

Why Environmental History?

Department of Environmental Studies
Masaryk University
ENS288: Environmental History

(Based on a presentation originally given by Dr. Christof
Mauch of the Rachel Carson Center)

- What is environmental history? What makes it special?
- What times and spaces are studied?
- Can nature be an actor? How?
- Why is environmental history important?

What is environmental history?
What makes it special?

Political history

- Great men and great events



Social history

- The history of “ordinary” people, generally as a whole, not individuals



Cultural history

Understanding of belief systems and values, popular culture, and everyday life

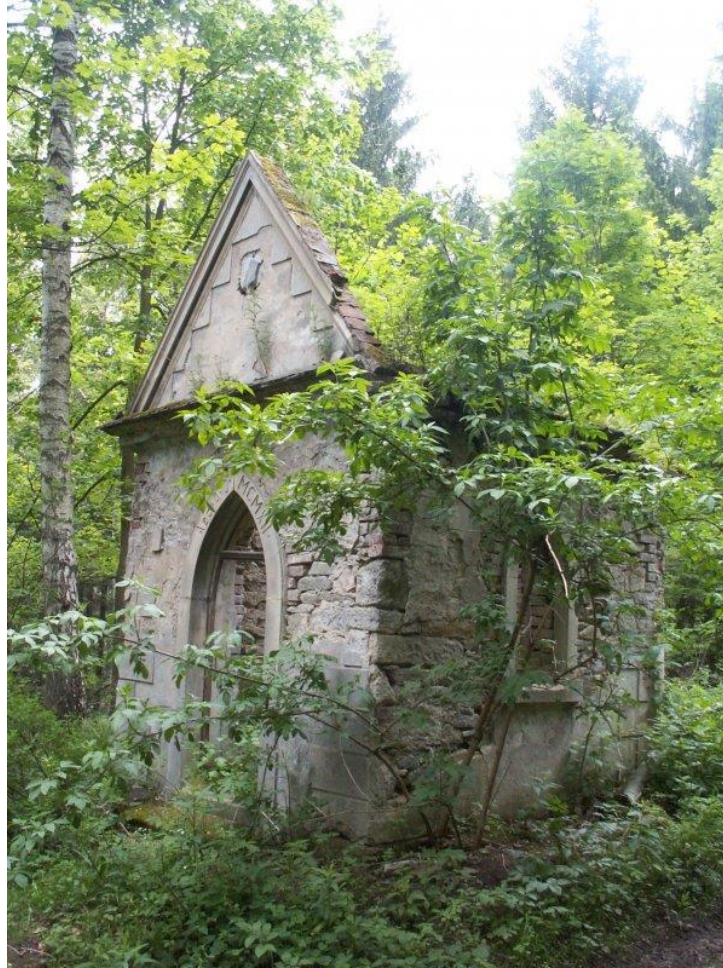


Nature is more than a backdrop



First televised atomic bomb test – Nevada, USA, 1951

Environmental history focuses on the relationship between humans and nature over time



Abandoned chapel in Krasny les, North Bohemia

How have we shaped our environment?



Banaue Rice Terraces, Philippines



Svitava River - Brno

And how has it shaped us?



Challenges

- Environmental history is interdisciplinary; it overlaps with other fields of history...

