A Companion to American Environmental History
BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO AMERICAN HISTORY

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Notes on Contributors

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Rebecca Solnit is a writer, historian and activist and author based in San Francisco. She has concerned herself with the history of that city and with urbanism and civil society, with California, with the West, with Native American histories and cosmologies, environmental politics, and visual representations. She is the author of twelve books, including Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape War of the American West (2000), As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art (2001), A Field Guide to Getting Lost (2005), and Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics (2007). Among her awards are the Lannan Award for literature and the Commonwealth Club of California gold medal. Her most recent book is A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster (2009).

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Donald Worster currently holds the Hall Distinguished Professorship Chair in American History at the University of Kansas. His principal areas of research and teaching include North American and world environmental history and the history of the American West. Among his books are *A Passion for Nature* (2008), *A River Running West* (2001), *Dust Bowl* (1979), and *Nature’s Economy* (1994).
Look upon this canvas (see cover). You see an image of the American sublime – the Grand Canyon. Its steep, plunging walls open up a chasm into the earth into which sunlight glances down as far as it can go. Deep down below flows the water of the Colorado – one of the archetypal American rivers. Up above, standing at the edge of this vast precipice, you see the icon of American wildlife – the buffalo. This is American nature, it would seem. This is the place to come in search of American environmental history.

And environmental historians have come here, and to places like it. They have written about the buffalo – and have come back to revisit the surprisingly complex story of how they were pushed off, by the hundreds and thousands, to their deaths. They have written about the National Parks and sublime landscapes – and have come back to revisit the topic to assess what has been gained and who has lost. They have written about the river – showing how its waters were dammed for growth and power, or how dams planned near this canyon were stopped by environmentalists. Each time they go back to these sites, they seem to develop a different and often multifaceted picture of the relationship between nature and humanity. Neither nature nor history is static, fixed. Take a picture in the 1960s – as Roderick Nash did in his pioneering book on the American view of wilderness (1967) – and take another in the 1990s – as William Cronon did when he reexamined the American idea of wilderness and found trouble therein (1995b) – and two very different images representing Americans’ relationship with the natural world develop. The earlier picture showed the free-flowing river against a backdrop of earlier industrial rampage as a hopeful sign of an unfolding ecological consciousness. The later one pointed to how we were nonetheless separated from the natural world when we idealized a certain view of wilderness, and how “we” did not actually include all of us after all. This canyon looks very different if you put the Havasupai into the picture as full participants in this
landscape (Jacoby 2001). It looks very different as well when you look at the Colorado from the vantage point of Los Angeles or irrigated fields in California’s imperial valley (Worster 1985; Davis 1999; deBuys 1999).

Environment and history shift before our eyes in this canvas. Look down to the bottom, and you start to see something the artist has hidden in plain sight – people. Their presence violates the genre of wilderness imagery, and so we do not expect to see them. But now that we do, we have to wonder what they are up to. They appear to be miners and builders. They are working – doing something in nature that is essential to human life, but which had escaped the serious attention of environmental historians until recently. The people are, as the artist Mark Tansey gives away in the title for this work, “Constructing the Grand Canyon.”

Of course, we remake nature – even seemingly pristine places. Tansey’s painting literalizes the “constructivist” perspective – the walls of the canyon, on close inspection, turn out to be red-tinted collages of words cut from magazines. Through words, people (like Fred Harvey, John Wesley Powell, or Wallace Stegner) did indeed construct the Grand Canyon as grand (Rothman 1998; Pyne 1999). But the geological and hydrological forces, over millions of years, have a great deal to do with it as well. As Marx said of history, we may make nature, but not just as we please.

The so-called cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences built on a constructivist basis sparked one of the great academic debates of a decade ago. It hit environmental history late, but it set off a conflagration of controversy. The postmodernists were ridiculed from some quarters. The notion that reality is in some fundamental way constituted through human ideas and representations struck many environmentally oriented scholars as solipsistic, hubristic, and anthropocentric to a nauseating fault. Someone suggested he would like to see a postmodernist encounter a real bear. Meanwhile, a group of scholars went out and looked at, say, Smoky Bear and the cross-cultural politics of nature preservation. Their work enriched the field. Some saw a drift to the representational as dangerous, as if it was a firestorm that might come sweeping through destroying everything that was good and real in its path. Instead, it proved to act more like a seasonal fire, clearing out some thickets and inspiring some new growth.

