

**John Soluri, Claudia Leal, and José Augusto Pádua (editors).
A Living Past: Environmental Histories of Modern Latin America. New York: Berghahn Books, 2018, 310 pp.**

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The *Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental* –SOLCHA– (Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History) presented the book *A Living Past: Environmental Histories of Modern Latin America* at the multitudinal Latin American Society of Latin American Studies Association –LASA– conference in Barcelona held in May of 2018.

This is a collaborative book, made up of 12 interconnected essays (including the Epilogue) resulting from decades of historical research experience. The contributors reviewed the environmental transformations in the Andean, Caribbean and Amazonian landscapes, looking upon the history of Latin America “as if nature existed”.¹ With this publication in the Brehmann series *Environmental histories: International perspectives*, the Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History consolidates its central role in a global network of researchers led by the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) and the Rachel Carson Center. The editors, Claudia Leal, José Augusto Pádua and John Soluri are widely recognised scholars with extensive experience in Latin American Environmental History, as well as SOLCHA pioneers. Leal, a professor at the Universidad de los Andes, has written on forestry, conservationism, and race. Pádua, from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, has focused on tropical forests, particularly the Brazilian Amazon. Soluri, from Carnegie Mellon University, has researched mainly the history of food production and consumption.

It is quite rare to discover edited volumes that interconnect their chapters thematically and put forward correlated arguments. In comparison with similar collections of a more patchwork style, the contributions in *A Living Past* are cohesive, interconnected and overlapping. With this book, SOLCHA sets a good example for how to create collaborative methodologies and how to exchange global knowledge through scientific networking.

Two main features connect these essays: first, they all address prior critiques of *declensionism* (degradation narrative) in environmental history and, second, they cross national boundaries to tell the history of macro-regions, or to explore common patterns throughout Latin America as a whole. On one hand, the narrative of *declensionism*, in which human beings are an enemy and the destroyers of natural landscapes, has evolved into interpretations in which human beings are part of constantly changing socio-ecosystems. Through a recognition that the appropriation and exploitation of natural resources also alters the human landscape, the social impact of environmental transformations is brought into the equation. On the other hand, the SOLCHA scholars have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to knit together all their previous works, and those by many

1 Using Germán Palacios’ words, in: *Territorios Improbables, Historias y Ambientes*, (Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Magisterio, 2018), 19.

classic environmental history authors, to build a cohesive and coherent body of arguments that are inspiring and thought provoking.

The editors suggest five cross-cutting themes based on the contributors' analyses and reflections: "Enduring Colonial Legacies," "States of Nature," "Transoceanic Trade and Ecological Exchanges," "Tropicality: Confronting Diversity," and "Convergences: Latin America and a Global Environment". However, the arguments and histories are so well connected that *A Living Past* can be read and interpreted 'Hopscotch-style': sorted and organised according to the readers' needs. The volume employs the following four categories of analysis:

Histories of "ideas"

This category comprises essays around the evolution of the notions of conservation, environmentalism and forestry, but also of narratives, worldviews, understandings, and visions of nature and natural resources. In other words, these are histories of our 'perception of nature' and its influence on political decisions or social actions. Leal, Funes, Santiago, McCook and Wakild show how peoples' conceptions of the land propelled not only conservationist and activist movements, but also changes in land use, for instance: perceptions about forests changed in Leal's terms "from threatening to threatened jungles", in Funes' "Great Caribbean" the *tierras calientes* (warm-lands) changed from a disease-ridden but rich and productive Caribbean, to picturesque beaches. Santiago, McCook and Wakild, respectively explore themes related to extractivist economies, developmentalist growth, and creation of natural protection areas, to examine the maturation of activism, conservationism and environmental science throughout the continent.

Histories of growth and developmentalism

Boyer, Cariño and Santiago demonstrate interdisciplinarily how developmentalist thinking and extractivist or export-based policies have destroyed the environment, abused the work force and caused social conflicts, through cases in Perú, Chile, Mexico, Venezuela and Argentina. "Mexico's ecological revolutions" borderlines an agrarian history with its reforms and counter-reforms, while "Extraction stories" borderlines labour and social history following the workers' struggles in *guano*, copper, oil, and mega-mining extractivist projects.

Histories of justice and sovereignty

The theme of environmental justice is present in almost all the contributions. Boyer, Cariño, Funes, Cuvi, Soluri, and Santiago expose the environmental costs associated with both the degradation and exploitation of natural resources, and their contribution to the marginalisation of peasant and indigenous cultures and their agricultural and food traditions. In other words, social injustice and the loss of food sovereignty.

Histories of food and culture

Following the previous group, food and culture are also a specific subject of study, portrayed as key drivers of interactions between local communities and their surrounding resources. Cuvi's "Indig-

enous imprints” separates *criollo* and indigenous heritage in agrarian contexts to make the case for sustainable indigenous practices and *sumak kawsay* (living well) philosophy.

Similarly, Soluri’s “Home Cooking” digs into the importance of agro-diversity to fulfil a culturally acceptable diet. Both Cuvi and Soluri explore briefly the concept of food sovereignty and introduce the history of free seed preservation. Van Ausdal and Wilcox reflect upon evolving trends in diet, as variously influenced by the competition for natural resources between ‘cowboy’, cattle ranching cultures in Latin American grassland (from the Mexican *vaqueros* to the Argentinian *gauchos* and including the Colombian and Venezuelan *llaneros*), and crop farmers, and the growing role of beef as a dietary staple. In terms of rural resources, consumer culture in major cities has food security implications in Sedrez and Horta’s essay “The Ivy and the Wall” (the Violeta Parra quotation is particularly meaningful).

Finally, as McNeill’s Epilogue indicates, an interesting next step for scholars is to expand this academic knitwork to interweave global environmental history. It is vital to keep pushing frontiers—both geographical and academic—in order to contribute something novel: expanding the body of existing knowledge and multiplying the ways in which it develops through collaborative and interdisciplinary research involving new generations of historians. I find some chapters very fresh and original, and yet others sound familiar and recurring; despite the five-year lapse between the publication of *New Environmental Histories* and this volume, some similarities are found,² and it seems obvious that some authors remain on a similar line of research. However, those chapters that propose innovative topics, arguments or approaches, such as “Home Cooking”, “Mexico’s Ecological Revolutions”, “Indigenous Imprints” and “The Ivy and the Wall”, will be of particular interest to scholars looking for innovative research questions that will challenge the discipline and its future development.

In conclusion, the volume’s major strength is its ability to break boundaries in order to connect relevant facts within macro-regions, by relating patterns and finding common contextual interdisciplinary frames. These Latin American histories are relevant across disciplines and strongly projected into the present, and SOLCHA has delivered a high-quality reference tool. Its many concise and source-rich chapters offer an effective reading. Well-written and accessible, they provide a good overview of recent trends and questions addressed in contemporary Latin American environmental history.



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2 Claudia Leal, José Augusto Pádua, and John Soluri, *New Environmental Histories of Latin America and the Caribbean*, RCC Perspectives (Munich, Germany: Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society, 2013).