

2021

A Natural Arch: Ecological Imperialism and the “Crosby Effect” in American Environmental Historiography

Joseph Esparza
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [Intellectual History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Esparza, Joseph (2021) "A Natural Arch: Ecological Imperialism and the “Crosby Effect” in American Environmental Historiography," *History in the Making*: Vol. 14 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol14/iss1/14>

This State of the Field is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

State of the Field

A Natural Arch: *Ecological Imperialism* and the “Crosby Effect” in American Environmental Historiography

By Joseph Esparza

In the modern historical field, few scholars actively court “large-scale” history as the foundation of their scope of study. Instead, most tend to concentrate on narrow ranges of fields, themes, and times. More than anything else perhaps, modern historians tend to interpret the past rather monolithically, through a particularly human-historical lens. It is indeed rare, although it is becoming more common, for professional historians to take an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating multiple fields and methods of study into their work. Environmental history is the subfield in which this method is most obviously used, and today’s historians borrow from a variety of thematic emphases. Modern environmental historiography’s emphasis towards ecological rather than postcolonialism, globalization, and anthropocentric agency is the dominant trend in the field.

As such, one book, Alfred Crosby’s *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, shifted the underpinning philosophical and methodological historical discourse of environmental history.¹ The work

¹ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

transformed the field from tending to emphasize the industrial or anthropocentric view of the interaction to a more environmentally-centered one.² By synthesizing the continuous tradition before it, the impact of Crosby's book resulted in a more intrinsic approach to examining human-environment relations. No longer would the environmental historian simply examine the impact of man upon nature, but of nature upon man. I argue that this shift, which I termed the "Crosby Effect," bridged the practice and philosophy of environmental history between two eras: environmental determinism and anthropocentric thinking, and a more nuanced postcolonial enviro-centric historiography, which can be seen through the discourse of United States' environmental historiography.

The Historiography of Alfred Crosby

For the late historian Alfred W. Crosby (1931–2018), understanding the emphasis of human agency in history needed to be rethought. History, the story of human activity and events, is not so much reliant on human choices and action but is a product of its relationship with the environment. In this way, Crosby contradicted this *de facto* state of environmental historiographical practice. Prior to Crosby, environmental historians generally tended to emphasize the industrial uses of nature towards humans or the influence of humanity upon nature. In his riveting and tremendously insightful 1986 work, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, Crosby offered the environmental historical field a new paradigmatic framework of interpretation.³ The work transformed the general discourse into examining nature as an agent in history in and of itself, thereby granting nature an intrinsic value of change. Moreover, Crosby's

² By "Human-Environment" interaction, I mean the general interplay and dynamic interaction between the natural environment and the artificial (human) environment.

³ Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900–1900*.

work tended to interpret history through the perspective of nature's influence over humanity. The book applies this concept to the success of European imperialism by examining the concept of "portmanteau ecologies."⁴ In the text's radical new interpretational method of examining untraditional historical sources and centering a non-human-centered narrative, it remains the seminal work in environmental history. Its influence is especially felt in the environmental historiography of the United States. Due to the author's influence, Crosby is often referred to as the modern founder of modern environmental history.⁵ Historians of all fields would do well to examine this particular book in the wake of its author's passing in 2018 and reconsider the innovative "Crosby Effect" of interpretation offered.

Before writing *Ecological Imperialism* in 1986, Crosby already established notoriety amongst his colleagues for his work in environmental history. Crosby received his doctorate from Boston University after serving in the United States Army during the Korean War (1950–1953) and being stationed in the Panama Canal Zone (which may have influenced his anti-expansionist and anti-colonial positions). Crosby, from his early academic career in the 1960s, was interested in the confluence of the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences. This desire led to the incorporation of his landmark interdisciplinary approach to history. His first work in 1965, *America, Russia, Hemp, and Napoleon: American Trade with Russia 1783–1812*, examined the role of

⁴ "Portmanteau Ecologies or Biota": This term, coined by Crosby, refers to a collection of biotic agents (Europeans, animals, viruses, plants, etc.) that were specially evolved on the European continent. These same organisms adapted well to the new environments where they were brought by colonization. By this biotic success, Europeans were extraordinarily gifted and successful at their colonial efforts. For more information, see Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 7, 270, 293.

⁵ Jeffery L. Meikle, "Biographical Memoirs: Alfred W. Crosby," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 163, no. 1 (March 2019): 88, 92.

hemp in the Russo-American trade near the Baltic Sea.⁶ His most renowned book, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, came in 1972 and was truly a watershed in trans-Atlantic and postcolonial scholarship.⁷ Unlike previous scholarship, Crosby identified both cultural and biological interconnections between the Old and “New” Worlds, which eventually gave each constructed hemisphere specific ecological agency and a new historical identity. Previous scholars tended to focus on both the human and European aspects of the trans-Atlantic exchange, yet Crosby enhanced historians’ interpretation of the trans-Atlantic exchange by incorporating natural, biological, and indigenous components.

Together, these intertwined realities created the Columbian Exchange as the hallmark of early trans-Atlantic history. After writing *Ecological Imperialism*, Crosby continued to publish prodigiously in environmental history for both scholarly and popular audiences. As his career developed, he incorporated the study of technology and science into his scholarship, while simultaneously earning the reputation as the United States’ foremost environmental historian.