The debate hooked into a central analytical tension that has characterized the field of environmental history. Some environmental historians have concentrated on the so-called material dimensions of history – ecology and political economy or modes of production. Others have looked primarily at changing ideas about the natural world. This book as a whole does not take a side on the issue of whether environmental history should hew to a more materialist path, or a more representational or cultural one; proponents and practitioners of both approaches are included. There is clearly a need for both kinds of histories, as well as for studies that show the interrelationship between the material and the ideological on all levels.
Introduction

In some of the most illuminating studies, the environment is viewed not as a thing but as a set of relationships under ongoing construction; matters of perception, political economy, and the dynamics of living ecosystems are viewed together, using interdisciplinary approaches. Environmental historians have argued that nature is a force to reckon with; many regard it as an actor. In the best studies, nature is not portrayed as a stone-faced slab and society is not reduced to a monolith. A dynamic nature, rather, is fitted into riddled human history, so that the place of the familiar social fault lines of class, gender, and race can be traced over time and through space.

When they look for human relationships with the natural, environmental historians no longer confine our vision to the “Big Outside” (or the legislative chambers where the future of those places was decided). Now, environmental historians take us to the streets of Philadelphia, to the 9th ward of New Orleans, to golden arches along route 66. Having traveled over hill and dale – and into canyons, down rivers, and up mountain tops – environmental historians have struck out into new territory to examine cityscapes and spatial segregation, the body, climate change, energy, consumption, genetically modified flora and fauna, the technological reinvention of nature itself. They have probed the cultural and political construction of the wilderness idea, laid bare its class, gender, and racial prejudices, and opened room for investigations of environmental justice in the past. They have jettisoned the impulse to tell past environmental history as a dramatic conflict pitting “man” against “nature,” with nature as the inevitable, tragic loser. Environmental historians now search for a more complicated narrative, one that probes the social and cultural differences in the category of “man” and shows how they matter if we are to truly understand the role and place of nature in North American history. Environmental historians are as likely to look at human health as they are to look at efforts to preserve bison, redwood trees, or wild rivers; they are as likely to trace the connections among cockroaches, asthma, and an “urban ecology of inequality” in Harlem (Mitman 2007) as they are to trail a John Muir into the Sierra Nevada. An earlier generation of environmental historians often seemed to do just that, becoming camp followers of a sort, hoping to inspire themselves and others with the great cause of environmentalism by sanctifying a heroic few who found a way to rise above the industrial din of their day.

In the days of its emergence in the 1970s, the pioneers of environmental history, propelled by the spirit of environmentalism, sought a vista that would allow them to see into, and through, the smog of the contemporary metropolis. They wanted to reveal the lay of the land as it had changed over the nation’s industrializing history, uncovering the story of environmental declension as well as creating a pantheon of environmental heroes, from George Marsh, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir to Aldo Leopold, David Brower, and Rachel Carson. To be sure, from the beginning, American environmental historians have done much more than establish a canon of environmental heroes in the past. Early works showed the critical
importance of nature and biological exchanges in shaping the modern world. The diverse interests of historians interested in the environment coalesced in 1976, with the initial call to form the American Society for Environmental History. Over the next three decades, environmental history proved its worth by providing innovative perspectives on the history of the United States, its environs and its peoples. Over that time, the field evolved and diversified, and earned capital within the discipline of history and academia more generally.

By the beginning of the 1990s – marked by the roundtable forum on environmental history in the Journal of American History (Worster et al. 1990) and by the publication of William Cronon’s widely acclaimed Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (1991) – environmental historians had managed to elevate the status of their field within the profession. Most other historians finally took serious notice of the field, though there remain many misconceptions about the field (most common among them, that it is fired by a myopically presentist environmentalism, that it is misanthropic and not interested in people or class, race, and gender, and that it limits its attention to wilderness areas). But our field can now claim four Bancroft Prizes (for Donald Worster’s Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s, Cronon’s Nature’s Metropolis, Jack Temple Kirby’s Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South, and Thomas Andrews’ Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War – and the first Bancroft was given to Bernard DeVoto, a proto-environmental historian). An interdisciplinary field – often combining forces with the natural sciences, literary or eco-criticism, anthropology, science and technology studies, American studies, geography and other fields – environmental history is gaining interest across the academy and among the public. In addition to Americans’ continued fascination with wild places, there is a growing appetite for work exploring historical dimensions of food, climate change, urban environments, and sustainability or catastrophe.

