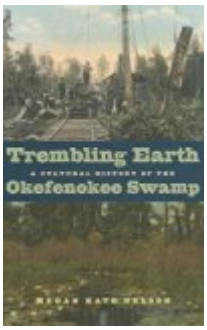
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Megan Kate Nelson. *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee Swamp.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. xv + 262 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-2677-1.



Reviewed by Jeffrey Kosiorek

Published on H-Environment (September, 2007)

Megan Kate Nelson's *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee Swamp* is a wonderful history of the various views different groups--colonists, slaves, Seminoles, developers, Swampers, preservationists, and others--developed of the Okefenokee and the ways these visions of the swamp clashed, interacted, and transformed over the past four hundred years. At its heart, *Trembling Earth* is, as the title suggests, a cultural history. The central concern is how people make sense of the swamp environment in response to their needs, values, perspective, and experience. As any cultural history should, Nelson also ties people's perceptions of the Okefenokee to physical reality, showing the ways these views engendered ecological transformations and social, economic, and political change.

In addition to being a cultural history, *Trembling Earth* is also unabashedly local, focused on the Okefenokee and its immediate hinterland. When Nelson ranges beyond the confines of this environment, it is only with the purpose of shedding more light on the swamp itself. But, like the best local histories, by examining the Okefenokee in detail, *Trembling Earth* gives the reader insight into larger trends through the in-depth study of a more narrow and comprehensible set of practices. In this case, the experiences of people and development in the Okefenokee are comparable to not just other swamp ecosystems, but also other historically marginal environments beset by developmental pressures, such as the New Jersey Pine Barrens and California's Mojave Desert.

Nelson's most important contribution, however, is a framework she introduces for discussing and understanding the interaction between people and their local environment, what she refers to as ecolocalism. As Nelson describes it, ecolocalism is "a constellation of competing ideas rooted in beliefs about land use and value and shot through with convictions about race, gender, and class distinctions. These ideas and beliefs determined a particular pattern of action that communities took within" their environments "and thus shaped local cultures" (p. 3).

Much like many people's initial impressions of the Okefenokee, I first thought of ecolocalism as a murky, awkward, and unnecessary term. How-

ever, as I made my way through ***Trembling Earth***, I came to appreciate the simplicity of ecolocalism and its utility for historical study. As Nelson argues in the introduction, ecolocalism presents an alternative to regionalism, allowing for more limited, fluid, variable, and contested definitions of the relationship between environment and cultural identity. Thus, the concept recognizes the way changes in environmental conditions, social relations, or political circumstances can transform how people view and make use of the ecosystem around them. Moreover, ecolocalism recognizes that an environment often produces a variety of cultural responses that can coexist, conflict, and inform one another.

Unfortunately, for all of ecolocalism's merits as a concept, it will probably never become commonly used in the field of environmental history. Two years after ***Trembling Earth's*** publication and five years after Nelson completed her dissertation, little notice has been paid to ecolocalism, with only a handful of references in the literature. This neglect of ecolocalism, while perhaps predictable, represents a lost opportunity. With much of environmental history focused on local issues, ecolocalism offers a coherent way of comparing parochial views of the environment across time and space, putting local environmental issues into regional, national, and transnational perspective.

As Nelson reveals the multiple, shifting views of the Okefenokee, ***Trembling Earth*** serves as a model for the ways ecolocalism can provide insight into the cultural history of an environment. The book begins by focusing on the evolution of two ecolocal visions of the Okefenokee: European American and African American. By 1750, "ecolocal ideas promoting the close relationship between Africans and swamps" abetted the legalization of slavery in Georgia (p. 16). From then until the end of the Civil War, slaves worked the inundated lowlands, ably clearing land, engineering irrigation canals and levees, and cultivating rice and other crops. However, much to the dismay of their owners, they also used swamplands to achieve temporary independence--stealing away for a few days or weeks--or more permanent freedom in Spanish Florida. While Blacks embraced an ecolocalism that equated swamps with refuge and sustenance, white culture literally wrote Blacks out of the swamp. Particularly in fiction, the swamp became the place of poor whites, outlaws, ghosts, and wild animals. As was the case with later groups' views, whites' and Blacks' ecolocal beliefs intertwined, informed, and conflicted with one another, conditioning how people used and understood the Okefenokee.