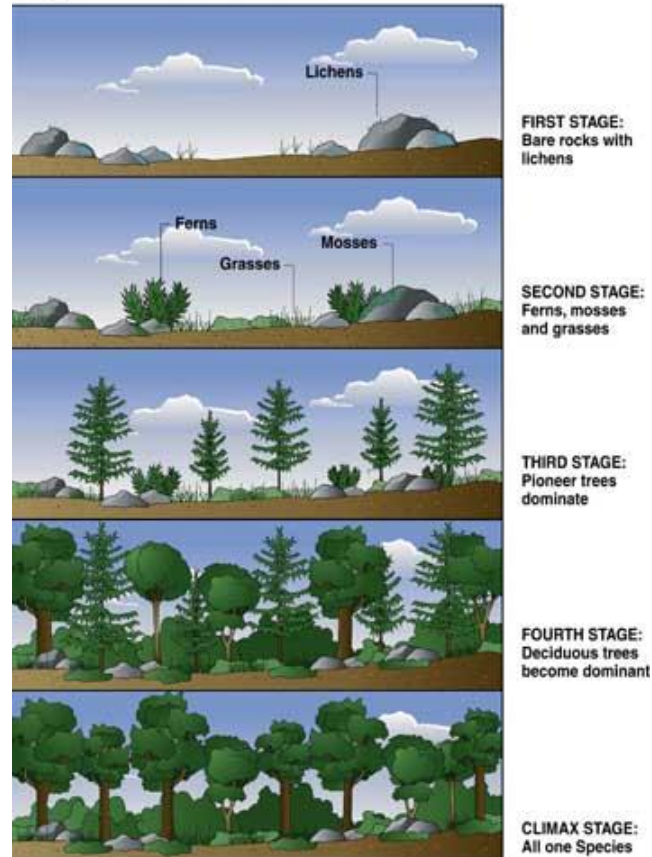


On the way to the Christmas tree market, New York City, early 1900s

As well as with the social and natural sciences

- Geography, biology, ecology, etc.

Stages in Forest Succession

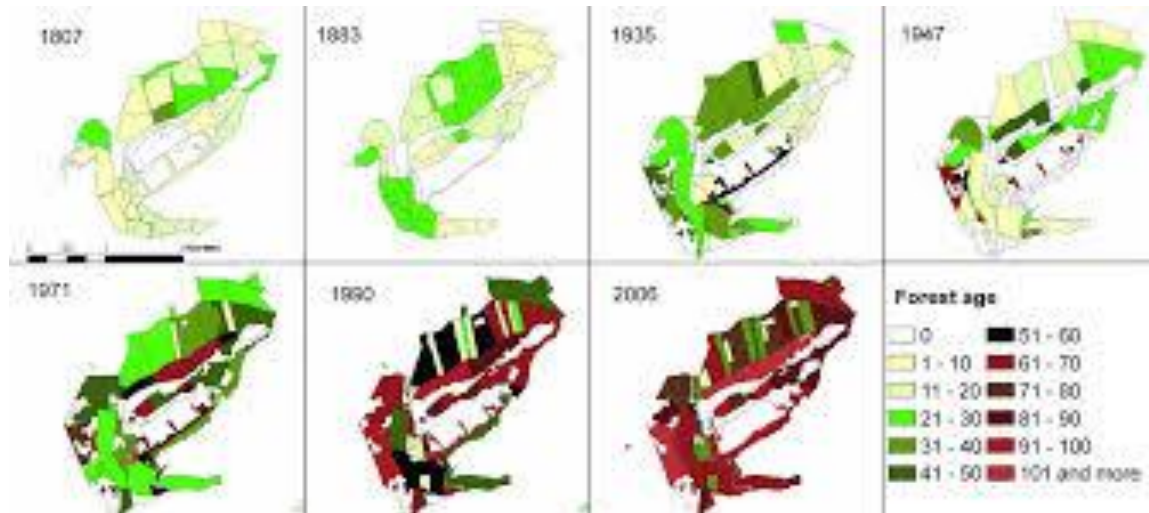


Different approaches

- 1. Material environmental history
- 2. Cultural/intellectual environmental history
- 3. Political environmental history

Material environmental history

- Studying actual changes in landscape



Changes in forest age composition over time, Pálava, South Moravia

Cultural and intellectual environmental history

- How do people view nature and the environment? What values do they attribute to it?



Caspar David Friedrich – *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon* – 1830-35

