

Book Review: What is Environmental History? by J. Donald Hughes

*In the second edition of **What is Environmental History?**, J. Donald Hughes outlines the development of the study of the relationship between humans and nature across time. In tracing the emergence of the field, Hughes's work underscores the extent to which environmental history is a necessarily interdisciplinary endeavour covering a wide geographic scope. Paulo Rui Anciaes positions this as a text to be approached as a concise reference work to supplement environmental history research.*

What is Environmental History?. 2nd Edition. J. Donald Hughes. Polity. 2015.

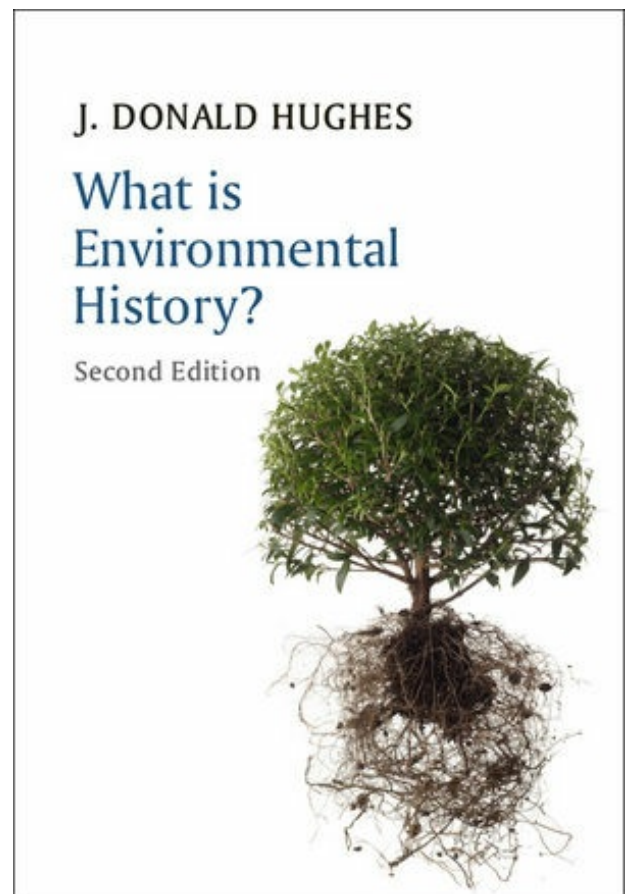
The question that *What is Environmental History?* asks is answered in its first sentence: environmental history is the study of the mutual relationships of humans and nature through time. More specifically, it delves into three main themes: how the environment shapes human history; how attitudes towards the environment influence human actions; and how these actions bring about environmental changes.

It sounds like a very broad field, and it is. In a sense, this is the broadest of all history sub-disciplines; after all, the natural environment provides the context for all human events. On the other hand, environmental history can be regarded simply as an interdisciplinary methodology. J. Donald Hughes points out that when discussing the implications of their work, geographers often become in effect environmental historians (5), and that many of the finest environmental histories were written by non-historians, including geographers, philosophers, anthropologists and biologists (102).

The structure of the book is the same as the first edition, published ten years ago. The first chapters define the discipline and give an overview of early contributions. The central part of the book describes recent developments around the world. The final section discusses global problems, future directions for the field and methodological issues. The contents have been updated in this edition, which now includes a section on the Middle East and North Africa.

While environmental history is one of the newest scholarly endeavours, having begun in the late twentieth century, the questions asked have attracted interest since the time of the Ancient Greeks and Chinese, who wrote about problems such as deforestation. The study of the relationship between humans and the environment since those times is useful for understanding problems that only appeared in the last half-century. This point is not developed in detail, but interested readers can search for more information in the author's extensive accounts of [environmental history in ancient civilisations](#).

The geographic scope of the works reviewed in this book is also wide. Once again, the author knows what he is writing about, being a founding member of the American, European and South Asian Environmental History societies.



Refreshingly, there is information about countries that are often ignored in academic reviews because their output is in a language different from the author's own. However, because of this breadth, the text is at times reduced to a tedious listing of authors, books, institutions, societies, journals and conferences, especially in the European section, where it almost becomes a 'who's who' of environmental history rather than a review of theories and methods.



Image Credit: A striking example of humans' ability to make a living in a hostile environment, the [Pico vineyards](#) have been vulnerable to cycles of prosperity and failure, transforming the island's economic and social structure since the fifteenth century (Paulo Rui Anciaes)

There is also a disproportionate emphasis on developments in the USA, which have their own separate chapter, whilst the rest of the world shares an all-encompassing chapter titled 'Local, Regional, and National Environmental Histories'. The author mentions in several places that the field of environmental history emerged in the USA, but also admits that this aspect has perhaps been overemphasised by some of its practitioners. He quotes Richard Grove, who observes that analyses by US environmental historians tend to be narrow in terms of the geographic scope of the sources of information used and topics studied (50).

Despite the growing number of environmental historians in many countries, disparities in levels of participation in the field are transparent from the names and institutions mentioned throughout the book. For example, studies in countries that are ex-colonies tend to be conducted in many cases by researchers from, or locals based in, the ex-metropolis. Judging from the bibliography at the end of the book, there also seems to be a gender bias in the field, as only a small proportion of the authors are women.

The need to consider environmental problems in a global context is also evident in the 'Next Issues' section, as the majority of the issues described are global, including population growth, energy and resources, biodiversity, biotechnology and oceans. Environmental history could, in fact, be the study of world history, although it could also fall into the trap of not being able to say anything in general about the world that is true of its diversity. The author suggests that it is probably better to focus on a particular topic or historical period but, like other scholars, he has also attempted (and successfully managed) to write a book covering environmental history from the prehistoric to the contemporary age ([Hughes, 2009](#)).

The book not only reviews the evolution of human behaviour towards the environment, but also the evolution of

environmental thought across time. This review is solid in the pre-twentieth-century chapter but patchy in the others. The object of analysis is not very clear: is this a review of ideas about the environment or a review of books containing those ideas? There are also a few gaps. The histories of Deep Ecology and Marxist Ecology, [documented by David Pepper in 1996](#), are not updated in this book. There is only one paragraph about the environmental justice movement, which does not mention developments outside of the USA. On the plus side, the author does not fail to notice that environmental ideas have in several instances come dangerously close to racial prejudice, even in the writings of renowned historians such as Lucien Febvre (33).

Environmental historians have always been suspect for promoting an environmentalist point of view, which, according to John McNeill, is particularly true in India and Latin America. But this is not necessarily a problem, if it is based on their 'understanding of history [and] in the light of ethics' (103). The author himself is mostly neutral, and it is not until page 99 that his personal views are heard when discussing the meaning of 'development' in history books. While others see environmental history as being theory-poor, the author notes that its practitioners occupy the whole spectrum between environmental determinism and cultural determinism. The only criticism that he finds harder to rebut is the tendency for the field to produce 'declensionist narratives': that is, accounts of progressive environmental degradation as a result of human action.

Overall, the book is a short, concise and accessible introduction to the field, synthesising topics that can be explored in more detail in the author's other books or in the works of [McNeill](#). The book is especially useful as reference material, as one third of its two hundred pages are bibliography, although the references could have been better organised if they were in a single place; currently they appear twice, in the Notes and in the Bibliography sections.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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