of flood defence policy through tools such as NERC's "Flood Studies Report". Porter concluded that the question how scientific practices were shaped by policy makers' needs and in turn how scientific practices have influenced the trajectory of flood defence policies, since the 1950, remains a largely unexplored matter.

The final presentation of the morning was a paper by Raymond Smith entitled *Is the past a resource for modern water resource planning?* He started by outlining the way that the use of time based or historical information in water resources has reflected the concerns of their age. He then argued for the need for a more integrated approach to the use of historical information, that draws on a variety of long term sources. He developed this theme by reference to a case study of the river Mole. Finally he argued that such deepened understanding would be of use, for example in water abstraction licensing and the improvement of river biodiversity.

The afternoon kicked off with a paper by Humphrey Southall of the University of Portsmouth entitled "20th Century Land Utilisation Surveys as a source for 21st Century Land Use Policy." This paper detailed how three 20th century land surveys are being used to create an on-line GIS resource that is open to researchers interested in past land use and land use change. The main source used for the creation of this online resource has been the Land utilisation survey of Great Britain which was conducted by Dudley Stamp in the 1930s. This survey was entirely conducted by volunteers and schools and resulted in a series of colour maps of the land use in the UK during the 1930s. These maps are now digitised and form the basis of a GIS database which can be accessed through the Vision of Britain through time website. This site contains also Census statistics from 1901 to 2001, full text of three 19th century gazetteers and writings by early travellers such as Defoe, William Cobbett and others. You can access the Vision of Britain through time website at www.visionofbritain.org.uk.

The next paper by Erin Gill, a PhD student at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, was entitled "The Living Soil: Lady Eve Balfour's soil manifesto." The paper explored the work of Eve Balfour, one of the founders of the organic farm movement, and author of the book "The Living Soil", which will be republished later this year.

After the mid-afternoon coffee break Vimbai Chaumba Kwashirai, a Leverhulme Fellow based at the University of Liverpool took the audience to a completely different part of the world. He explored a theme about contested forest ownership and exploitation in colonial Zimbabwe. Kwashirai accounted how colonial authorities evicted the local Ndebele population of North Western Matabeleland from commercial hardwood teak forests or gusu for the creation of state forestry reserves. The aim was to make the one million hectare forests more productive and sustainable in order to cope with the demand for railway sleepers and other building material in Southern Africa. Zimbabwe had the only large reserves of teak hardwood in Southern Africa which meant that the reliable supply of timber was very important to the colonial authorities leading to the creation of forest reserves for the production of timber. It led to injustice and a struggle for the management of forest resources between local communities and the authorities on the one hand and conflict among administrative departments on the other during the colonial period.

The final paper of the day transported the conference delegates from South Africa to higher spheres: the history of the discovery and understanding of the Stratosphere. This interesting paper about a part of the planet that lies almost beyond the grasp of humans was presented by Peter Brimblecombe, Professor of atmospheric chemistry at the University of East Anglia. He described how there is a very ancient connection between humans and the stratosphere. For millennia people in many parts of the world have observed optical effects caused by aerosols and ice particles in the stratosphere. This had often religious or even political significance because phenomena like rings around the sun were seen as messages about the fall of kings and the like. The discovery of the stratosphere happened during the turn of the 20th century but has been largely overshadowed by other scientific discoveries at the time like radioactivity and the development of quantum mechanics. Peter regards the discovery of the stratosphere as one of the major scientific discoveries

of the 20th century. The discovery that the atmosphere had layers had ramifications for science beyond meteorology and led to the realization that there were layers in the ocean and the earth. The discovery of these things was the beginning of geophysics. In the 21st century the relation between the stratosphere and human society is very direct. Pollution created by human activity will have huge implications for the stratosphere in terms of ozone depletion and other undesirable effects that have a direct impact on life on earth. For this reason human activity and the stratosphere is of political, social and scientific importance more than ever before.
