

H-Net Reviews

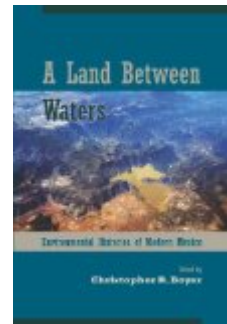
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher R. Boyer, ed. *Land between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*. Latin American Landscapes Series. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012. 328 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-0249-3.

Reviewed by German Vergara (University of California, Berkeley)

Published on H-Environment (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Dolly Jørgensen



Environmental histories of Modern Mexico

This volume illustrates the recent surge in research on the environmental history of Mexico. After years of being a marginal endeavor with only a handful of specialists contributing to its development, Mexican environmental history has become a dynamic subfield with an increasing number of practitioners. Christopher R. Boyer, an important voice in Mexican environmental history, presents this book as “a snapshot of modern Mexican environmental historiography at this stage of its development” (p. 14). Bringing together a diverse group of U.S. and Mexican scholars with varied interests, the book does an excellent job of reminding readers that the environment has been an important actor in Mexican history, not a mere backdrop.

In the introductory essay “The Cycles of Mexican Environmental History,” Boyer tackles the important question of what modern Mexican history looks like from an environmental perspective. He offers a new periodization based on the dynamic relationship between extensive and intensive forms in the use of nature and cycles of political stability and volatility. Perhaps taking a cue from archaeologists, who have long employed a framework of alternating cycles of macro-regional centralization and fragmentation in their analyses of Mesoamerican history, Boyer argues that Mexican history in the past two centuries can be understood as a series of transitions between periods of centralized state authority and economic growth and political decentralization and economic stagnation. He identifies three major phases of

what he terms “the political ecology of centralization”: between 1765 and 1808, between 1876 and 1910, and from the mid-1940s to the 1980s. Decentralization occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century, the revolutionary and postrevolutionary years, and the neoliberal era. Rejecting a facile correlation between these cycles and ecological degradation or recovery, Boyer points out that his periodization’s usefulness relies on underlining the connection between political and economic patterns and forms of resource use.

Unquestionably the dominant themes in Mexican environmental history, land use and the politics of water are at the center of the book. Angus Wright’s essay, “Downslope and North: How Soil Degradation and Synthetic Pesticides Drove the Trajectory of Mexican Agriculture through the Twentieth Century,” examines the history of Mexico’s agriculture to argue that twentieth-century land policies were justified by a view of Mexican soils in the old agricultural heartland as historically degraded and poor. This vision led policymakers to look to the arid North and the tropical lowlands and to industrialized food production for solutions, in fact worsening Mexico’s social and agricultural problems. In “Mexico’s Breadbasket: Agriculture and the Environment in the Bajío,” Martín Sánchez Rodríguez traces the impact of a system of water technology and soil management using *cajas de agua* (low-lying fields that were seasonally flooded) on the development of a commercially successful agricultural landscape in the Bajío region. Also

addressing the politics of water use and agricultural production in “Water and Revolution in Morelos, 1850-1915,” Alejandro Tortolero Villaseñor challenges the traditional view that land scarcity was at the heart of revolutionary upheaval in early twentieth-century Morelos. Advancing instead a “hydraulic thesis,” Tortolero argues that access to water was crucial in creating the profound disparities of wealth and power that provoked acute social tension in the state, as sugar haciendas monopolized an increasing volume of water for their crop. Water and power are also at the center of Luis Aboites Aguilar’s essay “The Illusion of National Power: Water Infrastructure in Mexican Cities, 1930-1990.” Aboites describes the expansion of urban water and sewer services during the twentieth century as the federal government channeled enormous fiscal resources into public works. He analyzes the federal government’s commitment to extending water infrastructure across Mexico as part of a centralizing model that saw Mexico City as responsible for bringing progress and technological innovation to a developing nation. This “national model” lasted until the late 1970s when faith in the power of technology to bring about social change began to falter and the national treasury to shrink. Burdened with overexploited aquifers and expensive megaprojects, water infrastructure was decentralized and handed over to underfunded state and municipal authorities. In “King Henequen: Order, Progress, and Ecological Change in Yucatan, 1850-1950,” Sterling Evans examines the role of what he calls the “henequen-wheat complex” in shaping the state’s social and environmental history. Weaving a story of transnational connections, peasant dispossession, oligarchic rule, and monoculture, Evans shows how henequen cultivation became inextricably intertwined with the region’s economy and landscapes.