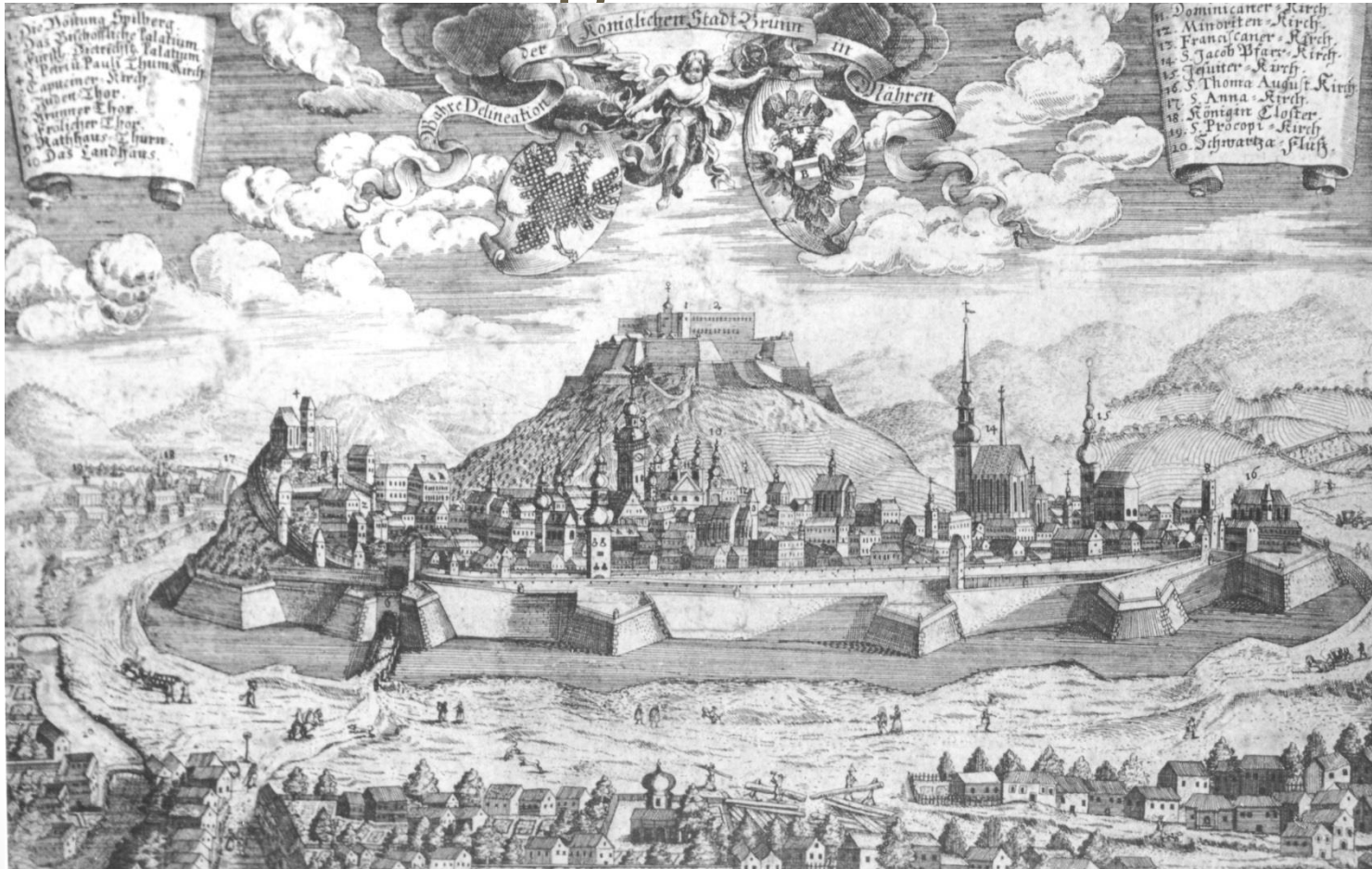
Political Environmental History



Therefore there are many sources we can use.

- Traditional written sources
- Maps
- Images
- Photographs/satellite images
- Material evidence: sediments (geology), pollen, flora and fauna (historical ecology), archeology, etc.