While not a strict environmental determinist, Crosby’s interpretive method requires the consideration of ecological factors in determining historical phenomena.⁸ However, environmental discourse is not a method that he entirely created, but transformed

⁶ Alfred W. Crosby, *America, Russia, Hemp, and Napoleon: American Trade with Russia 1783–1812* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1965).

⁷ Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: The Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972; repr., Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishing, 2003).

⁸ “Environmental Determinism” refers to the interpretive theory in both the humanities and social sciences that holds human culture and development in all places is strictly structured and defined by the limits of its geographic location (ocean, mountains, desert, valley, etc.) and environmental factors (water, soil, plants, climate, animals, etc.). It downplays the importance of human-agency and tends to emphasize the interconnected limiting factors of development proposed by the natural world.

and popularized.⁹ *Ecological Imperialism* is a watershed work in restructuring this method in the existing historiographical discourse surrounding environmental history. In retrospect, the book serves as a sentinel of differentiating two traditions in the environmental historiographical tradition.

Before 1920, with a few exceptions, environmental history closely resembled a mixture of Darwinian-Muirish natural histories or Frederick Jackson Turner-style expansionist narratives. Natural histories as such really cannot be considered “histories” in the modern sense of the term. Scholars and writers were purely concerned with the evolutionary history of the natural world and had little concern for constructed narratives or cultural history. Some of these include scholars such as Charles Darwin (1809–1882) with biology, John Muir (1838–1914) with earth science, Charles Lyell (1797–1875) with geology and glaciology, Clarence King (1842–1901) with geology, and Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) with biogeography. Likewise, expansionist narratives, such as Frederick Jackson Turner’s (1861–1932) “Frontier Thesis,” tended to be nationalistic and overtly industrial in their view of nature. From the 1920s to the 1970s, scholarship in environmental history tended to be centered around an anthropocentric viewpoint in the shaping of the environment or an environmental deterministic one.

After Crosby’s groundbreaking work, the entire field shifted towards embracing postcolonialism and more nuanced approaches in terms of agency and change towards the human-environment connection. Along with his earlier work *The Columbian Exchange*, *Ecological Imperialism* diverted the role of agency in environmental history by shifting the emphasis from human causes to environmental causes of history.¹⁰ Additionally, while previous scholarship tended to emphasize localized or

⁹ Alfred W. Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (October 1995): 1180–88.

¹⁰ Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History,” 1180–88; Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*.

nationalized histories, later environmental historiography took on an overall distinctly postcolonial and global lens. In many respects, the old and new schools of environmental history reflect similar themes and approaches, but their conclusions are often radically opposed.

Ecological Imperialism is written as a history explaining the success of European colonization. Crosby explains this development in an international and enviro-centric framework. Firstly, Crosby labels the “Neo-Europes” as those places outside of Europe whose people today are primarily of European descent (i.e. United States, Canada, Argentina, Australia, to name a few). Secondly, the book argues that the success of European imperialism was mainly due to these favorable “portmanteau biota” in reshaping colonial landscapes of the “Neo-Europes.”¹¹ The aggregate literature suggests *Ecological Imperialism* bridged the historiographical debate between anthropocentric and enviro-centric emphases and became a catalyst towards a deeply postcolonial perspective on environmental history.

Scholarship Before Crosby (1893–1986)

In the United States, the historical trajectory of environmental history rose from the conservation-environmental movements in the late nineteenth century. Most tellingly, as greater concern for conserving the natural environment rose, so too did interest in what could be called proto-environmental history scholarship. Because environmental history, as both a discipline and an approach, requires, at minimum, something of an interdisciplinary method of historical analysis, the field could not truly rise until after the publication of the great modern tomes in the natural sciences. Texts such as Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833), and Willis Linn Jepson’s *Flora of California* (1909), became some of the catalysts of broader academic interest in the natural and ecological sciences.

¹¹ Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 7, 293.

The word “ecology” was not even part of the English lexicon until 1866.¹² All this to say, historians, subconsciously of course, had to allow the other disciplines to develop before incorporating their texts into an interdisciplinary historical discourse. On a larger scale, this was the era of a growing social consciousness of the importance of environmental conservation.

However, the mid-nineteenth century also saw justifications for racial and imperial superiority built on what is now known as the first wave of environmental determinism. Early pseudo-evolutionary ideas, such as Lamarckism, extolled Europeans’ ability to acclimate to climate and explained that tropical peoples generally lacked the strength of Europeans due to their climate.¹³ This kind of environmental determinism justified the superiority of an entire race and the “natural” ability of that race to dominate others.¹⁴ This idea would arguably reach its most infamous form in the racial theory of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) which stated that Northern Europeans were destined by nature to be the greatest race. According to Hitler himself, “The North forced men to further activity – production of clothes, building of abodes. First, it was simple caves, later huts and houses. In short, he created a principle, the principle of work. Life would not have been possible without it.”¹⁵ The conceptions of the natural world and post-enlightenment secular rationalism clashed with devastating consequences. In its most insidious form, environmental determinism was used as a pretext for genocide.

¹² Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History.”

¹³ Ernst Mayr, “Lamarck Revisited,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 5 (1972): 79–80.

¹⁴ J.A. Campbell and D.N. Livingstone, “Neo-Lamarckism and the Development of Geography in the United States and Great Britain,” in *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* (1983): 278.

