

ASEH Conference Review

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For five days in April 1999, environmental historians, historical geographers, anthropologists, federal government employees, and others interested in exploring past human-physical environment interactions, assembled at the Holiday Inn City Center in Tucson, Arizona, for the biennial meeting of the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH). As has been the case so often in the past, the meeting lived up to its well-earned reputation as a premier forum for the exchange of environmental ideas, while at the same time, its small scale—at least relative to the national conventions of the Association of American Geographers and the AHA—fostered an atmosphere of intellectual cross-fertilization that was as relaxing as it was invigorating. Also in keeping with past gatherings, the site selected for the meeting was a provocative one, stimulating debate among attendees on a variety of topics ranging from urban decay and suburban sprawl to fire suppression and water supply to large-scale mining and environmental justice issues.

The theme of the 1999 meeting was “Environmental History Across Boundaries,” and as the numerous field trips and countless informal excursions, not to mention many of the nearly sixty panels, clearly demonstrated, a more suitable site could hardly be imagined. Whether it is the international frontier—“the scar” as writer Octavio Paz succinctly described it—that separates the United States from Mexico, the blurred transition zone that marks one’s passage from the hollow urban core into the surrounding suburban sprawl, the landownership rights that distinguish public lands from private, the limitations of the Central Arizona Project, or the cultural divide that separates the region’s residents from one another, boundaries are a fact of everyday life in Tucson.

In many ways, the changes Tucson has witnessed over the past several decades and the complications that have arisen as a result are illustrative of what is happening in other urbanized areas across America’s dry Southwest. While increased population has created economic opportunities for some, it has marginalized others and contributed to an assortment of environmental problems. Since the 1950s, for example, population growth during the automobile era has caused Tucson to

expand its boundaries at the expense of the old urban center. Indeed, between 1953 and 1998 the number of people per square mile in metropolitan Tucson actually dropped from 5,000 to 2,400 even though total population increased sharply. The environmental consequences of this urban sprawl have been many. Currently, twelve acres of Sonoran Desert land are cleared each day for new homes, offices, and commercial buildings. Meanwhile, total annual vehicle miles, which rose from a mere two million in 1970 to approximately sixteen million in 1997, have clogged thoroughfares and clouded skies.

The conference included several sessions that dealt specifically with the American Southwest and they provided a valuable insight into local issues. Notable examples were sessions on wilderness management in the Four Corners Region, the debate over the Central Arizona Project, land use in the Santa Cruz River basin, and the regionally appropriate presidential address by Donald Pisani on water issues in the West. There was also an unusually strong number of papers dealing with foreign topics. Although the ASEH conference has hosted an increasing array of papers that focused on non-American locations, this year's conference exceeded previous gatherings in that respect. Sessions on Germany, Brazil, Africa, Europe, and global issues reflected the far-flung interests of the participants. This geographic diversity reflects the strength in number of environmental historians and their desire to put their tools and research questions to work in new places.

There was strong balance across the environmental history spectrum. Sessions focused on some of the traditional subject areas such as environmental policy and attitudes about nature. In addition, there were sessions dealing with urban pollution, environmental equity, natural hazards, and tourism. A lively and well-attended session on the biography of important figures in the environmental movement illustrated the breadth of participants' interest. In many ways, the number and diversity of topics reflects a breakthrough for the ASEH meetings. This meeting was far more than a collection of the old guard and their proteges. It was a professional conference of senior-, second-, and even third-generation scholars who have made environmental history into a viable speciality that is respected beyond history departments and beyond the United States. A sure indication of the discipline's promising future was the presence of a large number of graduate students.

Perhaps nothing captures the imagination of a geographer more than to be presented with the opportunity to "venture into the field" and experience the sights and sounds of a new place firsthand. With eleven field trips to choose from, the Local Arrangements and Program Committees did not disappoint. Excursions to Biosphere II, the Santa Cruz Valley, the San Pedro River, the University of Arizona Tree Ring Laboratory, as well as a fascinating all-day trip to Nogales, Mexico—to name but a few of the options, acquainted out-of-town visitors with local scenery (including