Example: the changing landscape of Brno in images



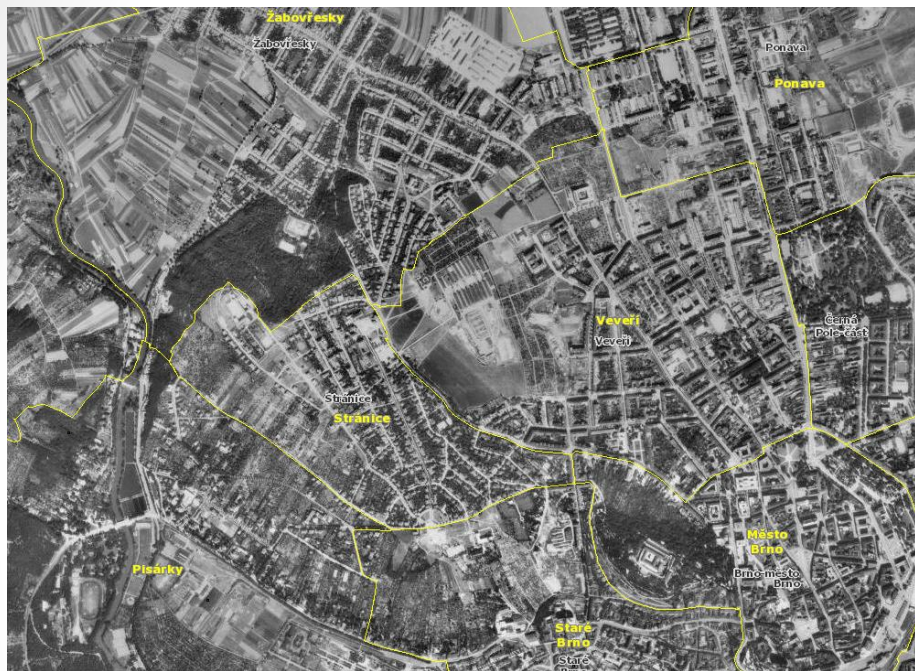
Brno, c. 1700

Brno

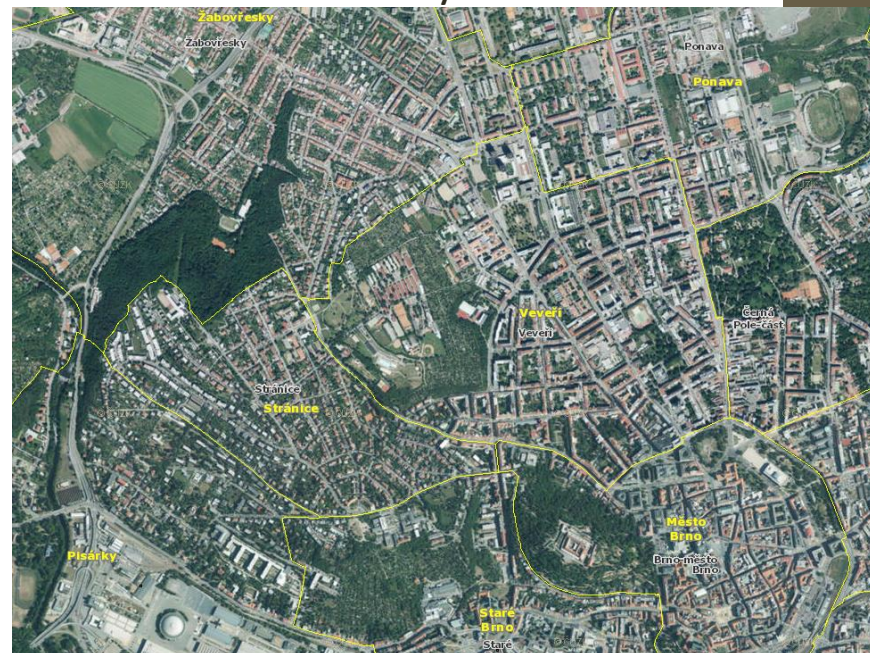


Brno, c. 1867

Brno 1953



Brno - Today



Questions of time

What time periods interest the environmental historian?

The distant past...



Z. Burian – 1966 – *Hunted Mastodon*

To the present



Kenyan game wardens examine a poached elephant

Questions of time

- What kind of timeframes are environmental historians interested in?

Human relations over long periods of time, as well as sudden changes



Lebanese cedar



Japanese tsunami of 2011

Spaces

Environmental historians study human-nature relations in a wide variety of spaces, such as

Urban spaces



Forests



Agricultural areas



Nature knows no borders

- Where in the world is it?