¹⁵ Adolf Hitler, “‘Why We Are Anti-Semites’ - Text of Adolf Hitler’s 1920 speech at the Hofbräuhaus,” Carolyn Yeager, January 29, 2013, <https://carolynyeager.net/why-we-are-antisemites-text-adolf-hitlers-1920-speech-hofbr%C3%A4uhaus/>.

From the creation of the first federal reserve in Yosemite in 1864 to the first national park in 1872 to the Progressive Era's establishment of conservation-minded departments and bureaucracies, the nation slowly began grasping at a greater consciousness of the environment. Historians for the most part ignored this development, yet not all. In the wings of the early conservation movement was the birth of environmental history. More than anything else, both the early conservation movements and the historiography of environmental history (before the 1970s) tended to emphasize the instrumental value of the natural world. This general ideology would contrast with later environmental thought emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature and its causal agency in history. In other words, society and historians tended towards acting and writing on and about the environment and its relation to how humans could or had used the environment for human uses. Part of this included the idea that the ultimate agency of change rested with man, and therefore, this was an anthropocentric vision of history.

While historians tended to avoid what would now be called the environmental approach to history, there were some who fully, or at least partially, embraced it. One of the most infamous arguments in United States' historiography was proposed in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, also known as the "Frontier Thesis."¹⁶ In this work, arguably the most well-known western American historical work centered on geographic and environmental expansion, Turner explains that the entire history of the United States could be linked to the expansionist fever that beset the nation from its earliest days. According to Turner, it was in the intercourse of "civilization" and "wilderness," and the latter's taming by the former, that the identity of the American spirit was born. Consequently, the idea of "the West" is what gave the United States its drive to expand and justify its national identity. With the "closure" of the American

¹⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History 1893* (1893; repr., Pinnacle Press, 2017).

frontier and the nation's imminent continental urbanization, Turner suggests that Americans would have to reexamine themselves. The book itself takes a traditional approach to history by examining letters, manuscripts, and other documents, but there is also a fair amount of interpretive license on the part of Turner to command such a lofty and sweepingly generalized thesis. Incidentally, the argument has been deconstructed, reconstructed, and critiqued in many forms by subsequent generations of historians for its oversimplistic monocausal nature. Nevertheless, the thesis itself relies primarily on conceptions of wilderness, land, geographic expansion, and the "taming" of the environment. In this particular way, Turner's frontier thesis is the first significant work in the environmental history of the United States.

What the "Frontier Thesis" lacked in specificity it made up for in impact. The opposite can be said of Avery Odell Craven's (1885–1980) *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860*, published in 1925.¹⁷ Environmental history still occupied a minuscule place among historians' research, as the bulk of the more popular human-environment writing at the time was related to the natural sciences. Despite this, *Soil Exhaustion* represented a distinct growth towards the interdisciplinary method of environmental history. Fundamentally, the book chronicles the poor uses of land in Virginia and Maryland and its economic, social, and political impacts on the region. The work covers the colonial through the antebellum periods, and, in furthering its narratives, it relies on statistics, records, and almanac-like information, as well as documents describing the political and economic results of poor land usage. In retrospect, this book's topic was almost prophetic in its timing, as poor soil-use habits would lead to the Dust Bowl of the Great Plains just a few years after its publication in the 1930s.

¹⁷ Avery Odell Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (1925; repr., Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

James C. Malin's (1893–1976) *Grassland of North America*, published in 1947, applies Craven's methodology to the Mid-Western region of the United States.¹⁸ It amplifies Craven's scholarship by providing a geographic history of the region and its effects on agriculture. Like Turner's thesis, Craven and subsequent scholars like Malin intellectually bent their analyses towards how human agency on the environment caused specific phenomena, thereby keeping the causal agency as anthropocentric.

Turner and Craven introduced two important concepts into the historical discourse. Turner, with his "large-scale" and environmental approach, and Craven with his innovative methodology, contributed two features that would come to define future works in environmental history. Walter Prescott Webb (1888–1963) in his work, *The Great Frontier* (1952), added a third: globalization and colonization.¹⁹ Essentially, Webb applied Turner's distinctly American thesis of western expansion and broadened it to the entirety of the Americas. The environment is boundless, and it is appropriate that this style in the scope of a study reflects the diverse methods of analyzing the past. For Webb, the reality of a "great frontier" to the west of Europe, caused the four-hundred-year boom of the West. With the expansion of these continents now complete, Webb suggested the possibility of economic malaise. This economic-colonial approach examines the success of colonialism from the European perspective in North and South America, while also detailing the significant differences between Anglo-Saxon and Continental imperialism. The book covers topics that are now commonplace in subfields such as Indigenous histories, colonial governance, and comparative imperialism. Notwithstanding, the most prominent theme again runs parallel to the existing environmental motif: the expanding control of humanity upon the natural world.

¹⁸ Robert Galen Ball, "James C. Malin and the Grasslands of North America," *Agricultural History* 46, no. 3 (Jul 1972): 414–424.

¹⁹ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1952).

In 1962, the book *Silent Spring*, by marine biologist Rachel Carson (1907–1964), was written in the wake of nuclear testing, massive habitat degradation, and growing pollution.²⁰ While it is not considered an academic work by any means, its influential narrative for the masses proved a bellwether for the direction of environmental historiography. The work affected millions by its calls against the insecticide DDT and its impact upon wildlife in the United States.²¹ Countless lay readers read the book, ingraining in the American populace a newfound, almost ecocentric, view of the environment. As Carson concludes her work, she writes, “The ‘control of nature’ is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.”²² Carson viewed nature not only as a commodity for humanity but as a positive good of itself. For this reason, 1962 is popularly seen as the birth of the modern environmental movement. The book’s publication was a pivotal point in which the existing conservation movement was about to transform. *Silent Spring* helped shift the emphasis from recognizing the industrial view of nature to the intrinsic value of nature in popular culture. What Carson encapsulated to the populace, Crosby would do to the historical academy.

