discipline and indiscipline

THINKING ABOUT where environmental history might or should be heading is a formidable assignment. But perhaps it is not quite formidable enough. That is, the editorial request which produced these brief essays was formulated in a way that tacitly assumes ("direction," "heading") that environmental history has developed and will continue to be developed as a unified cohesive subdiscipline. This may have been the case in its earliest days (although all origin stories merit careful scrutiny). It is certainly not the case any more. Both the topics of papers presented at the annual ASEH meetings, where disciplinary boundaries are policed by the program committee, and those of the books submitted for the annual Marsh Prize, where authors (or their publishers) classify themselves, suggest that environmental history is currently perceived as embracing not only a wide range of topics, but also, somewhat paradoxically, a wide range of disciplines. An unevenly spreading blob might better represent this situation than a targeted monodirectional arrow.

This image may be inelegant, but it is not meant to be unappreciative—or even unflattering. On the contrary, one of the most attractive features of environmental history is its potential for synthesis and inclusion. I know that there exists some regret for a past golden age of the field when its focus was sharper and its boundaries better defined—when scholarship tended to converge on topics like the frontier and regions like the American West. But such regret is misplaced. New topics have not displaced the old—there is still plenty of work to do, and plenty of good work being done in those areas. And if some of the varied current range of environmental history is adventitious or superficial—the result of a natural inclination among academics to hitch their scholarly wagons to a field that seems energetic and expanding—much of it represents a real enhancement of the field.

Particularly encouraging is the tendency toward geographical inclusiveness, or at least diversity. Of course the United States is a big important place, in terms of environmental history as well as in many other ways, but it is not the only place. It is connected to other places by land and by sea, as well as by economics, politics, and culture. Within this country, there are strong institutional reasons, based in the development of the field and also in the training and hiring of academic historians, for the preponderance of Americanists in history departments, and of American topics in environmental history. And "American" has generally been subject to strict construction; for example, in most practical situations, "North American" is not seen either as synonymous with it or as subsuming it. The 49th Parallel sometimes seems more permeable to the feet (or
paws or hooves) of earthbound wanderers, than to the unfettered imaginations of historians. This is not to say that American environmental (and other) historians who have chosen to focus on their own society have been idiosyncratically parochial; the historical institutions of many other nations reflect parallel inclinations and commitments. It is probably a natural human trait to be more interested in the local (however large) than in the remote (however near). The benefits of such concentration are manifold and manifest. But like every choice, it also has costs.

Fortunately, the countervailing pull has become especially strong for environmental historians, in whose research the human and the non-human are so profoundly intermingled. Regulation and exploitation are largely matters of culture and politics, of course, but many topics in environmental history flow more readily over national borders, as is well illustrated by much excellent work exploring the connections between environment and empires, new world and otherwise. Willingness to look beyond borders has also led historians to focus on features—like plants, animals, topography, and climate—that are less immediately defined by them. So I hope that the emerging tendency to see environmental history in a regional and even global terms will continue—and I am grateful for the recent compendious contexts provided by such scholars as John Richards (The Unending Frontier—California, 2003) and Steven Mithen (After the Ice—Harvard, 2004).

Political and cultural boundaries can constrain our choice of approach as well as our choice of topics—constraints that are at least equally powerful, although less obvious. For example, heavily freighted terms like “frontier” and “nature” have very different valences even in other anglophone historical traditions; it can be bracing to learn how they look to other people. Recent ASEH conferences have been increasingly global from a prosopographical perspective, as well as from a thematic one. Such trends signal continuing openness to developments in different places (and also, to make a point for which there is really no room here, in such allied disciplines as the history of science). They provide a salutary counterbalance to the vigorous institutionalization that is also an indication of the health of environmental history.