



Full citation: Funes Monzote, Reinaldo. "The Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History." *Global Environment* 1 (2008): 244–49.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/4258>.

First published: <http://www.globalenvironment.it>.

Rights: All rights reserved. Made available on the Environment & Society Portal for nonprofit educational purposes only, courtesy of Gabriella Corona, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche / National Research Council of Italy (CNR), and XL edizioni s.a.s.

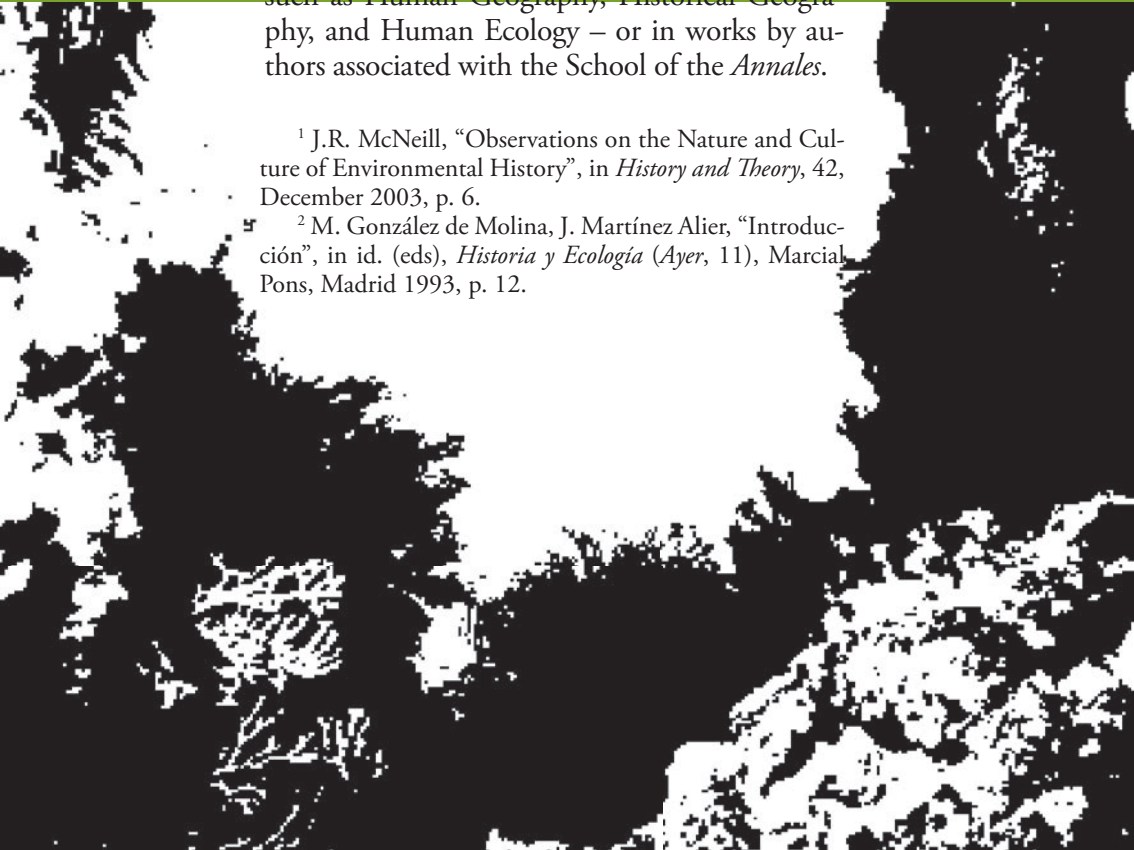
The Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History

Reinaldo Funes Monzote

Environmental history deals with, to put it briefly, “the mutual interactions of humankind with the rest of Nature”.¹ This means “to interpret history as a co-evolutionary process of humans and their environment, starting from the unbreakable links between social and ecological systems”.² This approach has important precedents in 20th century academic milieus – in fields such as Human Geography, Historical Geography, and Human Ecology – or in works by authors associated with the School of the *Annales*.

¹ J.R. McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History”, in *History and Theory*, 42, December 2003, p. 6.

² M. González de Molina, J. Martínez Alier, “Introducción”, in id. (eds), *Historia y Ecología (Ayer, 11)*, Marcial Pons, Madrid 1993, p. 12.



