

# Environmental History During Colonial Period

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## ABSTRACT

There was an important shift in the environmental history during the period of colonisation when natural resources were exploited on a large scale and reorganized for imperial purposes. Commercial agriculture, the building of large-scale plantations and forestry ventures, mining, and infrastructure projects (such as railroads) introduced by colonial governments also disrupted ecosystems and rendered Indians as marginalized communities. Traditional environmental knowledge and sustainable resource management practices were increasingly being replaced with extractive policies which emphasized economic gains. These modifications, among others, led to deforestation, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation and ecological imbalance and influenced the relationships between people and environments. This paper explores the environmental impacts of colonial rule, and the role of the continuing legacy of colonial policies in shaping current environmental issues and resources governance in former colonies.

**Keywords:** Environmental history, Colonialism, Resource exploitation, Deforestation, Environmental change

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental history is an interdisciplinary subject which looks at the human-natural environment relationship in an historical perspective (Worster, 1994). It introduces the concepts of political, economic and social influences on landscapes, natural resources and ecological systems. Contemporary environmental history begins during the colonial era when the policies, practices and attitudes of colonial powers made a significant impact on the management and use of land, forests, water and wildlife (Arnold and Guha, 1995). Most of these changes can be addressed to the economic agenda of the colonial authorities, who aimed to tap the maximum natural resources for the purposes of industrial development and expansion of the colonies.

Colonial administrators introduced new systems in which Europeans made changes to the traditional patterns of resource use. The forests, traditionally managed by the local communities, were brought under the state control under the forest laws and policies for conservation (Rangarajan, 1996). These measures were put in place to protect natural resources, but they were

indeed implemented for the purpose of railway, shipbuilding and commercial industries, acquiring timber and other valuable materials from them (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999). Consequently, forests and other common areas, providing long-time sources of livelihood for indigenous and rural people, were abruptly denied to them (Guha, 1989).

Commercial farming was also promoted through the introduction of cash crops (tea, coffee, cotton, indigo, rubber, sugarcane) by the colonial governments. Extensive natural forests and grasslands were converted for plantations and there were considerable deforestation and loss of habitat (Damodaran, 2006). Focusing on the export of farm products threatened and affected biodiversity and led to increased degradation of soil resources and conflicts in farming systems. Additionally, new land revenue policies have created re-distribution patterns within the rights to land while frequently pushing local farmers into commercial production over subsistence agriculture. These developments resulted in greater environmental pressure and social and economic inequalities.

During the colonial period the exploitation of

mineral resources, building of transportation infrastructure and high levels of development in the cities all exacerbated environmental change. Because of the amount of timber and other natural resources needed for mining operations, railway expansion and infrastructure projects, forestation and the degradation of the environment were significant (Beinart and Hughes, 2007). Irrigation schemes and canal construction to facilitate farming practices, changed natural water regimes, with consequences on the ecological systems (Rangarajan, 1996). Habitat loss and organized hunting led to a decrease in wildlife populations and hunting, which was often encouraged as a sport for colonial elites.

But local communities were not passive to such changes. Protest, litigation and subterfuge became common way of challenging the policy of the colonial nature. Colonial environmental policies were opposed by various forms of protest, litigation and defiant action by indigenous groups, peasants and forest users (Guha, 1989). Their resilience put into relief the contradiction between the ideals of colonial economics and the practice of traditional environmental management. These struggles eventually led to a later conservation movement and debates of rights of communities to natural resources and issues of environmental justice (Grove, 1997).

The colonial period study of environmental history is significant because it helps to understand the origins of many of the current environmental challenges. Colonial policies continue to be manifested in issues like deforestation, biodiversity loss, unequal access to natural resources and conflicts over land (Gadgil and Guha, 1992). The environmental impacts of colonization can be used to gain greater insight into its historical origins and to help address environmental issues in the modern world, helping to develop more sustainable and equitable methods for managing environmental resources. Hence, some of the features of the environmental history can provide a valuable lens to appreciate the entangled history of colonial government, ecological change, and human society.

### Literature Review

Environmental history has become an important discipline of study relatively new, which looks at how human society has interacted with its physical surroundings through time (Cronon, 1995). There has been discussion about the important role colonialism contributed to the transformation of ecosystems through

policies based on maximizing the economic return. Close-up studies of the colonial governments emphasize that forests, land and water were perceived not as ecological resources for all, but also as resources of empire-building.

Research on colonial environmental policies has given us an understanding of how the forests became in the hands of the State through the forest laws and the science of forestry (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999). Traditional rights of indigenes and local communities were curtailed in these measure and a regular export of timber to railway, shipbuilding and industrial development was guaranteed (Guha, 1989). Scientists have demonstrated the impacts of these policies on biomass clearing, loss of biodiversity and change of traditional resource management practice.

A number of research projects have explored the effects of colonial agriculture on the surroundings. Commercial plantations of tea, coffee, cotton, indigo, rubber etc. brought in a tremendous change in the extensive deforestation of the forests (Damodaran, 2006). Scientists say export crops did more harm than good to the land as they led to soil erosion, loss of diversity and a loss of the traditional agricultural systems. The same applies for various efforts in the field of mining and infrastructure building, which have been studied and found to have heavily influenced the landscape, including the strain on natural resources, in particular with respect to railway construction, mineral extraction and irrigation (Beinart and Hughes, 2007)

Environmental historians have also brought indigenous people's resistance to colonial environmental policies to the fore (Guha, 1989). Local groups protested access to the forests, against exploitative land practices, and traditional rights to the use of natural resources. Such acts of resistance helped pave the way for future environmental campaigns and formed the basis of the discussion surrounding the conservation effort and the involvement of community interest (Grove, 1997)

Overall, literature shows that the impacts of colonial rule on the environment had deep and lasting effects. The ecologies have become a consequence of both the exploitation of forests and the growth of commercial agriculture and the extraction of natural resources is affecting the condition of ecological imbalances in present day. Past studies have stressed the need for knowledge on colonial environmental policies to understand current problems like deforestation, biodiversity depletion, degradation of land, etc., and

conflicts over managing natural resources.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a study using qualitative research descriptive with a type of secondary data analysis. Academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles, historical records or government reports have been checked for information related to EH in the colonial period and credible sources have been used (Arnold and Guha, 1995). The collected data was then thematically analysed to highlight the main changes in the environment, the colonial policies, the practices of resource exploitation and its socio-economic and ecological consequences. Existing literature is examined and contrasted to determine the impacts of colonial rule on environmental management and the impact it had on the ecosystems and local communities along with the long-term effects.

## Conclusion

An era of change occurred during the colonial period when colonial administrators began changing the natural environment to meet economic and political needs. By cultivation, science and forestry, mining, and extensive resource-gathering, colonial authorities seriously changed ecosystems and traditional methods of managing the environment. These policies led to the destruction of forests, loss of biodiversity, degradation of land and displacement of indigenous and local peoples (Damodaran, 2006). Today, issues of resource conservation, environmental justice and sustainable development are still affecting the environment of Settlement, and they all stem from the colonial legacy (Grove, 1997). A unique aspect of this historical heritage is the need to comprehend it in order to create effective environmental policies and practice equitable resource management. This study looks at the link between the two processes of colonial government and ecological change and suggests the need to incorporate historical approaches into environmental planning today. Research and analysis can broaden the knowledge base and give a broader perspective into the impact of colonial environmental policies for future research into regional

experiences and their cross country comparison.

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