The Natural Arch: Crosby and *Ecological Imperialism*

Ecological Imperialism is as much a case study in a radical methodological approach as it is a historical argument about European-based imperialism itself. Turning to the former, the book is composed primarily in thematic style. Separated into twelve chapters, the book analyzes several specific topics ranging from

²⁰ Crosby, “The Past and Present of Environmental History.”

²¹ DDT: (Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane) A odorless gas used as mosquito repellent.

²² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962; repr., Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., n.d.), https://library.uniteddiversity.coop/More_Books_and_Reports/Silent_Spring-Rachel_Carson-1962.pdf.

geology to epidemiology, and from botany to anthropology. This range of fields alone makes the work idiosyncratic among modern historical work. Crosby does not try to contextualize human activity in the traditional sense of a *singular* event between two distinct human events. Instead, he contextualizes human activity within the scope of environmental constraints. This is why Crosby is so keen on detailing non-historical topics such as the breakup of Pangea, human evolution and migration, wind patterns, and other natural historical factors. Understanding these differing fields makes the work an outlier not only in its diverse analytical method but in its historiography.

Crosby relies on traditional historical primary sources such as letters from explorers and natural history manuals, and secondary sources from previous environmental historians in the mid-nineteenth century. However, Crosby's interdisciplinary method to his broad thesis demands more breadth. Thus, Crosby considers scholarship in other fields. This includes peer-reviewed studies from the natural and earth sciences, statistical data, anthropology and archeology, and geography. This plethora of source material is the fuel of Crosby's approach. He regularly employs a "proxy method" of analysis to his study, applying data about nature and evolutionary biology from one historical instance to another as opposed to the use of direct evidence. In this approach, there is a sense of universalism in his work. Just as the natural environment is complex, interconnected, and fluid in its boundaries, so too is environmental history. This leads to the characteristic "large-scale" approach to the past by which environmental historians are so often marked. The environment knows no arbitrary or methodological boundaries, and Crosby's revolutionary approach reflects this.

The specific argument of *Ecological Imperialism* is founded on two main historical questions. First, why is it that Europe was so successful in achieving world hegemony in comparison to other world powers of the past? Secondly, as a corollary to the first, what were the specific environmental conditions that allowed the Europeans to be so successful? The

former question was answered quite promptly by Crosby in the prologue and first chapter of the book, wherein he explains that something of a perfect combination of geographical and ecological factors allowed European imperialism to rise to unrivaled power. He writes:

North America...South America, Australia, and New Zealand are far from Europe in distance but have climates similar to hers, and European flora and fauna, including human beings, can thrive in these regions if the competition is not too fierce. In general, the competition has been mild...the success of European imperialism has a biological, and ecological, component.²³

This idea then divides the world of imperialism into two main spheres: the European and the Neo-European. By “Neo-Europes,” Crosby names those places in the world that Europeans successfully colonized, where those of European descent outnumber Indigenous peoples, and where consistent large exports of food are sourced.²⁴ These Neo-Europes include places like the United States, Canada, Argentina, Chile, the Azores, Australia, and New Zealand.

These certainly are not the geographic limits of imperialism, but they are the finest examples of colonial success and European migration. These locations share obvious similarities, some of which include a likeness of latitude (thirty to forty degrees north or south of the equator), comparable oceanic winds, a familiar climate, and a biogeographical landscape that paralleled that of western Europe. Therefore, their environmental similarity to Europe proved their cause of success according to Crosby. Interpreting the past in this sense takes agency from human causes and places it in the unmovable innate structures of

²³ Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-6.

the planet. Places colonized or attempted to be colonized by Europeans (Greenland, the Middle East, Central America, Africa), were too environmentally dissimilar from Europe to succeed as Neo-Europes. Therefore, they were exploited solely for resources and often retained large Indigenous or mixed-racial populations compared to areas that were successfully colonized.

The second main historical question of the book is set in aiming to answer *what* specific environmental factors were similar to Europe. This is what the majority of the book sets about discussing. From analyzing the Norse and their early colonization attempts of North America to understanding the evolution of European weeds, diseases, and animals, to a case study of ecological imperialism in New Zealand, Crosby concludes that the particular factors that led to European success were a perfect “portmanteau biota.” Of this, he concludes that the “success of the portmanteau biota and of its dominant member, the European human, was a team effort by organisms that evolved in client and cooperation over a long time.”²⁵ The specific evolutionary history of the Neo-Europes, whether from Indigenous migration, oceanic wind patterns, or any other factor, offered European invaders (both human and biological) a land without serious competition. Consequently, this allowed the animals, plants, and people of Europe to spread without check, thus establishing the “Neo-Europes.” The book radically expands views of the reality of colonial power, the agency of geography in history, and the role of Indigenous peoples in the macrohistorical record.