In its organization, A Companion to American Environmental History seeks to showcase the vast array of works in our field and reflect as well as probe the ways we have pursued our work. Part One, “The Elements of Environmental History,” begins with Louis Warren’s essay on landmarks in the field, in which he wonderfully situates a place – one that many would like to imagine as existing outside of history and beyond the reach of humanity – in its historical, cultural, and ecological context. We then go to the elements themselves – or the roots, as Empedocles, the pre-Socratic philosopher and herbalist who is often credited with identifying the four elements of the Western tradition called them. In very different ways, Nancy Langston, Donald Worster, Stephen Pyne, and Rebecca Solnit explore Air, Earth, Fire, and Water. Our authors take their subjects seriously, and have tracked them not only on the continent of North America but to the ends of the earth (but they have stopped short of what Empedocles is said to have done in his pursuit of fire – plunging to his death in a volcano).
In Part Two, “Nature and the Construction of Society and Identity,” Colin Fisher, Chad Montrie, Susan Schrepfer and I examine what environmental historians have said, and might yet say, about the ascendant categories of analysis in the discipline of history – race, class, and gender. Environmental historians, contrary to stereotypes, have done important work showing what difference difference makes in understanding American relations with the natural world. Indeed, they have shown the reciprocity between making gendered, racial, or class identities and structuring access to, experiences of, and wealth derived from nature. Neil Maher then looks at the body – an important topic that has been explored by a number of different disciplines in recent years. Detractors of the various studies of the body often complain that there are no real bodies in this Foucault-inspired scholarship. Be that as it may, environmental historians, with their interest in materiality and nature as well as the cultural history of the body, have important insights into human beings as animals on this planet shaped by culture and nature.

Part Three, “The Nature of American Culture,” begins with Richard White’s essay situating environmental histories after the “cultural turn” – considering works that explore the boundaries between as well as the hybridization of “nature” and “culture.” Matthew Dennis, Aaron Sachs, and Finis Dunaway contribute three original essays to form the core of this section: they explore Americans’ multifaceted relationships to and ideas about nature from the colonial era through the twentieth century. This chronologically organized set of essays is flanked by David Rich Lewis’s authoritative and probing discussion of American Indian environmental ideas and practices and Andrew Kirk’s reflection on the “ecotopian” countercultural strain in post-World War II environmentalism. Tom McCarthy concludes the section with a broad-ranging and penetrating essay on that essential human activity – which is at once cultural, economic, and ecological – consumption.

Part Four, “Contact Zones: Americans Conjoining the Natural World,” presents a series of essays examining the different ways we have, and may yet, explore particular places where Americans have interacted with the natural world, from flora (Frieda Knobloch), fauna (Edmund Russell), forests (Ellen Stroud), fields (Sara Gregg), and food (Douglas Sackman) to cities and suburbs (Chris Sellers), energy (Brian Black), mining (Katherine Morrissey), water (Patty Limerick), oceans (Helen Rozwadowski), and the overseas landscapes Americans have colonized to capture the wealth of nature (Richard Tucker). To some extent, this section tends to be more material in orientation to balance the cultural orientation of Part Three. Still, that easy distinction is broken down, or transcended, in many of the essays in both sections.

