Historical Perspectives on Tribal Sovereignty and the Environment

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by Jacob Jurss

By August 2016, thousands of water protectors had assembled along the banks of the Missouri River near Cannonball, North Dakota, to protest Energy Transfer Partners’ Dakota Access Pipeline. At this intersection between tribal sovereignty rights and the defense of environmental resources were members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, who led the movement decrying the project as dangerous to the community’s drinking water and sacred sites. As more outsiders joined the protests, commentators questioned the motivations behind the protest actions. Was the largest gathering of Native American and First Nation peoples in over a hundred years a renewed defense of the sovereign rights of Native nations? Were the protesters water protectors, as they called themselves, or, as pipeline defenders suggested, misinformed and dangerous agitators seeking to delay a job-creating infrastructure project? Had the Native-led movement been co-opted by environmental activists seeking attention for their own goals? From where did this movement come? Scholars have worked to untangle the meaning of the movement through op-eds, crowd-sourced syllabus projects like the #StandingRockSyllabus, and bibliographies like Kyle Whyte’s Indigenous Climate Justice Teaching Materials & Advanced Bibliography. Future historians will debate the importance of the actions at Standing Rock, but historians already have worked to illuminate many of the underlying issues present at the protests as part of a continual movement in the push for greater tribal sovereignty and environmental justice that stretches from the point of European and American Indian contact to today.

The actions at Standing Rock did not appear spontaneously. They began as a American Indian led movement whose social, cultural, and historical roots not only reach back to the political movement for American Indian rights of the 1970s, but even further to the earliest treaties and encounters between Europeans and American Indians. The movement at Standing Rock is only the latest step in a centuries-long struggle in defense of Native sovereignty and treaty rights. Scholars of American Indian history increasingly have used environmental history to expose how the history of Indian removal, cultural erasure, and challenges to tribal sovereignty are linked to a history of unfettered extraction of natural resources, degradation of the environment, and commodification of American Indian lands into private property. This essay examines a selection of recent scholarship in American Indian history and how the framework of environmental history has contributed to a new understanding of the relationship between Native American tribes and Euro-American settlers.

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American environmental history grew, in part, out of the environmental movement of the 1970s, which rallied American citizens to petition the government for increased environmental protections. Environmental historians were interested in the roots of the environmental movement. They also put forward a larger argument about American history: the environment was not a passive landscape shaped by humankind, but influenced human action at the same time as it was impacted by humankind. The environment could be viewed as an agent of change. The idea that the environment affected all humans refuted a stubborn narrative that American Indians were “primitive peoples” who passively existed in a pristine, Eden-like wilderness, rather than as human beings who engaged and co-existed in a variety of ways with their environment. Academics increasingly questioned the premise of this narrative, in part because of the relationships built between researchers and tribal members during the Indian Claims Commission (ICC) that started in 1946.

The movement for greater awareness of the treaty rights of American Indians, represented by both well-known organizations like the American Indian Movement (AIM) and individuals from reservations and urban Indian communities, grew parallel to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that pushed for greater inclusion of the story of American Indian tribes into the teaching of the
history of the United States. Activists and leaders like Clyde Bellecourt whose recent book, *The Thunder Before the Storm: The Autobiography of Clyde Bellecourt* (2016), described how the movement used protests and occupations of federal lands and buildings to demand that the United States recognize historic treaty obligations to tribes. Native scholars’ writings, like Vine Deloria Jr.’s *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969), pushed for non-Native academics to have a greater awareness of the power of their scholarship on public perceptions, and to include tribal understandings of their own history in their work. Spurred on by these calls and influenced by increased campus activism for both ethnic minority rights and environmental rights, environmental scholarship and research in American Indian history grew rapidly, sometimes in conversation with each other.

Early touchstones linking environmental and American Indian history included Alfred Crosby’s *The Columbian Exchange* (1972), whose idea of “virgin soil epidemics” suggested that the lack of American Indian immunity to new diseases carried by Europeans doomed Indigenous communities to vast depopulation events. William Cronon’s *Changes in the Land* (1983) demonstrated the links between invading New England settlers and manipulation of the environment that contributed to dynamic societal changes in northeastern American Indian communities. During the 1990s, the fields of environmental history and American Indian history began to incorporate more Native voices through greater inclusion of oral history and American Indian perspectives into historical narratives of the conquest, settlement, and creation of the United States.

