

1-1-1998

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Andrew Kirk

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### Recommended Citation

Kirk, Andrew. "Goats and Rivers Together Again for the First Time!: Shifting Perspectives on Environmental History in the Southwest." *New Mexico Historical Review* 73, 1 (1998).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol73/iss1/2>

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# Goats and Rivers Together Again for the First Time!: Shifting Perspectives on Environmental History in the Southwest

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ANDREW KIRK

In the 1970s, North America (including the southwestern United States and northern Mexico) experienced an environmental revolution that changed politics and history. Although the rise of environmentalism seemed to happen overnight, it was actually years in the making. Throughout the twentieth century, individuals and organizations worked to save America's natural treasures from the seemingly unstoppable onslaught of industrial capitalism. For most of the century, environmentally minded Americans were outnumbered and outgunned by proponents of development and modernization. Conservationists often found themselves at odds with a society that marched to the drum-beat of progress and perpetual growth. Nevertheless, they were able to slowly build a powerful environmental movement that successfully fought and won crucial battles over the sanctity of national parks and forests in the United States. By the 1960s, proponents of environmental protection succeeded in substantially transforming the ideological orientation of the nation. The culmination of this shift came with the publication of Rachel Carson's path-breaking book *Silent Spring* (1962).<sup>1</sup> Carson's apocalyptic vision of a world struck dumb by human arrogance hit a nerve that awakened the nation to the far-reaching consequences of humanity's impact on the non-human environment. In the wake of *Silent Spring*, the environmental movement in the United States exploded into a powerful force in national politics. Millions of people looked at the world around them and began to recognize the scars of unchecked development, pollution, and waste.<sup>2</sup>

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Andrew Kirk is a western and environmental historian who recently completed his Ph.D at the University of New Mexico. Kirk has edited a volume on the idea of human nature and environmentalism and has also published on the Conservation Library and appropriate technology.

In the wake of this environmental revolution, historians began to study the roots of the environmental movement and the contemporary environmental crisis. These scholars focused not only on changes in societies and institutions over time, but on the shifting interactions between humans and the "natural" and non-human world. In such works, the environment became an actor, not simply a stage for human events. As a result, a new field of environmental history, dedicated to bringing an environmental perspective to historical analysis, began to evolve.<sup>3</sup> Although a relatively new enterprise, environmental studies have quickly become an influential genre, particularly for scholars of the southwestern United States, a region where many of the battles of the environmental movement took place.

In this special issue on the environment, essays by Mark W. T. Harvey, Daniel Tyler, and Dan Scurlock reveal aspects of changing political, cultural, and environmental imperatives in the Southwest. From giant reclamation projects that promised economic prosperity at the expense of scenic wonders, to the complicated issues of dividing and allocating the resources of the Colorado River across several states and two nations, to the history of the lowly goat, these authors carefully relate the complex, contingent, and far-reaching outcomes of interactions between human culture and the non-human world. Although eclectic, these essays share the common goal of revealing the unintended consequences of human interaction with land and animals over time.

This issue opens with Dan Scurlock's exploration of a very different aspect of environmental history: the impact of domesticated animals on the environment. This engaging history of the goat in the Southwest does a good job of highlighting the cultural and environmental contingencies that shaped the history of this important regional resource. Scurlock, a free-lance archaeologist, notes that numerous studies of sheep in New Mexico and the Southwest exist in the historiography of the region. Likewise, several books and articles chronicle the history of cattle and cattle ranching in the U.S. Southwest. Goats, on the other hand, have been largely ignored by both regional and environmental historians. This essay provides a welcome corrective to this gap in the literature.

While ignored by most, goats played a crucial role in the conquest and settlement of North America. Goats arrived in the New World with Columbus, and Coronado introduced goats to the region now known as the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico. Here, goats quickly multiplied and became an important source of wool and protein for Spanish and Native Americans inhabitants of the region. Successful goat husbandry often meant life or death for remote communities in New Mexico and the surrounding area. In many subtle ways, Scurlock argues the introduction of the domesticated goat altered both cultures and environments. Goats transformed local economies by providing ready sup-

plies of meat, wool, and hides. In addition, goats reshaped local environments by over-grazing which resulted in altered vegetation patterns and increased erosion. During the 1930s, the goat population culminated then declined thereafter due to changes in the regional economy and increasing recognition of the environmental consequences of large goat herds.

Water and reclamation are issues that have captivated environmental and western historians and dominated western politics for most of the twentieth century. Daniel Tyler, a historian at Colorado State University, provides a much needed historical perspective of the 1922 meeting of the Colorado River Commission and the negotiations that led to the Colorado River compact by focusing on Colorado commissioner Delphus Emory Carpenter. Fighting over the precious waters of the Colorado, lawyers and politicians have revisited this compact regularly over the years. But few understand the historical roots of this crucial western document and the men who dedicated their professional lives to its construction. Tyler argues that only when we understand the goals of the architects of the compact and especially the central role of Carpenter, can we hope to understand the roots of the contemporary controversy surrounding the Colorado River. Herbert Hoover was the best known member of the 1922 Commission, but Tyler argues that it was Carpenter who really shaped the meeting.

Through his experience as a Colorado water lawyer and water Commissioner Carpenter came to believe that interstate water compacts were the last resort for resolving western water issues over the long term. He became a champion of the idea of state cooperation over outside domination or constant litigation. As an attorney, Carpenter understood the dangers of water litigation, an inherently adversarial and acrimonious process. He argued for the common law doctrine of equitable apportionment. Carpenter was a consummate consensus builder and "broker of ideas" who steadfastly held to his ideals of cooperation in the highly charged political atmosphere of the Colorado River Compact negotiations. In the end, the "miscalculations of the compact commissioners precipitated the very tension and litigation which the Compact was designed to prevent." Nonetheless, Delph E. Carpenter's efforts provide a model for all of those concerned about the steadily dwindling resources of the West's greatest river.