The remaining five chapters move away from water and agriculture. It is one of the strengths of this volume that it explores less-developed topics, such as oil, conservation and the creation of national parks, botanical gardens, forests, and pearl aquaculture. Myrna I. Santiago brings together labor and environmental history in “Class and Nature in the Oil Industry of Northern Veracruz, 1900-1938,” an examination of the environmental and social impact of oil extraction in northern Veracruz in the first half of the twentieth century. Incorporating Richard White’s insight that class shapes how people view and interact with nature, Santiago argues that the rigid race and class hierarchies that characterized the oil industry at the time (with Americans and Europeans at the top and Mexican workers at the bottom) meant that

“all of them lived in the same place, but they all inhabited very different spaces” (p. 183). Similarly, José Juan Juárez Flores’s “Besieged Forests at Century’s End: Industry, Speculation, and Dispossession in Tlaxcala’s La Malintzin Woodlands, 1860-1910” depicts the transformation of forests in Tlaxcala from an essential resource for the livelihood of local communities into a capitalist commodity. Juárez describes the impact of liberal policies and Porfirian modernization, underlining the relentless industrial exploitation of local forest resources for turpentine, broom root, wood, and railroad ties. More reminiscent of declensionist narratives than the other essays in the collection, the chapter abounds in such terms as “devastating” and “destructive” to describe people’s impact on nature.

Also interested in the question of sustainability, Mario Monteforte and Micheline Cariño’s “Episodes of Environmental History in the Gulf of California: Fisheries, Commerce, and Aquaculture of Nacre and Pearls” reviews five centuries of pearling in the Sea of Cortez. The authors, marine biologists engaged in aquaculture projects, argue that the pearl fishery in Mexico has followed a pattern similar to that in other regions of the world. Driven by the “Pearl Myth” (the search for fabulously rich pearl beds), wild stocks went through cycles of overexploitation, exhaustion, abandonment, and recovery, a process that usually benefited only a few individuals. Then came aquaculture in the early twentieth century and with it farming technologies that allowed wild populations to rebound. The authors explore the trajectory of aquaculture ventures around the world, paying particular attention to what they call “the world’s first successful experiment in massive cultivation of pearl oysters” by a French-Mexican entrepreneur in the early twentieth century. The chapter ends with a call for “a sustainable and socially just version of the Pearl Myth” (p. 272).

Using the Mexican Royal Botanical Garden as a microcosm, Rick A. López explores the “changing (and contested) understandings of nature first within New Spain and then within the Mexican republic” in “Nature as Subject and Citizen in the Mexican Botanical Garden, 1787-1829” (p. 73). A typical project of enlightened monarchs, the botanical garden in New Spain was actually among the few imperial institutions to survive the transition to the postindependence period. As such, López suggests, the garden offers a window to trace the emergence of what he calls “Mexico’s nationalist ecological imagination” (p. 74). Perhaps exaggerating its influence, he argues that the botanical garden played an important role

in codifying the views of nature adopted first by the Creole and then Mexican elites. In a similar vein, Emily Wakild's "Parables of Chapultepec: Urban Parks, National Landscapes, and Contradictory Conservation in Modern Mexico" suggests that urban parks and conservation areas reflect as well as shape larger political and cultural trends. Their histories, she writes, tell us "more about the societies that created them than of the natures they enclose" (p. 193). Wakild probes the history of conservation in Mexico and convincingly shows that it has as complex a trajectory as in the so-called developed nations. Finally, Cynthia Radding's contribution "Conclusion: Of the 'Lands in Between' and the Environments of Modernity" summarizes the volume and adds some final considerations. Radding emphasizes the double importance of the book in bringing common topics in environmental history to the attention of other historians of Mexico, on the one hand, and in shedding new light on traditional themes of Mexican historiography, on the other.

Land between Waters is a very valuable contribution to the emerging field of Mexican environmental history.

As the first overview of environmental history for any country in Latin America, the volume offers the reader an excellent introduction to the recent growth and diversity of scholarship that characterizes the field. As is the case with many edited collections, however, the connection between the chapters is not always clear. Although Boyer and Radding's essays serve to some extent to unify the book, the authors of the chapters could have contributed to a more cohesive volume by referring to each other's contributions. Perhaps more important, not every essay is immune to oversimplification, with versions of what Shepard Krech labeled the "ecological Indian" in *Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999) or deconstructionist perspectives occasionally making their way into the text. This might have been avoided by adopting a more quantitative approach to assess the level of anthropogenic transformation of ecosystems and landscapes. The book is thus somewhat uneven. These minor shortcomings aside, researchers, professors, and students will find this volume a useful tool, one that contains challenging questions, offers new perspectives, and opens up new lines of inquiry for a thriving field.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: German Vergara. Review of Boyer, Christopher R., ed., *Land between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39043>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.