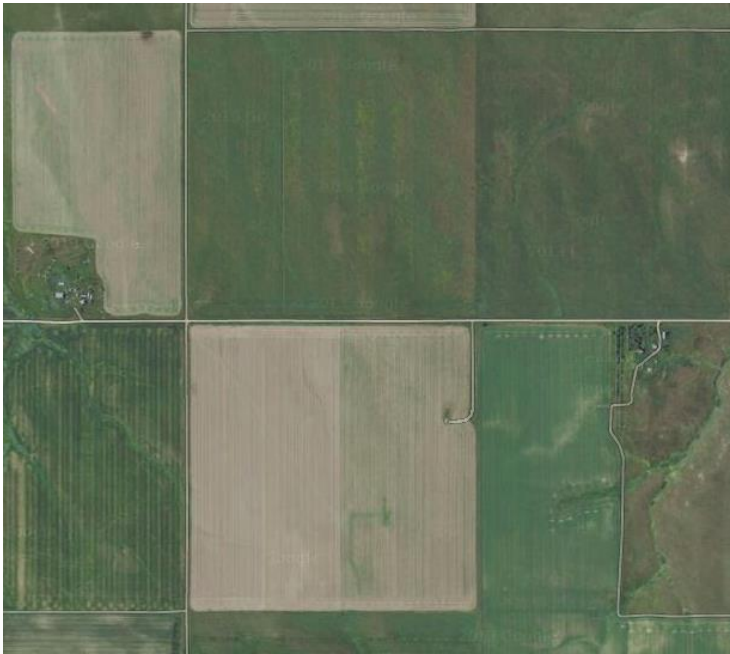
The Alps – Italy? Switzerland? Austria?



The Mediterranean – Greece? Italy? Libya? Cyprus?

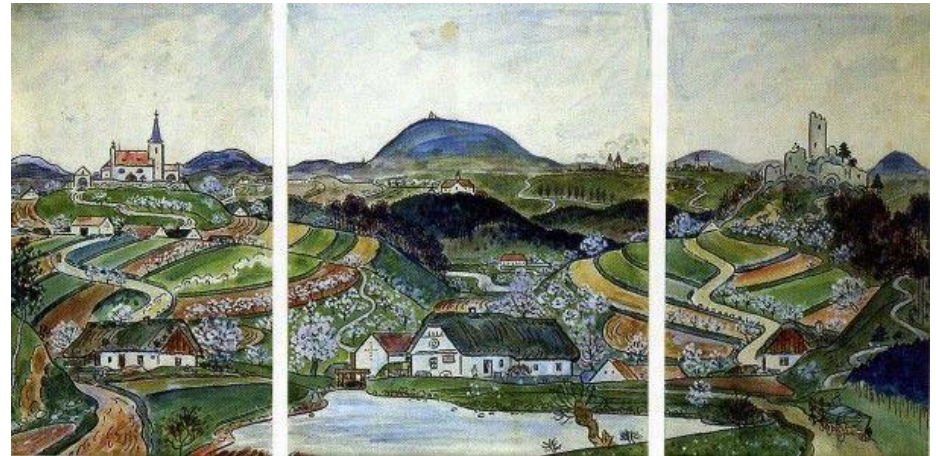
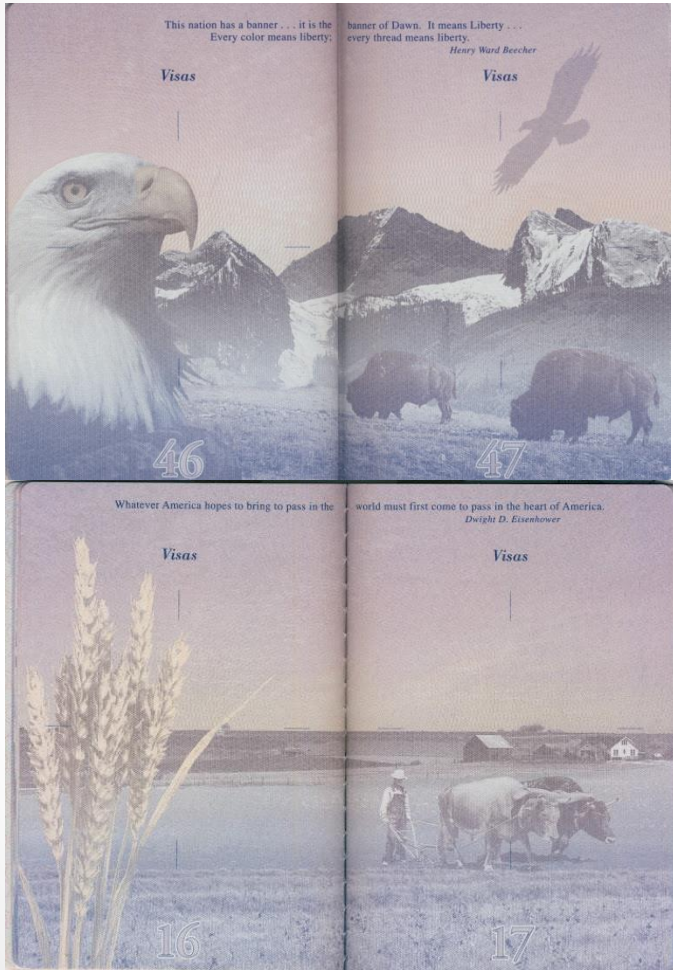