The last decade of research in American Indian history has employed methods from environmental history to better understand the interwoven and nuanced narratives in American Indian history. In addition to using archival sources, more historians incorporate recorded oral histories and seek out community partnerships to provide deeper engagement and Indigenous perspectives to their scholarship. Students and the general public benefit from these collaborations by reading histories that expose them to narratives of American Indian communities. The use of environmental history alongside Indigenous histories reminds readers of their broader connections, such as the displacement of tribes by the government that sought to extract environmental resources from their homelands. These narratives contain echos from the past and help explain how the country arrived at the current moment.

Re-evaluating the early encounters between Europeans and American Indians is at the center of the edited collection by Catherine M. Cameron, Paul Kelton, and Alan C. Swedlund, *Beyond Germs: Native Depopulation in North America* (2015). Several of the edited volume’s articles push back against Crosby’s concept of the virgin soil epidemic as too environmentally deterministic. In the wake of Crosby’s research, many scholars overemphasized his conclusions regarding the role of disease in the depopulation of Native America. Instead, the editors acknowledge that in addition to disease, violence through war, slavery, forced removal, and other means of erasure conducted by European settlers played key roles in the decline of the continent’s Indigenous population. Their essays demonstrate that environmental factors of disease were linked to, and worked together with, other sociopolitical aspects of European settlement to colonize North America.

The nuanced connections between American Indian history and environmental history are increasingly illuminated through the work of borderlands historians. Borderlands history originally stemmed from Herbert Eugene Bolton’s work, *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida*.
and the Southwest (1921), which reconsidered Frederick Jackson Turner’s east to west moving frontier thesis as described in the essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1894). Bolton centered his history of North America on the Spanish Empire. Borderlands scholars have vastly expanded Bolton’s analysis by examining relations between European powers and Native communities throughout North America, particularly in the Spanish-American Southwest. These narratives demonstrate the impact of cross-cultural interactions on communities. Bolton’s borderlands relied on the presence of empire borders, but borderlands studies increasingly have challenged this view of boundaries. These challenges include asking questions regarding how borderlands operated between Indigenous communities and how water affected borderland spaces. These overlapping frameworks build new pathways that demonstrate the connectivity between research fields.

Tribes did not simply react to European invasion, but instead actively sought advantageous environmental positions to strengthen their own power. Robert Morrissey argues in an article in the Journal of American History, “The Power of the Ecotone: Bison, Slavery, and the Rise and Fall of the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia” (2015), that the environmental and geographical locations of villages helped to determine who held power and influence. These environmental borderlands of the pre-
colonial era allowed the Illinois to take advantage of environmental resources like bison in the west, while maintaining connections to slave trade networks further east and south. In addition to the southwestern and midwestern prairies, the fluid locales of the sea complicate how historians of borderlands, the environment, and Native Americans understand borders and power. European empires and later, nation-states, competed with each other to solidify their boundaries. Tribes whose lands or access to the sea straddled nation-state borders often subverted these lines by engaging in traditional migration patterns that followed the seasons. Lissa K. Wadewitz’s *The Nature of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries, and Bandits on the Salish Sea* (2012), Joshua L. Reid’s *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (2015), and Andrew Lipman’s *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast* (2015) use a combination of environmental history, borderlands studies, and Indigenous studies to reorient how we understand interactions between American Indians and Euro-Americans. Nancy Shoemaker’s collection of primary sources on New England whaling, *Living with Whales: Documents and Oral Histories of Native New England Whaling Industry* (2014), came from her research for *Native American Whalemen and the World: Indigenous Encounters and the Contingency of Race* (2015). This body of research, particularly when viewed in relation to Wadewitz, Reid, and Lipman, explains how borders were not the only concept blurred by the seas. Identity and concepts of race were malleable and fluctuated. For many of these groups, the seas formed an important part of their identity, but the ocean’s very nature made it difficult for empires and nation-states to satisfactorily police their borders, especially when faced with predating Indigenous claims.

Following the American Revolution, the United States sought to expand its borders and power through military intervention and treaty negotiations with tribes. Throughout the nineteenth century, Americans forced Native communities to accept reserved portions of land. These reservations were often carved from lands holding little use for American settlers. The *Dawes Act of 1887* fractured tribal land holdings further by allotting individual parcels to tribal members and opening excess land holdings for sale to non-Native settlers. As Gilded Age industrialists sought energy to power their capitalist empires, they sent surveyors out to search for new sources of energy. Many of the lands previously considered unfavorable for agriculture were found to hold new, economically viable environmental resources, including oil, gas, and nuclear energy reserves. Recent scholarship on the turn of the twentieth century through World War II has further explored the links between the exploitation of environmental resources and the attempted destruction of Native culture and rights. Chantal Norrgard’s *Seasons of Change: Labor, Treaty Rights, and Ojibwe Nationhood* (2014) explores the methods employed by the Ojibwe to defend their tribal sovereignty from the 1870s to the 1970s. Tribal citizens used treaty rights to preserve and defend community access to environmental resources. The race to secure material for the atomic bomb is highlighted in Traci Brynne Voyles’ *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (2015), which exposes the environmental injustice and environmental racism of uranium mining on Navajo lands. Yet, as James Robert Allison III describes in *Sovereignty for Survival: American Energy Development and Indian Self-Determination* (2015), energy tribes (tribes with access to energy reserves on their lands) have fought with energy extraction companies for control over these resources. By successfully regaining control over resources like coal these tribes have increased their self-determination, but have wrestled with questions of economic benefits and dangers to the environment.