Ecological Imperialism dialogues with previous United States environmental historiography in both its scope and approach. However, it also incorporates elements entirely unto itself. Like Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” and Webb’s *The Great Frontier*, the work holds a consistent theme of globalization and colonization or expansion. In this way, all three scholars understand the importance of the interconnected reality of environmental history, especially when it is applied to a large

²⁵ Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 293.

geographic scope. Additionally, expansion, or in Webb and Crosby's cases, colonization, feature prominently as the medium by which environmental change occurs outside of Europe. Crosby for the most part spends the bulk of his writing from the Eurocentric perspective of expansion in a similar fashion to Webb and Turner.²⁶

The most striking difference between the works is their methodology. It is here that Crosby has more in common with Craven's *Soil Exhaustion*.²⁷ Crosby builds significantly upon the interdisciplinary approach of statistics, agricultural science, botany, geography, zoology, and anthropology, put forth by the combined scholars. By incorporating this method as a new scale, Crosby improves where the other two shy away from detailing ahistorical topics. For him, humanity and its expansion have irreparably damaged the natural ecosystem of the planet and his tone in the book reflects this ideology. Between his work in *The Columbian Exchange* and *Ecological Imperialism*, what is most significant is a shift in the historical agency. It is here where Crosby's work stands as a sentinel in the historiography of environmental history. Before, even among environmental historians, there seemed to be an anthropocentric vision of the historical agency. *Ecological Imperialism* made ecocentric agency more mainstream, albeit with a distinctive postcolonial flair.

In light of Crosby's illustrious record, it is only natural to consider the potential biases within his work. For *Ecological Imperialism*, questions of Crosby's objectivity exist in his qualifications in completing dispassionate and accurate research of the environment. These are due to his potential bias and lack of certain standardized training. On a personal level, Crosby was something of an environmental radical during the movement's birth in the mid-twentieth century. Frequently, he was known to be staunchly anti-colonial, anti-Vietnam War, and was often found

²⁶ Webb.

²⁷ Craven.

supporting progressive causes.²⁸ There are more than a few “loaded” and biased adjectives which color the books, particularly concerning Western colonialists. Crosby’s research was possibly tainted by his taste for progressive politics, thus favoring post-colonial, pro-environmental narratives with little consideration for alternatives to his arguments or ideology. There is also the question of the author’s credentials in this quasi-scientific work. While a decorated historian and professor at the University of Texas, Austin, Crosby had little to no scientific or social scientific training. The book and its method, of course, rely heavily upon research from both fields and Crosby was self-taught in these disciplines.²⁹ While it is certainly commendable, it is hardly the professional qualification for most scholarships.

For all of its strengths, the book’s unorthodox approach has earned it some obvious criticism. It remains to be seen if some of them are accurate as more environmental historians continue Crosby’s approach. The first of the obvious criticisms deals more with methodology than content. The book eschews the traditional historical method in favor of the multidisciplinary approach. While there is no shortage of historiographical research and serious analysis, some traditionalists may find this unbecoming to the historical debate. Likewise, one can aptly critique such a sweeping metanarrative of which Crosby suggests in the book. While modern historians overspecialize their work to a fault, this book goes to the opposite extreme by beginning with the breakup of Pangea two hundred million years ago and ending with modern times. Quite a swath of time for a three hundred-page book.

Still, others may justly suggest the content of the work is misleading. For one, the book seems to take away human agency from the historical equation and falls into a kind of environmental determinism where humans have little action in determining their destinies. An assumption that continually goes unnamed in the

²⁸ Jeffery L. Meikle, “Biographical Memoirs: Alfred W. Crosby,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 163, no. 1 (March 2019): 88, 92.

²⁹ Meikle, 89.

book is its reliance on environmental stability and universality. This is perhaps most obvious when Crosby mentions the virality of specific pathogens like smallpox and syphilis. It is logical really, and perhaps Crosby can be forgiven, for assuming pathogenic spread and virality is a static normative value. In reality, epidemiology teaches otherwise. Viruses, in their choice of hosts, infections, and lethality, can significantly change throughout generations and human populations. Crosby relies on an unnamed epidemiological assumption in most of his virologic points. By this, he uses general knowledge and statistics about illness and applies those findings retroactively to specific historical cases of disease. This is partially problematic, but it is difficult to see a realistic alternative. Lastly, the book overwhelmingly deals with generalizations and mainly discusses British imperialism and its effects. While it includes brief discussions of Argentina and Chile, which were colonized by Spain, Crosby predominantly examines British Neo-European colonies. Perhaps the book's title should be *British Ecological Imperialism*, or should, at the very least, have included this caveat in its thesis.

The work is far from the traditional textual analysis of written primary sources and secondary literature. The book's very nature is multidisciplinary. Despite this innovative approach, its strongest benefits serve by the same token as its strongest weaknesses. In other words, the lack of a strict method, while useful for understanding the interconnected world, is notoriously difficult to analyze for soundness. Additionally, the "large-scale" approach to the past does not help answer historical questions that are, by their very nature, anthropocentric. For example, environmental history alone cannot explain the ideology of German anti-Semitism and the Holocaust as public policy. Likewise, historians using an environmental methodology cannot fully attempt to understand why the United States Constitution has been the longest enduring written constitution in history. These are specific, choice, and idea-driven histories. These drawbacks certainly should not discourage experimenting with the method,

but scholars should be well advised to consider the type of historical question they mean to answer.

