

Filling the Blue Hole in Environmental History

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There is a blue hole in environmental history. It remains a remarkably landlocked discipline, one that largely ignores the 7/10s of our globe's surface covered by water and an ecosystem estimated to constitute 98 percent of our biosphere. Oceanography is the last born of the natural sciences, but the persistent reluctance to tackle the oceans is due less to a lack of information than to western civilization's unique cultural relationship to the sea itself. Other societies have felt much more at home with the sea. We, however, have consistently defined it as "other," as alien and exotic. The cartographic tradition of coloring it blue suggests a vacuity and purity that we do not attribute to land.

In both the pagan and Christian traditions, the sea is a mysterious presence, the "Great Unknown," as Henry Gosse put it. For the Greeks, land stood for order, water for chaos. Europe perpetuated the ancients' notion of an earth island surrounded by a deadly river called *Oceanus*. It would not be until the fifteenth century that the river came to be understood as a series of navigable seas, but the oceans were initially discovered as something to cross rather than to be explored for their own sake. Until the later nineteenth century, understandings of oceans were one dimensional. They were perceived as surfaces, without the depths or inner life.

The sea was thought to be timeless, a notion that survives in the oft repeated trope of the "Eternal Sea." Naval or maritime history might take place on its surface, but the sea itself is timeless. Even as land was coming to be seen as a factor shaping human destiny,

oceans were never historical agents in their own right. History has been traditionally understood to begin and end on land. It starts when explorers or conquerers come ashore and ends when water is reached. Jonathan Raban has observed that “people who live on continents get in the habit of regarding the ocean as journey’s end...”

Oceans have been as off limits to geographers as to historians. Until recently, seas were seen as placeless places, without topography. In western cultures, the sea was perceived as pure nature, something best left to the natural sciences. It was seen as the ultimate trackless wilderness, lying outside society and resistant to civilization. Lands could be cultivated, but seas resisted human agency. Aquaculture, though ancient in practice, has never attained parity with agriculture in the sciences. Modern fishing is more often described in terms of mining than harvesting, widening still further the imagined gap between land and sea. In the western understanding of history, agrarians were designated cultured peoples, while mariners, like hunter/gatherers, were seen as uncivilized, even barbaric. Given our tendency to set land against sea, it should come as no surprise that water has scarcely begun to be incorporated into either western history or geography. Recently, ecologists have been able to make a place for man in nature, but only on land. They too have failed overcome the alienation captured in the expression “at sea.” Our Biblical myth of origins identifies mankind exclusively with earth, ignoring all evidence of our aquatic ancestry.

Filling the blue hole in environmental history is not just a matter of further research, but of a rethinking concepts of land and water, as well as the relationship between them. Exposure to alternative Pacific and Asiatic notions of the sea is just beginning to challenge the claims to universality of western understandings of the marine world. For Pacific

islanders, the ocean is not a placeless place, but a sea of islands with its own unique geography. For them, history does not begin and end with land, but is inextricably bound up with the sea itself.

The current critique of the notion of wilderness must now be extended to the sea. Recent work on the history of fish populations has demolished the idea of pristine oceans by showing what enormous effects man has had on the oceans. For at least fifty thousand years, ever since Homo Sapiens left the African shore, our history and that of the oceans have been interdependent. It is time to abandon our terrestrial myths of origins and acknowledge the ways that human culture began at the shore, not in the interior. Now that we have gotten beyond the equation of water with nature, land with culture, it should be possible to appreciate the ubiquity of seaboard civilizations.

Taking into account the experience of nonwestern cultures, including Native Americans, it now becomes apparent that land and sea are not polar opposites, but parts of an ecological continuum. Now that the depths as well as surfaces of oceans are better known, we can appreciate their terrains and understand how sea tenures share properties with landed territories. The positive reevaluation of wetland environments underlines the hybridity of land and sea, and of the coastal populations who have occupied the ecotones where earth and water meet. The excessive focus of maritime history (often called blue water history) on the deep sea has blinded us to the degree to which coasts, the most ecotonal of all environments, have played in both natural and human history.

Reformulating and revitalizing landlocked environmental history means going offshore, but also following the waters inland. More attention must be given to watersheds and estuaries,

to brown as well as blue water. We must move beyond continental boundaries to follow the migratory species, including humans, who for millenia have moved across as well as along the tide lines. This will be a history without borders, using the more useful concept of borderlands to produce a history with depth as well as breadth, where earth, wind, and water are in constant interaction and mankind plays a significant role. The histories that will result will be more liquid but also more solid. Now that we have muddied the waters by bringing earth and water, man and nature, together, the new history of oceans will be a very different hue, but one that more accurately represents its hybrid realities.

Nov. 2011