Federally sanctioned westward expansion of white settlers during the nineteenth century drastically increased the federal government’s land holdings. Since 1872, hundreds of square miles of this
federal land have been designated as national parks. Yet this land was taken, often violently, from 
American Indian tribes. Works like Mark David Spence’s *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian 
Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (1999) and Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek’s 
*American Indians and National Parks* (1999) exposed and analyzed how early efforts to preserve 
lands as national parks often denied tribes access to traditional sacred sites. This historical legacy 
continues to complicate the alliance between environmental groups and tribal governments. Stan 
Stevens’ edited volume *Indigenous Peoples, National Parks, and Protected Areas* (2014) analyzes 
several case studies from around the world to consider how national governments can improve 
cooperation with Indigenous populations to practice better conservation methods and ensure 
continual access to culturally important sites, while Peter Nabokov and Lawrence L. Loendorf’s 
*Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park* (2016) presents issues of 
American Indian at the center of a narrative about Yellowstone National Park.

![unitednuclearcorporationchurchrockuraniummill.jpeg](image)

This is an image of the United Nuclear Corporation Uranium Mine and Mill at Church Rock, New Mexico within the boundaries of the Navajo Nation. More information on effects of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation can be found [here](link). More on the 1979 spill of radioactive waste near Church Rock, the largest spill of radioactive material in the United States, can be found [here](link).

If the relationship between American Indians and national parks has been contentious, the role of 
scholars studying American Indians has been no less complicated. University anthropologists 
throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries robbed burial sites, rejected traditional 
knowledge, and misused community information in their research. The court battles of the Indian
Claims Commission (1946-78) encouraged greater collaboration between tribes and scholars working to secure and protect tribal rights to land and resources. As more Native scholars entered academia and universities worked to create ethnic study departments in the 1960s and 1970s, the relationship between tribal communities and universities improved, with increased collaboration. Recent initiatives have given greater institutional focus to creating partnerships between researchers and Indigenous communities. The Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Shirleen Smith’s *People of the Lakes* (2010) is a particularly strong example of how this type of collaboration demonstrates how scholars can work in partnership with communities to amplify Indigenous voices in academic discussions. These connections can also bring new insights to the links between environmental resources and Indigenous communities. Indigenous sustainability movements and explanations of traditional, non-sacred knowledge of plants and animals have enriched discussions in the field of sustainability. Where non-Native ethnographers once collected traditional knowledge in hopes of preserving it in museums before it “vanished”, works like Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Mary Siisip Geniusz’s *Plants Have So Much to Give Us. All We Have to Do Is Ask* (2015), and Thomas Pecore Weso’s *Good Seeds: A Menominee Indian Food Memoir* (2016) revitalize and protect Indigenous knowledge and disseminate it in a culturally appropriate manner. At the same time, museums and archives have begun the process of repatriating objects taken by scholars back to American Indian tribes, though the practice continues to be long, slow, and often frustrating.

Current events can be a difficult subject for historians to navigate, yet the study of the extended narrative of history helps to explain issues confronting the present moment. Donald J. Trump’s Presidential Memorandums on both the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines have thrust treaty rights issues, including the right to environmental resources, to the front pages of newspapers. Common to each of the 567 federally recognized tribes is the sovereign nation-to-nation relationship they have with the United States. Engaging with environmental history is another way that historians of American Indian tribes continue to demonstrate the breadth, depth, and complexity of these relationships.

**Recommended Readings**


Geniusz, Mary Siisp. *Plants Have So Much to Give Us, All We Have to Do Is Ask: Anishinaabe Botanical Teachings*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.


Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation’s and Shirileen Smith. *People of the Lakes: Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich’in Elders/Googwandak Nakhwach’ànjoo Van Tat Gwich’in*. Edmonton: The University of


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