As always, no methodological approach is perfect, and particular historical questions often require particular means. For questions regarding environmental history, historians need to remember that its methodical assumptions are subject to examining the particular biogeographical limits and resources of a region, not necessarily specific intellectual or personal choices. By understanding this biogeographical dynamic though, historians can more clearly contextualize a specific interpretation on the broader groundwork laid out by the environment.

After Ecological Imperialism: “The Crosby Effect” in United States Historiography

Environmental historiography’s turn towards ecological agency and interconnectivity, postcolonialism, and globalization, remains the dominant trend in the field today. This turn is what I term the “Crosby Effect” in the larger environmental historiographical literature. Many scholars in United States literature apply the concept of the Crosby Effect to particular historical developments. By interpreting the past vis-a-vis the lens of postcolonialism and ecocentrism, historians in the United States, perhaps unknowingly, participate in the paradigm shift started by Crosby.

Few books in United States environmental history are as shattering as Mark Fiege’s *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (2012).³⁰ This work reinterprets United States history in a completely new light arguing that no event in the history of the nation can be viewed apart from an innate connection to the natural world. Its use of the term *nature* is at times overly broad. However, it does speak to one of the fundamental issues at the core of modern environmental historiography, and a key tenet of the Crosby Effect: ecocentric

³⁰ Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

interconnectivity.³¹ Fiege recognizes this interconnectivity as it relates to human society writing, “Whatever form nature takes, peoples have arranged their societies, economies, and governments [toward it]...if nature has been intrinsic to social relationships, economics, and government, then it also has been intrinsic to the ideas of people who create those systems.”³²

Rather than offer a grandiose sweeping narrative of United States history, Fiege selects several “case study” events in which the environmental influence of nature is most pronounced. These include the idea of nature in the founding era, the Civil War, the environment, atomic warfare, and environmental ideas.³³ In this way, *The Republic of Nature* spans multiple events and historical fields including labor history, women’s history, intellectual history, and Indigenous history. Perhaps the strongest influences of the Crosby Effect are found through its embrace of postcolonial Indigenous history, and its general emphasis upon the almost transcendent ecocentric agency given to traditional historical events in the United States.³⁴ While the book does utilize the term “nature” in an overly generalized way, this does not discount the fact that it is a prime example of larger post-Crosby narratives incorporating essential themes found in *Ecological Imperialism*.

No mention of modern environmental historiography is complete without mentioning some of William Cronon’s work. Much of Cronon’s writings seem significantly influenced by the thought and practice of history as described by Crosby. In *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1992), Cronon explores the dynamic relationship between the burgeoning city of Chicago and the natural resources of the American West.³⁵ The book does

³¹ “Ecocentric interconnectivity” refers to the inherent interconnectivity within natural ecologies between the organisms and their environment.

³² Fiege, 10.

³³ Ibid., ix–9.

³⁴ Ibid., 23–56.

³⁵ William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992).

not simply subscribe to the idea of studying unit concepts in nature, such as soil, cattle, or water; rather, it synthesizes them into an enviro-centered narrative. Cronon ultimately argues that the system of growth exemplified by early Chicago is the system by which most cities in the United States interact with the natural world. A universal theme in much of Cronon's work, including both *Nature's Metropolis* and his 1996 intellectual-environmental history, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, is the historical conception of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in the past.³⁶ Particularly, Cronon is captivated with the idea of human ecology and understanding the place of nature in the human mind. This builds upon Crosby's generalized narrative of history, which approaches the past through an interconnected, globalized lens. By examining the meaning of place and nature in all of human culture and the natural world, Cronon sees a similar interconnected interpretation.

A standard in United States environmental historiography in recent years is Carolyn Merchant's *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (2007).³⁷ Similar to Fiege's text, this work provides a comprehensive interpretation of United States history through the lens of nature. Many specific themes, such as the making of race, class, and gender, occur as their formation relates towards the natural world. Like Crosby's work, it makes plentiful use of a variety of sources ranging from court documents to climate data. Its most obvious development in the vein of the Crosby Effect occurs in its discussion on globalization and the natural world. European imperialism was the prime catalyst of globalization in the modern age, and *Ecological Imperialism* intricately describes the natural networks of global connectivity. Therefore, any discussion of globalization and environmental

³⁶ William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996).

³⁷ Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

history, such as Merchant's research, owes historiographical gratitude to Crosby.

By its very nature, environmental history is interdisciplinary as it seeks to manufacture an approach to scholarship. One of the finest recent examples of this in American history is Thomas Andrews' *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (2008). Following Crosby's approach of explaining physical processes, the work explains in detail the formation of the key environmental item of the book: coal.³⁸ Andrews also exemplifies how animals played an essential role in the actual labor conditions of the colliers.³⁹ Until recently, the role of animals and how they have shaped human activities has largely been a study confined to anthropology and behavioral science. Crosby also goes to great lengths to analyze the role of animals in his history, which historians did not acknowledge prior to his work. Lastly, a prominent theme that runs through the book is the idea of studying landscapes, which echoes Crosby's entire landscape analysis of Neo-Europes. Demonstrating the Crosby Effect, Andrews writes, "I attempt...to advance our understanding of how working people have experienced and transformed the natural world, as well as how they have been transformed by it."⁴⁰ *Killing for Coal* seeks to grapple with the question at the crux of human-natural interaction: the mutual influences of humans upon nature, and more tellingly, that of nature upon humans.