At first, the environmental history movement focused on issues peculiar to the United States and Europe; but more recently academicians from these regions have begun to pay attention to other areas of the World. At the same time, an ever growing number of researchers from Asia, South Pacific, Africa and Latin America has been joining the environmental history community. Environmental history may not have yet gained as much recognition as the main historiographic trends of the last decades. Still, the field already displays important advancements in its degree of institutionalization, as well as an increasing influence in debates and proposals dealing with environmental problems.³

There is a discussion in progress between those who consider this way of looking at the past as a new trend in historical studies, and those who see it as a more general approach to the interpretation of past and present realities.⁴ More important than any divergence in this regard is the fact that more and more professionals are incorporating this approach into their works.

One of the characteristics of environmental history is that it does not disdain to deal with current environmental problems, even through the search for practical applications – as in the case of Agroecology, or of Political Ecology. As pointed out by Guillermo Castro (2005), history can contribute to the formation of an environmental culture capable of facing the crisis affecting the relations of our species with the natural world.

The Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History (SOLCHA, in Spanish) has become part of this movement aimed at creating a more inclusive and less anthropogenic history and facilitating the encounter between the Natural and the Social Sciences in order to construct a sustainable future for human species and their companions in our Planet. The process of the creation of the Society began in Havana in October 2004, during the Second Latin American and Caribbean Symposium of Environmental History, and was achieved at the Third Symposium, held in Carmona, Spain, in April 2006. However,

³ The American Society for Environmental History was created in 1976, the European Society for Environmental History in 1999.

⁴ An example of this is the “History of histories”, used by James O’Connor in “¿Qué es la Historia Ambiental? ¿Por qué la Historia Ambiental?”, in *Causas naturales. Ensayos de marxismo ecológico*, Siglo XXI Editores, México D.F., 2001

the origin of the Society can be traced further back, to the Latin American Environmental History Symposium held in July 2003 in Santiago de Chile, organized by the Ecological History area of the Universidad de Chile within the 51st International Congress of Americanists. The Symposium was attended by about 40 environmental historians from several Latin America countries, the United States, Canada, and Spain. It was the first time that a relatively numerous group of history scholars, interested in the approaches, methodologies, and issues of environmental history of Latin America and the Caribbean, convened. The seriousness and depth of the debates, as well as the innovative character of the issues under discussion and the community of academic interests, facilitated the exchange among the participants. The event was held as a plenary meeting over four days, and left the participants convinced of the necessity of giving continuity to the effort. For this purpose, a new meeting was convened in Havana, Cuba, from 25 to 27 October 2004, in association with the International Colloquium “Jose Marti: For a Culture of the Nature”. This meeting, the “Second Symposium”, was organized by the Geohistorical Research Program of the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation of Nature and Man. It was supported by an external Organizing Committee including some of the participants in the First Symposium in Chile. This committee had an important role in ensuring the diffusion and success of the call for papers and participation. In the space of a year, more than 150 colleagues from different countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, or interested in the study of this region in the United States, Canada and Europe, expressed their interest in the initiative. 90 of them attended the meeting: 32 from México; 12 from the United States; 11 from Colombia; 15 from Cuba; 6 from Spain; 5 from Panama; 4 from Brazil; 3 from Argentina; 2 from Costa Rica; 2 from Canada; 1 from Chile; 1 from Peru; 1 from Nicaragua; and 1 from Italy.

The gathering of such a huge group of researchers, mostly on resources obtained by each one through his/her own efforts, was a testimony of a widespread interest in forging tighter links between colleagues working on the environmental history of Latin America and the Caribbean. Without this kind of support, attendance would have been very limited, due to the scarcity of the resources available for the organization of the event. Valuable support was provided by the Regional Office of the United Nations Environmental Program, the Political Ecology Working Group

of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences, the 3rd Seminar on Political Ecology convened by the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation under the auspices of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Swiss Agency for Development and the Regional Coordination of Economic and Social Research. These institutions paid for plane tickets and hotel accommodation, allowing several colleagues to attend the Symposium.

Seventy-seven papers were delivered at the meeting. A tight schedule made it necessary to work in parallel sessions over three days, combined with four plenary sessions. The papers were presented in the following thematic workshops: New Histories of Forests in Latin America and the Caribbean; Urban Environmental Policies. A Historical Perspective; Water, Agriculture and Environment in Latin America and the Caribbean; Applications of Environmental History to the Conservation and Management of Bio-Socio-Diversity; Environmental Confliction in Contemporary Societies: Logics, Discourses and the Typology of Social-Environmental Protest in Latin America; Environmental History of Health and Medicine; The Agro-Ecosystems of Plantations for the Export. Ecological and Socio-Economical Implications; The History of Climate and Social Disasters Due to Natural Causes in Latin America and the Caribbean; Environmental Costs of Mining, Industrial Growth, and Power Development; Agricultural Development and/or Exploitation in Latin America and the Caribbean. A Historical Perspective; Environmental and Cultural Histories of Meat and Husbandry; Environmental History as a Tool for Political Ecology; Environmental History of Latin America and the Caribbean: Theoretical and Methodological Problems; Philosophies of Nature and Conservation in Latin America.