Not even nature that's been transformed by humans



For environmental history, regional features may be more important than national ones. Environmental history is often **transnational**.

But national differences matter too!



Josef Lada – *Czech Landscape*, 1933

Images of nature from US passport

How to sell potatoes.

American commercial for McDonald's

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ccpilsl-V4>

Czech commercial for Kaufland supermarket

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOjwiVPXJiU>

How can nature be an actor?



Nature as actor 1

The power of nature



Results of flood in Prague 1890

Nature as actor 2



Nature is constantly on the move.

Ecological imperialism

Cattle in Argentina



Erosion on a Czech corn field

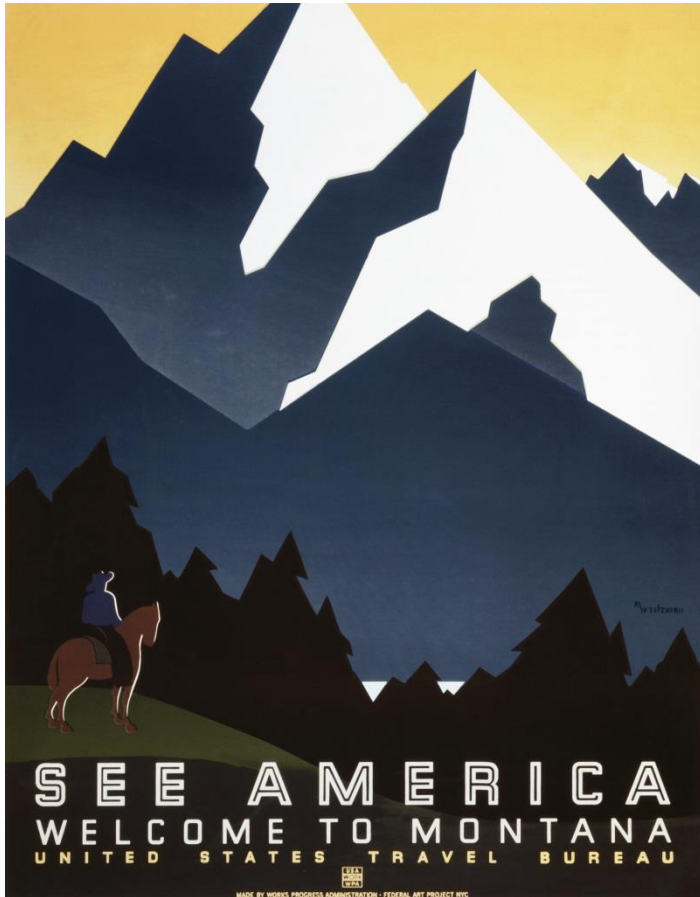


Nature as actor 3

Norse
settlements
disappeared
from
Greenland
1300 and
1400s – start
of the Little Ice
Age



Nature as Actor 4– Nature as “inspiration”