Mark Harvey, a historian at North Dakota State University, also tackles the subject of western water but from a very different angle. Harvey explores the important and often neglected history of Rainbow Bridge National Monument in Utah. Caught between two better-known controversies, the fight to save Echo Park in Dinosaur National Monument and the fight to stop a series of dams that threatened the Grand

Canyon, the crusade to preserve Rainbow Bridge from the encroaching waters of the newly constructed Lake Powell highlighted crucial weaknesses in the nascent environmental movement before the passage of tough national environmental laws in the 1960s.

Reclamation projects had been a dominant factor in the West's economy and politics since the New Deal. Massive federally sponsored dam projects promised work for thousands and power and prosperity for millions more. In the heady days after World War II, most westerners viewed the big water projects as unambiguously good. By the mid-1950s, however, a growing group of concerned citizens and conservationists began to question the logic of constructing giant reservoirs in the desert canyons of the Southwest.

These conflicting perspectives came to a head in a controversy over the construction of a dam in the beautiful and remote Dinosaur National Monument. Conservationists mobilized all of their resources to fight this project using the argument that the dam would destroy a natural wonder and undermine the integrity of the National Park system by setting a precedent for development in protected areas.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the conservationists' "precedent argument" carried the day. As a result, the Echo Park project fell apart and dramatically increased the power and support base of conservation organizations like the Sierra Club, which helped organize the successful fight.

Southern Utah's Rainbow Bridge became the test-piece for the "precedent" method of political action utilized by conservationists. The argument in this case centered on protecting the beautiful Rainbow Bridge sandstone arch from the waters of Lake Powell. Confident that the strategy that worked so well in Echo Park would also work for Rainbow Bridge, the conservation groups argued that this national monument had to be saved from inundation, or it would threaten the status of the reserve and set a precedent for future violation. This time, however, the conservationists miscalculated. Rainbow Bridge was never in jeopardy of complete submersion, and few outside the conservation community saw a problem with water crossing an imaginary boundary in a remote area. The idea of "precedent" alone was not enough to "stir the public," and the battle to stop the waters ended in failure. Harvey demonstrates that while the early battles over reclamation went far toward establishing a powerful environmental movement in the United States, the tide did not turn until the passage of environmental legislation in the 1960s. The fight over Rainbow Bridge was an important episode that played a key role in shaping the battles over the Colorado River and the better known controversy surrounding the Grand Canyon.

In each essay, Daniel Tyler, Mark Harvey, and Dan Scurlock look beyond the traditional historical emphasis on institutions to provide a richer and more encompassing history of North America. In this region, environmental imperatives often overshadow and overwhelm human ambition. By adding another layer to their analysis, environmental historians provide us with a better understanding of how we shape and are shaped by the world around us. Even seemingly mundane things like rivers, lonely stone arches, and goats are actors along with the rest of us in the unfolding story of North America.

### NOTES

1. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), and Linda J. Lear, *Rachel Carson: A Witness for Nature* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

2. For more on the history of the North American environmental movement, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1974); Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and his Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981); Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991); Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Green Revolution: The American Environmental Movement, 1962–1992* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993); and Andrew Kirk, "That Fearful Brightness: The Conservation Library and the American Environmental Movement, 1950–1980" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1997).

3. For several very good sources on environmental historiography, see *Pacific Historical Review* (August 1972), special issue on environmental history. Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," *Pacific Historical Review* 54 (August 1985), 297–335; Kendall E. Bailes, *Environmental History: Critical Issues in Comparative Perspective* (New York: University Press of America, 1985); *Journal of American History* (March 1990), special issue on environmental history; and Carolyn Merchant, *Major Problems in American Environmental History* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Company, 1993).

4. Mark W. T. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

Doña Ana County Historical Society's Sesquicentennial Symposium  
on  
**THE TREATY OF GUADALUPE HIDALGO**  
Saturday, February 28, 1998  
Las Cruces Hilton

Students of Southwestern history and, in particular, the history of the borderlands will value this opportunity to hear the following outstanding speakers:

- C. Malcolm Ebricht, Jr. (Center for Land Grant Studies) - *New Mexico Land Grants and Water Rights: Adjudication under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*
- Deena J. Gonzales (Pomona College) - *The Post-1848 Lives of New Mexico's Women, Children, and Families*
- John Grassham (Museum of Albuquerque) - *The Mexican-American Boundary Commission*
- Richard Griswold del Castillo (San Diego State University) - *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*
- Mark J. Stegmaier (Cameron University) - *The New Mexico-Texas Boundary: Years of Controversy*
- Josefina Z. Vázquez (El Colegio de México) - *The Significance in Mexican History of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*  
plus
- Jon Linford (New Mexico State University) - *Music of the Period and Mariachi de Oñate* (Oñate High School)

Josefina Vázquez's presentation is in the evening at New Mexico State University and open to the public. All others are during the day. The price of **registration includes lunch** and music of the period during the day and before the evening program. This Symposium is made possible, in part, by a grant from the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities.

**Registration:** Mail registrations to Doña Ana County Historical Society, 500 North Water Street, Las Cruces, NM 88001. \$25.00 if postmarked by February 10th. \$35.00 if postmarked after February 10th. Registration at the door if space is available. Published *Proceedings* of the Symposium will be available at a later date. Call John P. Bloom (505-382-0722) or Janie Matson (505-524-2357)