Several works speak to the influence Crosby has had on racially-specific approaches to environmental history. Both Thomas Dunlap's 1997 article, "Remaking the Land: The Acclimatization Movement and Anglo Ideas of Nature," and Virginia DeJohn Anderson's *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (2004) describe a particularly

³⁸ Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 130–135.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

British imperial slant.⁴¹ The latter was praised by Crosby himself after its publication where he wrote, “I recommend this book to all students of American colonial history and especially to those focusing on the sad tale of the relationship of the original and the new settlers.”⁴² As its title implies, *Creatures of Empire* examines the methods by which animals, particularly livestock from the Old World, transformed the lands that would become the United States.⁴³ This is a theme directly borrowed from Crosby’s evaluation of animals as invaders in the “Neo-Europes.” Dunlap’s article is more intellectual and represents a balance of an intellectual and environmental method. It examines the extent to which British colonists went to familiarize their colonies with native species to, so to speak, “tame” them. Both rely heavily on traditional primary sources and depart from the interdisciplinary approach.

Furthermore, Crosby influenced the rise of postcolonial and environmental scholarship with a certain bend towards Indigenous history. Shepard Krech’s *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999) rejects the common narrative of Native Americans as non-entities in the historical or ecological record before 1492.⁴⁴ This thesis is formulated on the premise of which Crosby’s *Ecological Imperialism* may be slighted: “they [other scholars] victimize Indians when they strip them of all agency in their lives except when their actions fit the image of the Ecological Indian.”⁴⁵ To Krech, historians have situated “the Indian” as an environmental

⁴¹ Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York: Oxford Press, 2004); Thomas R. Dunlap, “Remaking the Land: The Acclimatization Movement and Anglo Ideas of Nature,” *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (June 1997): 303–319.

⁴² Alfred W. Crosby, “Review of the Book ‘Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America by Virginia DeJohn Anderson,’” *American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (October 2005): 1158–1159.

⁴³ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁴ Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

⁴⁵ Krech III, 216.

model of non-intervention into the environment for too long. Instead of this modernized constructed image of the “ecological” Indian, he argues that Native peoples managed the land far more anthropocentrically and directly than historical memory normally allows for. The book aligns with Crosby in its general increase of environmental agency towards Indigenous peoples.

Lastly, *Pre-Columbian Water Management: Ideology, Ritual, and Power* (2006), dually takes the Indigenous perspective while courting with the environmental deterministic perspective.⁴⁶ At the very least, it speaks less of how pre-Columbian Indigenous peoples influenced watercourses, but how particular environments determined their water systems. In other words, it is a narrative of environmental adaptation married to Native culture. Whether from the British or Indigenous perspective, *The Ecological Indian* and *Pre-Columbian Water Management* displays an innate thematic approach to environmental history narrated by race and postcolonial analysis. Moreover, Hannah Holleman’s 2017 article, “De-Naturalizing Ecological Disaster: Colonialism, Racism, and the Global Dust Bowl of the 1930s,” analyzes the man-made ecological disaster through a postcolonial and racial lens.⁴⁷ The work suggests that colonially wrought capitalism was the driving force of the Dust Bowl, leading to a rift between nature and society. Here, the work echoes Crosby’s postcolonial ethos more so than its ecocentric one.

Two areas of scholarship deserve special recognition on their own as they lie on the peripheries of standard historical understanding. Both have received heavy criticism from the historical community and other fields alike, yet their influence and contributions to environmental history cannot be overstated. They are the works of Jared Diamond and the subfield of “Big

⁴⁶ Lisa J. Lucero and Barbara W. Fash, *Pre-Columbian Water Management: Ideology, Ritual, and Power* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006).

⁴⁷ Hannah Holleman, “De-Naturalizing Ecological Disaster: Colonialism, Racism, and the Global Dust Bowl of the 1930s,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 234–260.

History.”⁴⁸ More transdisciplinary than Crosby ever ventured, Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997) provides a materialist paradigm to interpreting the past.⁴⁹ Drawing on anthropology, evolutionary biology, botany, zoology, and history, Diamond’s thesis is not only compelling but enthrallingly provocative. He creates a materialist-environmental interpretive framework of human development along many of the same biogeographical lines as Crosby.⁵⁰ When considering what factors allowed the West to reach its great powers, Diamond argues the basis is technological, principally materialistic. The question then becomes: which factors allowed the West to attain global hegemony? The answer is remarkably similar to *Ecological Imperialism*. Yet, it is more nuanced than Crosby’s, including discussions of positive feedback loops, and a more comprehensive repudiation of European moral and intellectual superiority. Diamond argues favorable geography allowed the West to rise to unrivaled historical power.

Finally, something should be said of the subfield of “Big History.” In many ways, this contemporary field is the successor of the early modern field of natural history. Pioneered by David Christen, the subfield has attracted the astrophysicist and environmental historian alike. While the field is not directly tied to Crosby, it too analyzes the past through extraordinarily large-scale and interdisciplinary approaches. Whereas *Ecological Imperialism* begins with a discussion of Pangea, Big History’s scope extends to the origin of the universe. It constantly pushes the boundaries between the humanities and hard sciences as demonstrated by

⁴⁸ Big History: This subfield is an interdisciplinary field that attempts to incorporate the history of the entire universe, earth, and humanity into a coherent narrative. It builds upon the physical sciences as much as the social sciences and humanities. It is generally considered a form of history.

⁴⁹ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997; repr., New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017).

