Environment and Labor: Introduction

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The articles in this special *ILWCH* issue on environmental and labor history all in some way approach the question of how to write labor history as environmental history or, depending on your disciplinary inclination, how to write environmental history as labor history. Collectively, they serve as a response to calls made especially by environmental historians to build approaches to the history of nonhuman nature that integrate "human" history.[1] Richard White made an important attempt to do this in his influential essay describing how people know nature through work. For White, labor became the place where environmental and human history came together. Following White's article, a series of labor histories, which are also fine environmental histories, have examined the role of nature and ecology in the labor process and workers' confrontations with managers' efforts to rationalize production, often through the use of science. These works particularly look at agro-industries like sugar, banana, and citrus plantations.[2] Other historians have sought to address the problem of how to integrate environmental and labor history, again following White's lead, by focusing on the energy flows that produce both natural and social value, as in White's study of the engineering of the Columbia River and Thomas Andrews's recent study of "workscapes" in the Colorado coal mines.[3] Still others, such as Gunther Peck, have traced the alienation of both labor and nature during the process of capitalist expansion, particularly in frontier regions, whether in the nineteenth-century western US or the "Third World," where, as geographer David Harvey notes, the process of primitive accumulation based on the enclosure of commons repeats itself again and again. Peck argued forcefully for an analysis of the role played by the commons and nature in workers' movements, particularly in frontier regions. Most recently, a number of works have attempted to break down the barriers that have separated environmental and labor history by tracing key moments in which environmental conditions played a role in producing militant labor movements, including, at times, forms of working-class environmentalism. Myrna Santiago has argued that the social and environmental organization of oil extraction in the tropical rainforests of northern Veracruz spawned a politicized culture and a radical left militancy in "oil country" of revolutionary Mexico.[4] And, in *Inescapable Ecologies,* Linda Nash describes how Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries charted out disease, race, place, dirt, germs, and cancer clusters. She roots the revival of postwar environmental

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protests in the form of place-based accounts of illness in the bodies of migrant workers in California and urbanites concerned about smog.[5]

The articles and essays in this special issue build on this literature, reflecting a number of different approaches to combining labor and environmental history. First, common historiographical wisdom has tended to view both conservationist and environmentalist movements as antagonistic to labor, their preservationist impulse dictating a distrust of labor as destructive of a putatively pristine natural world. Similarly, historians have tended to view organized labor and workers more generally as hostile to conservationist and environmentalist movements that are led by and speak to the urban middle class. The articles in this issue by Joanna Dyl and Jacquelyn Southern provide important ways we might rethink this narrative of workers' alienation from the environment and environmentalism. Dyl, for example, examines the transient working class composed of hoboes, men who worked seasonally or for short periods in agriculture, mining, and logging, as well as in urban industry in the US West, and whose travels, often on the railroad, gave them an important contact with nature. She demonstrates that hoboes derived pleasures from their contact with nature akin to the experiences described by early conservationists like Teddy Roosevelt or Gifford Pinchot. For many historians the idea that urban residents could find a rejuvenating experience in the wilderness was a strictly middle- or upper-class phenomenon. Dyl's article shows that transient white male working-class hoboes described a similar relationship to nature, even as work in nature, especially in mining and logging camps, took its toll on their bodies. In Dyl's study, workers know nature not only through their labor, but through the pleasure they take in travel in wilderness. Southern's article, "Changing Nature," takes a different approach to bridging the divisions between environmentalist and labor movements, environmental and labor history. She demonstrates—again contrary to received historiographical wisdom that has described distinct working-class and middle-class forms of environmentalism–that the labor movement participated in a progressive conservationist embrace of nuclear power, "the peaceful atom." Southern also shows convincingly that unions like the United Auto Workers shifted in the 1950s from a conservationist support for publicly owned nuclear power plants to an antinuclear stance in their opposition to the construction of the experimental Fermi fast-breeder nuclear reactor dangerously close to both Detroit and Toledo. In so doing, Southern places the labor movement at the leading edge of a burgeoning antinuclear movement. Organized labor took its case, *Power Reactor,* all the way to the Supreme Court, where the coalition of unions lost. Southern shows how thoroughly the environmental ethic of the union leaders, many of whom later joined environmentalist movements, has been overlooked.