US WPA poster, 1939



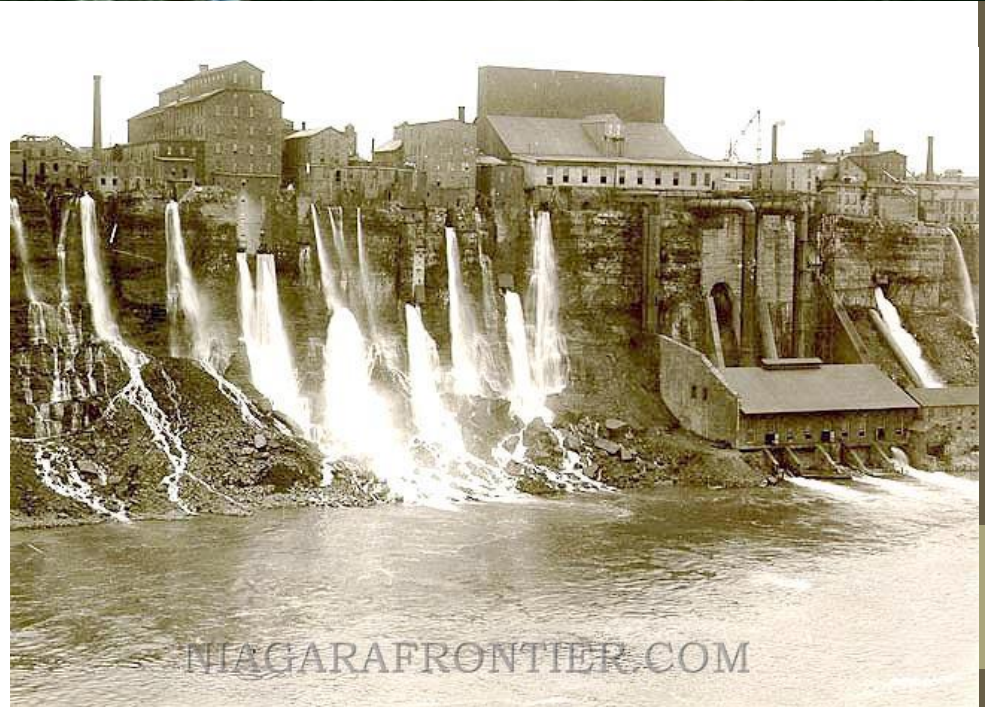
Nazi propaganda poster -
The eradication of the sick
and weak in nature - 1938

Why study environmental history?

**Because
environmental History
is politically relevant
and helps us
understand human
power vis a vis nature**

Nature is an actor but humans
have enormous power as well.

Our perceptions of the
environment and our
understanding of human-nature
relations in the past, and our
visions can help us build better
human-nature-relations in the
future.



**Because
environmental history
deals with some of the
most important issues
regarding the future of
our planet.**



Such as
Climate change and global
warming

Including flooding as a result of
global warming, the impact of
fossil fuels on the environment



Because environmental history helps us understand the human role in conservation



The history of

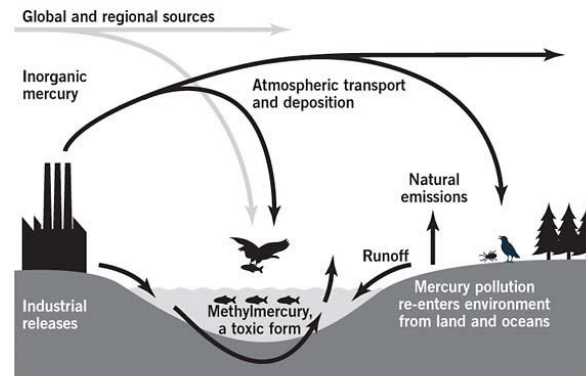
and of the wildlife trade

Because environmental history helps us understand the long-term effects and the unintended consequences of our relationship with nature



The mercury cycle

A new study by the National Wildlife Federation shows mercury poisoning in animals throughout the environment. They ingest toxic methylmercury by eating contaminated fish, bugs and other organisms.



Source: National Wildlife Federation

The Chronicle

Because environmental history helps us the understand the relationship between city and country



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Manufacturers and Publishers.*

*Wendell M. P. St. Louis, Mo.
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5075—Birdseye View of the Union Stock Yards, Chicago, Ill., U. S. A.

**Because environmental
history helps us
understand human
resource use**



It opens our eyes for the scarcity
of resources and for their
conservation into the future.



Environmental history gets you
away from your desk and out into
nature!

