

Environmental history of immigration for ASEH 2011 panels / roundtables

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Mass migration across national boundaries has had many environmental consequences through history, though immigration and environmental change have too often not been considered together. Today's situation in Arizona, the entire United States, and all of North and Central America can be illuminated by examining comparative and global cases. We might want to concentrate attention on agricultural labor, where the environmental impacts are clearer than immigrant labor for household, commercial and industrial economies. A panel or series of panels (or roundtables) could begin with the history of agrarian slavery, including the roles of colonial states, the rise of trans-Atlantic capital investment and consumer markets (e.g. Caribbean sugar, Brazilian coffee, and southern U.S. cotton), and ecological transformations on the agricultural frontier. In the post-slavery era (the line is thin) state-sponsored indentured labor systems produced the Chinese and Indian diasporas, the massive Italian labor movement into southern Brazil and Argentina, Jamaican labor in Central America, and the Japanese, Chinese and Filipino labor migrations into Hawaii and California. (Labor mobilization for the two world wars is probably another variant, though this is less well understood in the literature in anthropology and historical geography, and the role of intensified food production in wartime has been neglected.)

Additional examples abound, depending on the analytical perspective. They invite attention to the role of the state, class and exploitation / equity issues, ethnic tensions, the displacement of indigenous populations, demographic trends, and changes on the land (including immigrants' cultural traditions and skills in working the land). In other words, I see a major opportunity here for environmental historians to contribute to (and learn from) the well developed literature in several other fields, adding ecological dimensions to social, economic and political considerations. It will also be a major statement for the public, in Arizona and beyond.

Our audience(s): Colleagues and students, including the World History Assn channel; plus the broader reading public. A valuable edited book could well emerge, for these audiences.