Part Five, “Outside of the Grid: Place, Borders, and Scale,” explores the fundamental conceptual building blocks of our field. How do we carve up our field – conceptually, spatially, chronologically? The usual ways that US
history is bounded and periodized are often at odds with the way environmental historians have looked at the past. Sometimes, we have wanted to consider the long durée (of evolutionary or geologic time) rather than the usual half-decade or half-century focus of many monographs in US history. Sometimes, we have wished to look at regions or “bioregions” rather than states, as Dan Flores explores in his essay. Geographer Richard Walker and environmental historian Sarah Thomas show how the approaches of geography can continue to enrich and expand the analytical reach of environmental history. David Igler looks at the Northeastern Pacific as a water-connected region. His sharp essay helps us think about how we go about writing histories of places, whether they are littoral, oceanic, or, for that matter, land-locked. How are the places we study bounded (in our conceptions and out there in the real world)? When and to what effect are borders crossed? A volume on “American” environmental history is unsettling to many environmental historians, because we often look beyond political boundaries in writing our histories. Environmental history can play a key role in intimating the ways in which people and goods now enjoy, and have endured, social lives that are at once local and warped into transnational and global pathways and exchanges. In other words, following the movements of plants and animals in global commodity chains and through the Columbian, Pacific, and other exchanges is one way that environmental historians can continue to contribute to the transnationalization of American history. Focusing on the overlapping or comparable environmental histories of the United States and Canada, Ted Binnema maps a number of ways to do transborder history. Finally, Paul Sutter persuasively shows how US historians, whether or not they will trace the global or international connections in their topics, could see new horizons open up for their work by following the environmental histories written about nations and places beyond our borders.

As you will discover, each of the essays in this Companion takes on a different form. I did not impose a rigid grid to follow. Instead, I wanted essays to result from journeys the authors wished to make, so that they could best reflect their energies and convey their gifts of knowledge and insight. I proposed topics for each of the authors, but these were only points of departure. Some authors, to be sure, departed more quickly from where I left them than others. The first essayist in the volume, for example, went wildly off course – and I’m glad he did. I asked him originally to make a list of “landmark” studies in the field of environmental history. He instead went to the land itself, and wrote an essay that embodied the best of environmental history writing, turning “landmarks” from a metaphor into an orienting practice of interpretation.

But I never found out just what would have been on Warren’s list. The essays collectively portray the vast work that has been done in our field in little over a generation. Like other scholars in other fields, we stand on the shoulders of giants. But the giants sometimes stand on the rest of our shoulders.

In these essays written by both younger scholars and established leaders of the field (including several past presidents of the American Society for Environmental History), you will find handles and toeholds, but this is not a step-by-step guide to get you to a single peak. It does not chart every approach, nor does it document all of the climbs that have come before. Though this volume is robust in the range and scope of the essays, it is by no means exhaustive. Many topics, many places, remain unexplored. But many places are charted. Moreover, in each essay you are exposed to manners of exploration – multiple approaches to environmental history, if you will. You may be interested in a topic not touched on here directly. You may wish to adapt some of the approaches here – or, having seen what’s been done before, find your own way. Go off the trail. Light out for a new territory. My hope is that this volume will equip you as a scholar or a reader with orientation skills, an understanding of the places we’ve come from and encouragement to follow your curiosity about what lies beyond the next bend. In the end, what we are bringing back are tales from the field, as William Cronon (1992) reminds us.

History is always an alchemy of research and imagination. It is facts and stories – intermixed. Environmental history is people and places, flora and
fauna, soils and waters, fire and steel, growth and decay, work and leisure, race making and haymaking – intermixed. Environmental history insists that the great green, blue, and brown setting of human experience – the planet – always be in the mix of history. Without the earth, human history is diminished – in fact, it is eroded and parched. If it does not critically engage with the ecological context of human experience, history in effect turns humans into mummies – dehydrated shells of their real selves suspended in an airless netherworld. Environmental historians, by contrast, hope to put us fully in our place – and thereby make the past come alive.

Vashon Island, Washington

References


Part I

THE ELEMENTS
OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY
Chapter One

PATHS TOWARD HOME: LANDMARKS OF THE FIELD IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Louis S. Warren

This is nature – it must be.

Getting here was not easy. You drove five hours out of the city, then parked at Mammoth Ski Resort on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. There you unloaded your gear, and boarded the shuttle bus to the trailhead in Reds Meadow. On disembarking, you lifted your backpack and began a dusty hike through the foothills, until you came up a steep set of switchbacks to the outlet of Shadow Lake. Now, hiking along the lakeshore, you’ve come to your campsite. Here you pause.