During the closing session of the 2nd. Symposium, a Committee was created for the foundation and organization of the Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History (SOLCHA). The meeting also approved the proposal presented by colleagues of the Pablo de Olavide University of Sevilla to organize a 3rd Symposium in the city of Carmona.

This third meeting was held on 6, 7, and 8 April 2006 in association with the Third Spanish Meeting of Environmental History, and its central theme was Environmental History: A Tool for Sustainability. The meeting gathered about a hundred scholars from Latin America and the Caribbean, Spain, the United States, Canada, and Europe: 25 from

Spain; 16 from Mexico; 9 from Brazil; 3 from Chile; 3 from Colombia; 2 from Costa Rica; 2 from Uruguay; 1 from Argentina, 1 from Ecuador, 1 from Trinidad and Tobago, 1 from Puerto Rico, 1 from Cuba, 1 from Peru; 6 from the United States; 2 from Canada; 1 from Austria; and 1 from Italy. It was the first time that countries like Trinidad and Tobago, Ecuador, and Puerto Rico were represented at an Environmental History symposium on Latin America and the Caribbean.

The 3rd Symposium was a success, both for the diversity and quality of papers, and for the atmosphere of academic exchange and fraternity among the working groups. Workshops were organized on the following issues: Socio-Environmental Conflicts and Sustainability; Agricultural Activities and Sustainability; Perceptions of Nature in History; Forests Management and Sustainability; Socio-Environmental Impacts of Urbanization; Theoretical and Methodological Aspects of Environmental History; Social Metabolism and Sustainability; Environmental Policies and Sustainability; Fishing and Sustainability. The 3rd Symposium achieved the goal of drawing together the environmental historians of Latin America and those who work on environmental history in Spain, a former colonial power in that region.

As decided at the Havana Symposium, the participants in the 3rd Symposium held a General Assembly to debate the Society's rules drafted by the Organizing Committee, in order to formally create SOLCHA and elect its first Board. The team selected to direct the work of organizing the new Society included Guillermo Castro (President), from Panama; Micheline Cariño, from Mexico; Claudia Leal, from Colombia; Regina Horta Duarte, from Brazil, and Reinaldo Funes, from Cuba. The main goals of SOLCHA are: to promote research, exchange of opinions, teaching, and diffusion of scientific knowledge in the field of the environmental history of Latin America and the Caribbean, from an interdisciplinary perspective; to foster cooperation and contacts between those interested in this historical approach and analogous organizations in other geographical areas; to contribute to the creation of a new way, at once diverse and specialized, of approaching the links between the environmental problems of the past and the present, capable of helping us to identify actions favorable to the construction of more sustainable societies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Although the celebration of these symposia played the most rel-

evant role in the formation of a community of environmental historians and scholars in Latin America and the Caribbean, advancements have been achieved in other areas of activity. Among these, one could mention the creation of national networks, which was particularly successful in Colombia; the organization of courses on Latin American and Caribbean environmental history in countries like Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Cuba; the incorporation of environmental history as a tool for environmental planning in Cuba and Panama; the organization of thematic events or regional meetings; the ever increasing links with activists and professionals in other closely related areas, such as political ecology and historical geography; and the development of closer relations with colleagues in Europe and North America.

This initial stage in the development of SOLCHA will be evaluated in the general assembly to be held at the 4th. Symposium, which is scheduled to take place at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil, in November 28-30, 2008. This initial period is a test stage that will allow the introduction of reforms in the Society's rules. For this purpose, as well as for the abovementioned goals, SOLCHA is in contact with some 300 scholars and researchers interested in the environmental history of the region, as well as with its counterparts in North America – ASEH – and Europe – ESEH.

The organization process has an open and participative character. The cooperation of colleagues with a longer experience on the road to the creation of a Latin American and Caribbean environmental history is as important for SOLCHA as the support of those who have joined more recently, or would like to do so in the near future, adding to the ever increasing number of those interested in understanding the interactions between our species and its natural environment over time, and the consequences that these interactions have had for both parts involved. This can only be achieved through a collective creation based on a sincere interdisciplinary approach transcending the traditional separations between the fields of Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and the Humanities. We want to form a plural community, from the theoretical and methodological point of view, capable of providing a meeting point for the enrichment and diffusion of our knowledge, as well as promoting the incorporation of what is to be learned from our past relationship with nature into the planning of this relationship in our present and future.