In a similar vein, the report from the field on coal miners in Colombia by Steve Striffler and Aviva Chomsky reflects a new dynamic in Latin American labor movements. Striffler and Chomsky describe the important links between coal miners' unions, rural indigenous communities, and the environmentalist movement in Colombia. They argue that Latin America has constituted a

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crucial site where workers have historically made the connections between the exploitation of nature, the exploitation of their labor, and imperialism. In this case, leaders of coal miners' unions in Colombia critique the impact of mining on regional ecosystems and local indigenous communities, and link it to consumption of Colombian coal in the United States, and North American energy consumption more generally. They make these connections both in order to articulate demands for environmental protections to prevent the degradation of rural ecosystems and to protest against the dispossession of indigenous communities. Like Southern, Striffler and Chomsky describe how workers' unions have led, rather than followed or opposed, environmentalist critiques of capitalist development in the energy sector. It is perhaps not a coincidence that, as different as they may appear, auto workers in Detroit during the 1950s and coal miners in Colombia during the 2010s work in industries devoted to extracting energy from nature, coal and the atom, to fuel growth in first-world capitalist economies, industries that destroy not only workers' bodies, but the environment of workers' communities.

James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* offers another approach that a number of the articles in this issue find useful either as a heuristic analytical tool or as a point of departure in need of further refining. Scott's arguments about simplification and rationalization echo earlier analyses going back to writers like Harry Braverman about deskilling and the rationalization of the labor process. As recent environmental histories have shown, rationalizing nature through scientific intervention became a tool of deskilling, extracting local knowledge about ecological processes and replacing it with the expertise of scientists, as in Steve Marquardt's fine study of banana plantation labor in Central America. The articles here both reflect the influence of Scott's work and offer differing standpoints from which to analyze rationalization, whether of the labor process or of nature. Alan Mikhail draws on Scott to examine labor, modern state formation, and the environment in Egypt. He describes how eighteenth-century modernizers replaced local systems of labor management employed in public works and irrigation systems, and the local knowledge involved in these projects, with centralized state planning and massive systems of forced labor. He effectively ties what might be seen as a process of deskilling, the replacement of local labor systems with their complex categories of types of workers, and methods of building irrigation systems, to the building of a centralized nation-state bent on modernization. He connects the human disasters of workers, extracted from their communities and employed as simple labor—thousands of whom were killed in gigantic irrigation and public works projects—to the ecological disasters these projects produced.

Thomas Rogers offers a slightly divergent take on rationalization of the labor process in the sugar plantations of northeast Brazil during the early 1960s. In 1963, labor unions, state authorities, and planters created a task table which, in *Seeing Like a State* fashion, simplified the ecological realities of the plantation landscape and the diverse labor arrangements related to this landscape. In Rogers' retelling, the task table, which ultimately served as an

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instrument of intervention by the military regime in labor relations after 1964, was not an imposition from a rationalizing state, but rather a conquest of workers who sought to employ the task system to control the labor demands made by planters. The task table did reflect unusual detail in its categorization of jobs even when employed by military authorities hostile to radical labor organization. As Rogers demonstrates, even under dictatorship, during the 1970s, (male) workers could employ the task table to combat planters' use of informal and clandestine female contract labor, which undermined regular wage labor.

Jenny Smith offers a different kind of corrective to the perhaps overdeterministic arguments in *Seeing Like a State* by examining the history of two overlooked sectors of Soviet agriculture, the cotton and pig farming industries during the 1945–1970 period. While historians have focused on mechanization of agriculture (an aspect of Scott's state simplifications and rationalizations of people and landscapes) as a key component of agricultural industrialization, Smith reveals that Soviet authorities in certain regions and sectors of the economy resorted to labor-intensive methods of production that proved more efficient and productive. In hog farming in Ukraine and Siberia, this meant relying on, rather than replacing, local systems of skilled female labor. Uzbekistan's cotton plantations also relied on labor-intensive methods of collective farm labor, employing almost entirely women and children in seasonal labor. In part, this was due to the demographic realities defined by high birth rates and over-populated villages in Uzbekistan, which could provide cheap, seasonal labor, and in part due to efforts of Soviet planners to stem the tide of rural-urban migration and maintain rural populations in remote regions of the empire. In both cases, however, the lack of mechanization did not imply greater ecological sustainability. Rather, massive irrigation systems developed to cultivate cotton plantations led to the complete draining of the Aral Sea and widespread pesticide use that posed a problem as early as the 1970s. In pig farming regions, the reliance on labor-intensive practices encountered ecological limits in the eventual competition between people and pigs for food. Nonetheless, Smith describes a flexible system of Soviet agriculture in which local ecological and demographic conditions shaped the nature of agro-industrial labor and production.