You could hardly imagine a place more natural. The mountain slopes you ascend are part of the Ansel Adams Wilderness Area, which contains some 230,000 acres of the eastern Sierra Nevada. This rugged geography practically reverberates with the grand personalities and events of environmental history. A haunt of John Muir, who exhorted Americans to take to the wilderness as early as the 1870s, this mountain was first draped in the protective codes of conservation with a flurry of laws passed in 1890, when the federal government temporarily attached much of it to Yosemite National Park (which today abuts the Ansel Adams Wilderness just north of here). Three years later, the ground where you stand became part of the national system of “forest reserves” (now the national forests), and Theodore Roosevelt added more of the mountainside to that system in 1907 (Rose 2000: 77).¹

In 1964, Congress compounded its protections by enshrining this very spot in a designated wilderness area. The Wilderness Act of that year declared this “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Wilderness.net 2009; US Congress 1964). Originally called the Minarets Wilderness – after the jagged peaks that crown this section of the mountain range – authorities posthumously honored the nation’s leading wilderness photographer by renaming it the Ansel Adams Wilderness in 1984.
The stunning beauty of this place is fitting tribute to Adams, whose images of unpopulated mountains and meadows are imprinted across everything from calendars and posters to coffee cups and T-shirts. To a significant degree, Adams taught millions of Americans the meaning of wilderness as it became enshrined in the Wilderness Act, the place “where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

If you could look past the relatively few hikers and campers in view you might be tempted to see this as a mountain outside of history, a place indeed “untrammled by man.” From the crashing cataract in the stream below your campsite beside Shadow Lake to the thick trunks of Jeffrey pine surrounding it and upward to the soaring mountain peaks, this “community of life” could indeed fool you into thinking you have stepped into an Adams photograph.

But for a place without history, there sure are a lot of rules here. To enter the trailhead from the road, you had to show your permit to a ranger. This is a popular destination, and for the permit itself you had to apply months in advance, and pay a fee.

Then you had to find a way in. Entrance is permitted only on official trails, and you entered on the one assigned to you by the National Park Service, which administers this wilderness. Now that you’re here, you’re on deadline. The permit requires you to enter the wilderness on a particular day, and leave within a set number of days to make room for the next permittee.

The permit spells out a host of other regulations you must obey: You cannot have fires if you camp at elevations above 10,000 feet. You cannot cache equipment, and you cannot take along any wheeled cart to carry any of it. You cannot camp within fifty feet of any stream or lake, and you have to carry all your garbage out. You cannot play touch football or participate in any other “competitive event.” You cannot bring a dog.

These administrative proscriptions have a history of their own, some of which is inscribed into the very earth. To discourage cross-country rambling – which erodes slopes and damages meadows – the Park Service maintains trails (which you are required to use). In many places a steady column of hikers has worn them deep into the soil. On hard terrain, where pathways might become less legible, temporary laborers have carved them into the earth with shovels and adzes. The switchbacks about a mile below were lined with stones, and graded with carefully placed steps. In one place above, they are even blasted into bedrock with dynamite and reinforced with concrete.

The trails and rules serve similar purposes. They exist because so many visitors resort to these peaks that they easily reproduce urban problems. Thus, if you collect water from that cascade below, you would be wise to endure the tedium of pumping it through a filter to avoid ingesting *giardia intestinalis*, a parasite that infests watersheds all over the rural US in part
because of the feces of backcountry hikers. (Containing giardia is one of the reasons for the ban on camping within fifty feet of a lake or stream.)

The rules also stipulate you must stow your food in a small, fiberglass barrel provided by Forest Service headquarters. This “bear can” is impervious to assault by the black bears. Once the animals were rare, but in the last two decades the abundant refuse and ill-tended provisions of hikers have provided them with enough food to colonize this mountain, even to elevations where they have little or no natural habitat.

So authorities manage hikers to preserve as much as possible of the “untrammeled” wilderness experience they – you – seek. The rules are a means of making this landscape look and feel the way you want, reflecting the fact that you are part of a powerful constituency that deploys votes and money to support the regulatory system that governs this slope. It is not too much to say that if recreationists like you were not here then the Ansel Adams Wilderness would not be here either. The condition of this mountain is partly an expression of the power of its visitors.