⁵⁰ Robert P. Clark, “Book Review: *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*,” *Journal of World History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 203–205.

Dagomar Degroot's Historical Climatology project.⁵¹ This fascinating project attempts to uncover the general climate of the planet by examining ship logs from past centuries to better understand climate change. However, in recent years it has expanded to include scholars from multiple fields, dramatically expanding its scope of research. While both Diamond's work and Big History are controversial, to say the least. They owe much of their intellectual prowess to the legacy of Crosby.

Conclusion

Ecological Imperialism's greatest effect was its reimagining of United States environmental historiography. Much like intellectual history, environmental history is something of a history of fundamentals, that is, the study of the premises and foundations upon which other histories are built. Both are relatively slow-changing, offer a tenacity to subconsciously influence human agency, and are built upon interconnected themes. What was the new framework of interpretation that Crosby reimagined? It suggests that we have been doing history wrong in part all along by utilizing only traditional historical approaches. Likewise, Crosby incorporated this approach into his work to prove the arch connects and encapsulates various themes of the environmental approach. Before *Ecological Imperialism*, much of environmental historiography emphasized ideas such as environmental determinism, Eurocentrism, and anthropocentrism. Crosby shifted the underpinning philosophical and methodological historical discourse of the subfield. By synthesizing the continuous tradition before it, the impact of Crosby's work resulted in a more intrinsic approach to examining human-environment relations. No longer would the environmental historian simply examine the impact of man upon nature, but of nature upon man. Coupled with the

⁵¹ "The Papers of Thomas Jefferson and the Record of Past Climate Change," Historical Climatology, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.historicalclimatology.com/>.

State of the Field

postcolonial motif prominent in his work, Crosby bridged the practice and philosophy of his craft between two eras: the industrial and intrinsic conceptions of nature. After its publication, United States environmental historiography transformed. Thanks to *Ecological Imperialism* and its “Crosby Effect,” environmental history enjoys a prominent and growing place among United States historiography.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Virginia DeJohn. *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*. New York: Oxford Press, 2004.
- Andrews, Thomas G. *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Ball, Robert Galen. "James C. Malin and the Grasslands of North America." *Agricultural History* 46, no. 3 (Jul 1972): 414-424.
- Campbell, J.A., and D.N Livingstone. "Neo-Lamarckism and the Development of Geography in the United States and Great Britain." *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* (1983): 278.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., n.d. First published 1962 by Houghton Mifflin. https://library.uniteddiversity.coop/More_Books_and_Reports/Silent_Spring-Rachel_Carson-1962.pdf.
- Clark, Robert P. "Book Review: *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*." *Journal of World History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 203-205.
- Craven, Avery Odell. *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860*. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2006.
- Cronon, William. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992.
- _____. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *America, Russia, Hemp, and Napoleon: American Trade with Russia 1783-1812*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1965.
- _____. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- _____. *The Columbian Exchange: The Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport and London: Praeger

- Publishing, 2003. First published 1972 by Greenwood Publishing Co.
- _____. "The Past and Present of Environmental History." *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (October 1995): 1180-88.
- _____. "Review the Book 'Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America' by Virginia DeJohn Anderson." *American Historical Review*, 110, no. 4 (October 2005): 1158-1159.
- Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017. First published in 1997.
- Dunlap, Thomas R. "Remaking the Land: The Acclimatization Movement and Anglo Ideas of Nature." *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (June 1997): 303-319.
- Fiege, Mark. *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012.
- Hitler, Adolf. "'Why We Are Anti-Semites' - Text of Adolf Hitler's 1920 speech at the Hofbräuhaus." Carolyn Yeager, January 29, 2013. <https://carolynyeager.net/why-we-are-antisemites-text-adolf-hitlers-1920-speech-hofbr%C3%A4uhaus/>.
- Holleman, Hannah. "De-Naturalizing Ecological Disaster: Colonialism, Racism, and the Global Dust Bowl of the 1930s." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 234-260.
- Krech III, Shepard *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.
- Lucero, Lisa J. and Barbara W. Fash. *Precolumbian Water Management: Ideology, Ritual, and Power*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006.
- Mayr, Ernst, "Lamarck Revisited." *Journal of the History of Biology* 5 (1972): 79-80.

- Meikle, Jeffery L. "Biographical Memoirs: Alfred W. Crosby." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 163, no. 1 (March 2019).
- Merchant, Carolyn. *American Environmental History: An Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- "The Papers of Thomas Jefferson and the Record of Past Climate Change." *Historical Climatology*. Accessed May 5, 2021. <https://www.historicalclimatology.com/>.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Pinnacle Press, 2017. First published 1893 by *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*: 197-227.
- Webb, Walter Prescott. *The Great Frontier*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1952.

Author Bio

Joseph Esparza is a Master of Arts in History student at California State University, San Marcos. He is studying intellectual history in the early United States and writing his thesis on John Adams's ideas of education in the classical liberal arts tradition. He also has an interest in American environmental history. He received a bachelor of arts *summa cum laude* in history from CSU San Marcos, where some of his undergraduate work explored the relationship between the natural law and internationalism in the Catholic Church, and the influence of the natural law theory in Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. He works as a public speaking instructor for Rose Debate Institute, where he enjoys giving students the confidence to express their voice. He previously worked as a park interpreter for California State Parks. You can often find him in the Sierra Nevada and local mountains hiking, backpacking, or mountaineering