

CHAPTER 2

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Summary

1. The agricultural revolution (10 000 to 12 000 years ago) was followed by the industrial-medical revolution that began in England in the mid-1700s. Some major harmful effects that agricultural societies and industrialized societies have had on the environment include alteration of the distribution of plants and animals; air, soil, and water pollution; habitat and ecosystem destruction; and increased waste production. Major beneficial effects of these societies include an increased food supply, better educational and health services, and a higher standard of living for some people. These effects have also produced poverty, want, and disease. The environmental impact of the current information and globalization revolution may help decrease environmental disasters and make people more aware of events, but this revolution also decreases cultural diversity and increases environmental degradation.
2. Slash-and-burn and shifting cultivation were traditionally used, and these practices had little impact when only small areas were cleared, cultivated and then left to regenerate. As agriculture became more advanced, harmful effects grew.
3. The pre-Columbian era (ending in the early 1600s) lasted for about 10 000 years. Up to 10 million tribal people had minimal impact on the environment as they used their resources sustainably. In the colonial settlement era, European colonists viewed resources as inexhaustible. The major phases in North American history of land and wildlife conservation, public health, and environmental protection can be divided among these periods: 1832–1870, 1870–1930, 1930–1960, and 1960 to the present. Between 1832 and 1870, early conservation laws were introduced in Canada, and awareness of environmental degradation in the United States and the need for conservation increased during this period. Between 1870 and 1930, Canada took many steps to address conservation issues, and protect wildlife. In the United States the preservationist movement, led by John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, began. Between 1930 and 1960, Canada adopted the U.S. idea of leaving parks “unimpaired for future generations,” and increased soil conservation practices in their Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Program. In the United States, much of the country’s degraded environment was restored and, in 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps was established.
4. Early American conservationists in the 19th century included Henry David Thoreau and George Perkins Marsh. John Muir founded the Sierra Club in the United States at the end of the 19th century, Gifford Pinchot was instrumental in managing forest reserves, and Franklin Roosevelt enacted programs to restore environmental degradation after the Depression. In the early 20th century, George Sifton, often referred to as the father of conservation in Canada, and James Harkin, referred to as the father of national parks, helped advance conservation measures. In 1962, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* with its documentation of pesticide pollution galvanized Canadians and Americans and began the modern environmental movement.

5. In the 1980s, the concept of sustainable development was discussed in the Brundtland Report, a publication supported in Canada, but not in the United States. The Montreal Protocol, aimed at protecting the ozone layer, was signed in 1987. In the United States, environmental concerns were important to Jimmy Carter, but not to Ronald Reagan who increased private use of public lands. Bill Clinton generally supported environmental concerns, but the policies of George Bush and his son have undermined environmental concerns all over the country. Barack Obama has emphasized the development of renewable sources of energy, while at the same time overseeing the development of unconventional sources of oil.
6. Canada played an active role in the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. In 2002, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien signed the Kyoto Protocol, and Prime Minister Paul Martin promised to meet its target. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government did not support the Protocol and subsequently withdrew Canada from it. New Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has adopted a different policy, and instead supports the Paris Agreement.
7. The basic premise of studying environmental history is the thought that knowledge of the past can help to prevent future mistakes.