Next, Nelson turns her attention to the Seminoles' use of the Okefenokee and how this conflicted with and shaped white Americans' "beliefs in land development and national expansionism" (p. 41). Attempts by the United States military to remove the Seminoles from the southeastern part of the nation brought many white Americans into the swamp for the first time, changing their ecolocal perceptions. In particular, General Charles Rinaldo Floyd, who published writings of his experiences in the swamp in 1838-1839, brought those whites living in the swamp's hinterlands "to see the Okefenokee as a potentially valuable space in which white men could affirm their masculinity and social status, improve their situation, and change their lives" (pp. 69-70).

The new ecolocal view that emerged brought on a period of exploration and exploitation of the Okefenokee. The Suwanee Canal Company undertook the first major intervention in the swamp during the 1890s. Attempting to drain the swamp for agricultural land and log its forests, the company failed miserably, chiefly because they misjudged the swamp's hydrology. Over the next decade, the Hebard Lumber Company fared better by drawing from its years of lumbering experience in the Midwest, familiarizing itself with the ecology, and remaining flexible and creative in its operations. Though financially successful, the company still failed to comprehend the Okefeno-

kee's ecological complexity. Focusing solely on harvesting the swamp's valuable old growth cypress, the Hebard Lumber Company "attempted to force on the Okefenokee a mode of production that swamp ecology would not sustain" (p. 72).

The final two chapters are the most fascinating of the book. The fourth focuses on the Swampers, a predominately white, yet "socio-economically diverse kin-based community that inhabited cultivated, and hunted the swamp" from the antebellum era through the New Deal (p. 117). Nelson details the Swampers' ecolocalism and their struggles to both make a living in the Okefenokee and ensure the swamp continued to exist as a viable ecosystem. Consequently, they found themselves "at odds with developers who sought to convert or extract resources from 'their swamp'" (p. 156). And, by the early twentieth century, Swampers worked together with scientists and conservationists to safeguard the Okefenokee. The ultimate success of the preservationists and their Swamper allies, detailed in the last chapter, led to the Swampers being restricted from entering the swamp. Though both groups' ecolocal views had led them to coordinated activity on behalf of the Okefenokee, refuge status enshrined the preservationist ecolocalism and, ironically, led to the demise of Swamper culture.

In researching this history, Nelson identified and consulted a staggering number and variety of sources spread across a vast literary landscape of popular, personal, official, and scientific writings, as well as the recollections of local inhabitants and the Okefenokee environment itself. Moreover, Nelson blends quotes and references into the text in a seamless manner, using them to elucidate how the swamp's interlopers and inhabitants perceived the environment and its possibilities, as well as the physical reality of the Okefenokee. Nelson should also be commended for creatively using other sources when material touching directly on the Okefenokee proved scant: the first two chapters rely heavily on documents recounting slaves' and Seminoles' customary use of other marginal Southeastern environments to illuminate the ways they likely utilized the Okefenokee swampland.

Though there are a lot of things to praise about *Trembling Earth*, there are also shortcomings. Transnational comparisons, mentioned in the introduction, are never explored; the interaction between Swampers' and Blacks' ecolocalism is neglected; tourists' interpretations of the Okefenokee in the decades after preservation are only superficially treated. Additionally, though much of the work is admirably short and readable, there are portions, particularly in the developers' chapter, that go into tedious and unnecessary detail. But these are all minor quibbles with what is a solid cultural and environmental history. Sadly, I fear *Trembling Earth's* most valuable contribution, the concept of ecolocalism, will be disregarded by historians regardless of the book's faults or virtues.

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Citation: Jeffrey Kosiorek. Review of Nelson, Megan Kate. *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee Swamp.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

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