And this is a remarkable thing, because wherever you might be from, the vast majority of people who visit here actually live in distant cities and suburbs. How did the mountain end up in the hands of people who live so far away, in landscapes so different from this one? What compels so many of them to seek respite in this place? How is this landscape connected to the one they flee or, more specifically, how has the making of this place been connected to the making of that one? What are the implications of city-dweller dominance for near-by people, and for the natural systems of this mountain, and how did the government – “the state” in scholarly parlance – gain the power to direct your travels and your behavior across a landscape that symbolically represents anarchic American freedoms?

Environmental historians explore the changing connections between people and nature, a project that has been dominated by questioning, abrading, interrogating, and otherwise troubling the boundary between nature and culture. In recent years, they have expanded their field to include landscapes close to most homes, and the environmental history of suburb and city is now a major component of our work (Hurley 1995; Tarr 1996; Kelman 2003; Orsi 2004; Klinge 2008; Melosi 2008; Walker 2008a). This essay, which introduces some of the major insights and debates of environmental history, might just as easily have considered a city as a wilderness area.

But in the end, to confront the landscape of the Ansel Adams Wilderness is to risk a profound sense of bewilderment at how a superficially pristine and natural landscape in fact represents a weird and potent mix of country and city, nature and culture, a mélange whose history is complex, confusing, and for that reason all the more intriguing. Thinking as a historian on this journey means confronting questions of law and the state, race and class and gender, work and leisure, the confluence of the natural and the artificial, and the forces that draw them together. To find your way through
this place and its history is to discover that the Ansel Adams Wilderness is less a world apart from the city than a peculiar, contingent expression of the city’s connections to the most remote rural landscapes. To understand what you see on the trail to Mt. Ritter and back is to travel not only through space but to consider key connections to environmental histories of country, city, and the spaces between.

Your backpack weighs in around 60 pounds. Loaded with almost everything you need for your survival, it suggests a cultural connection to the mountains and your ecological separation from them. Onerous as it is, it is also a material, historical legacy of Victorian naturalists like John Muir, who first crossed the Sierra in 1869, descending toward the eastern lowlands via a canyon not far north of where you are standing at Shadow Lake. Like you, he was a seasonal visitor, a lowland dweller who sought respite from his daily cares in the sublime mountain peaks and canyons. And like you, he carried urban goods on his back, everything he required for his journey.

As he made his way down this eastern Sierra slope, he encountered a band of Indians from Mono Lake headed the other direction, “on their way to Yosemite for a load of acorns” (Muir 1911: 294).

In that passing, two ways of seeing the Sierra Nevada and of understanding its creatures also passed. Muir was hiking for fun. The Mono Paiutes were hiking for food.

Muir and the Monos differed, too, on what these mountains were. Muir saw them through a lens at once secular and religious. An intellectual heir to Romantics like William Wordsworth and William Blake, his nature was the home of a God who seemed, after the scientific and industrial advances of the eighteenth century, profoundly distant from everyday experience. Although Muir published scientific articles on the geologic origins of the Sierra, his mountain wilderness was also benign and holy, the creation of a decidedly merciful God who intended it to serve as “the People’s Playground.”

The Mono Paiutes also loved the mountains, and still do, but in ways profoundly different from Muir. To them as to many other Indians, the land was not part of a unitary “Nature” but the home of many powerful spirits who had to be appeased to retain luck in the hunt, in childbirth, in health. Good fortune flowed only to those who made the proper offerings and gifts to spirits like Kwi’ina, Golden Eagle, who created the Sierra Nevada when he flew so low his wings touched the soft mud of the young earth and raised it into mountain peaks (Beesley 2004; Lee 1998; Heizer and Elsasser 1980; Nelson 1983).

For Mono Paiutes, the mountains were not a mere playground, but home. They played here, to be sure, but unlike Muir and you, they also worked here, fashioning lodges, food, and tools from these forests. You can believe in a mythical land, untouched and “untrammeled” if you want, but if you know where to look there are traces of Indian occupation – Indian