A number of articles in this issue offer another approach to combining labor and environmental history by focusing on the enclosure of the commons in workers' movements. Steve Stoll's article on "captured gardens" traces the role of garden plots in mining communities in the United States. Stoll shows how the enclosure of the Appalachian commons was facilitated by the ecological disruptions caused by logging and deforestation, driving mountain residents into an increasingly destructive relationship with the forests and into dependence on wage-labor in the coal mines. Once in the mines, subsistence garden plots, now "captured" by the companies, ensured workers' survival. Family members' work in the gardens subsidized the low wages paid by companies and thus contributed to the creation of surplus value as well as subsistence. Formerly part of a diverse ecological landscape and the basis of independence, garden plots and livestock

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now became essential to miners' subsistence, underwriting low wages and the reproduction of the labor force. With the Great Depression and the New Deal, however, workers' garden plots emerged as part of an important, if largely unknown and ultimately unsuccessful, New Deal program to settle unemployed miners and workers in industrial villages where they would have access to land to produce subsistence crops–an echo, Stoll demonstrates, of the nineteenth-century agrarian utopianism identified with Robert Owen. In a sense, the New Deal homestead program sought to restore workers' access to a commons in nature, but within the context of capitalist industrialization and modernity. It reflected both an effort to rebuild a certain degree of working-class agrarian autonomy, but also the interests of industrialists like Henry Ford who had workers subsidize the costs of production by producing their own food. These efforts earned the contempt of both socialists on the left and business advocates on the right who saw a return to the land as a threat to American capitalism. While for workers the garden plot may have represented autonomy and the survival of preindustrial forms of labor and relationships to nature, it was ultimately, whether in coal camps or industrial villages where it served as relief for the unemployed during the New Deal, a key, if invisible, element in the reproduction of the labor force.

While Stoll's focus is on a local commons located in the garden plots of Appalachia's mountain hollows and then transferred to coal camps and homestead industrial villages, Gunther Peck places his emphasis on how to think about the commons in a global or transnational framework. For Peck, histories of migrant workers and their relationship to the commons break down the national boundaries and historiographies of nation states that often confine even transnational histories. He argues that an environmental history focus on migrant labor and immigration history helps shift the scale of historical analysis from the national to the transnational. For Peck, migrant workers' relationship to a commons found in nature facilitates the writing of truly transnational histories of migrant labor. Migrant workers' movements, Peck argues, reveal a host of nonhuman landscapes that might be called commons, beyond the original commons located in "first nature," as William Cronon referred to it in *Nature's Metropolis*, the places migrant workers move through, from public parks and railroad lines to deserted fields and lots. In addition, migrant workers "use, find, and create" global or transnational commons that are indispensable to their movements across national borders. Migrant workers and the environment, whether nonhuman nature or built landscapes, are on the move and often transnational. For Peck, blackberry bushes reflect a nature produced by ecological disruption and movement; they are often found in "edge habitats" produced by migrating human and animal species. They reflect, too, a commons in nature that may be indispensable to migrant laborers as they move through the mosaic of landscapes, foraging for subsistence, and making their way across national boundaries. Connecting the commons found in blackberry bushes to migrant labor, Peck contends, offers a way of thinking about labor and the environment from a truly transnational perspective.

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Peck's article, like Dyl's, highlights one of the advantages of an environmental history approach to labor studies. Focusing on the environment allows both Peck and Dyl to find workers who occupy often invisible or difficult to pinpoint places in the interstices of labor's geography. An environmental history approach facilitates a spatial analysis of class formation and labor that can accommodate workers on the move, workers who travel, migrate, and occupy multiple—at times liminal—places in nature, cities, industries, and agriculture, often crossing regional and national borders.

NOTES

1. See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" and Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon, (New York, 1996); Gunther Peck, "The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History," *Environmental History* 11 (2006): 212–38.

2. Steve Marquardt, "'Green Havoc': Panama Disease, Environmental Change, and Labor Process in the Central American Banana Industry," *The American Historical Review*, 106 (2001): 49–80; Douglas Sackman, "'Nature's Workshop': The Work Environment and Workers' Bodies in California's Citrus Industry, 1900–1949," *Environmental History* 5 (2000): 27–53; John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin, TX, 2006); Thomas Rogers, *The Deepest Wounds: A Labor and Environmental History of Sugar in Northeast Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

3. Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Colombia River* (New York, 1995); Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

4. Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1938* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

5. Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA, 2007).

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