

The State of the Art of Brazilian Environmental History

Conferences, labs, and media

Two international events held roughly ten years apart signal that environmental history in Brazil is flourishing. In May 2008, the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Belo Horizonte hosted the 4th Symposium of the Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History (SOLCHA), attended by over 200 scholars from Latin America, Spain, Canada, the United States, England, India and South Africa. In July 2019, the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) in Florianópolis received some 400 researchers from around the globe for the Third World Congress of Environmental History, sponsored by the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO). Brazil was able to accommodate these major events because its researchers in the field of environmental history are integral to worldwide scientific communities, having formed strong networks among local, regional and national scholars. Furthermore, host universities and federal funding agencies provided support, reflecting the prestige accorded to environmental history by the Brazilian academic community as a whole.

The Fourth SOLCHA Symposium was chaired by Regina Horta Duarte, coordinator of the History and Nature Research Group, based at the UFMG. The Third World Congress was chaired by Eunice Nodari, leader of the Laboratory on Immigration, Migration, and Environmental History (LABIMHA/UFSC), and vice-chaired by Lise Sedrez of the Laboratory of History and Nature at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (LABHEN/UFRJ).¹ The local steering committee included researchers from institutes across the country, reflecting a nationwide web of active research groups, all with ties to Master's and doctoral programmes. Both the Fourth SOLCHA Symposium and the Third World Congress were landmark events that opened new frontiers in the development of environmental history in Brazil. If the Symposium did much to reinforce the presence of the field within Brazilian academia, the Congress can be expected to lend it even greater momentum.

Brazil also convenes local and national events on a regular basis. Since 2010, LABIMHA/UFSC has organized biennial symposia in Environmental History and Migrations, always featuring international guests. The Environmental History Work Group has been active inside the National History Association (ANPUH) since 2013 and currently includes 185 members. It sponsors

1. For LABIMHA, UFSC, see: <https://labimha.ufsc.br/>. For LABHEN, UFRJ see <https://labhen.historia.ufrj.br>

symposia and courses at its biennial countrywide conferences and state meetings, which take place on alternate years.²

Brazilian groups and laboratories are engaging in a variety of research and dissemination projects. At the UFRJ, LABHEN hosts the specialised John Wirth library and the Online Library of Environmental History (BOHA), where users have access to bibliographies covering scholarship produced in and about Brazil, by topic or region. As one of its tasks, the History and Nature research group at UFMG runs the science communication programme ‘As4Estações’ (The 4 seasons), aired weekly on the university’s radio station. Its podcasts are available on YouTube and Spotify.³

Exhibits

Inaugurated in Rio de Janeiro in 2015, the Museum of Tomorrow was designed with the help of researchers from a number of fields, including the historian José Augusto Pádua of LABHEN/UFRJ, who serves on the institute’s Scientific Committee. The goal of this applied science museum is to foster debate about today’s challenges and tomorrow’s potential. Conceptually and spatially, the fulcrum of its five sectors (Cosmos, Earth, Anthropocene, Tomorrows and Us) is the Anthropocene age. Depicting humans as a geological force, the exhibits address such themes as global heating, biodiversity, sustainability, and coexistence.⁴

Noteworthy publications in Portuguese

Brazilian researchers of environmental history have made many significant contributions in English and so are accessible to readers worldwide. There are several additional titles released in Portuguese over the last ten years which deserve special mention and are detailed below.

- Luciana Murari, *Natureza e cultura no Brasil, 1870–1922* [Nature and culture in Brazil] (São Paulo: Alameda, 2009). 470 pp.
- José Luiz de Andrade Franco and José Augusto Drummond, *Proteção à natureza e identidade nacional no Brasil, 1920–1940* [The protection of nature and national identity in Brazil] (Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz, 2009). 267 pp.

The study of the relations between culture and nature is pivotal to understanding Brazilian society since the size of the country’s territory and its natural diversity have been fundamental in the formation of a national identity and human development. Murari turns to fiction and non-fiction prose from three generations of intellectuals to investigate a multifaceted cultural movement,

2. For Environmental History Work Group, ANPUH, see <http://gthistoriaambiental.org.br/>

3. For AS4ESTAÇÕES podcast, see <https://www.youtube.com/c/AsQuatroEstações> (also available at Spotify – As Quatro Estações)

4. For Museum of Tomorrow, see <https://museudoamanha.org.br/pt-br>

where a mystical understanding of a vibrant natural world coexists alongside a view of nature as a roadblock to modernity.

From the perspective of a cultural history of science, Franco and Drummond explore how Brazilian scientists safeguarded nature, with a spotlight on the First Conference to Protect Nature, held in 1934. The scientists featured in these pages were defenders of a nationalist project led by a strong, interventionist State and, as such, they hoped to play a defining role in crafting public policies on the rational use and protection of natural resources.

The environmental history of the forest is an essential topic in a country whose vast tropical forests are critical for the health of the planet. Understanding the cultural traditions and the diversity of actors and interests linked to tropical forests requires diligent documented research, moving beyond the mere description of progressive destruction. These two books offer original contributions:

- **Dora Shellard Corrêa, *Paisagens sobrepostas: índios, posseiros e fazendeiros nas matas de Itapeva (1723–1930)* [Overlapping landscapes: Indians, illegal tenants, and large farmers in the Itapeva forests] (Londrina: Eduel, 2013). 274 pp.**
- **Diogo de Carvalho Cabral, *Na presença da floresta: Mata Atlântica e história colonial* [In the presence of the forest: the Atlantic Forest and colonial history] (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond/FAPERJ, 2014). 536 pp.**

Corrêa surveys two centuries of forest history in southwestern São Paulo, where colonisers rejected or belittled earlier forms of settlement and buried the memory of indigenous peoples, small farmers, and peasants. Her analysis probes transformations of this landscape and the various ways in which the forest has been socially appropriated. Cabral's thought-provoking account questions the centrality of humans in the history of the Atlantic Forest during the colonial period. He examines non-human agency, which he sees as playing a decisive role in political, social, economic, and cultural processes. He demonstrates that the forest is not just a stage but rather an active, multiple, and complex historical agent.

The following two books address the history of agriculture in a frank dialogue with environmental history, grounded in thoroughgoing archival research:

- **Clayton Márcio da Silva, *De agricultor a farmer: Nelson Rockefeller e a modernização da agricultura no Brasil* [From rural worker to farmer: Nelson Rockefeller and the modernization of agriculture in Brazil] (Guarapuava: Editora Unicentro, 2015). 231 pp.**
- **Sandro Dutra e Silva, *No Oeste, a terra e o céu: a expansão da fronteira agrícola no Brasil Central* [In the West, the earth and the sky: the expansion of the agricultural frontier in Central Brazil] (São Paulo: Mauad X, 2017). 303 pp.**

Silva discusses projects to modernise Brazilian agriculture technologically from 1946 to 1961 and the initiatives of the American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA). Because the agency

met with both resistance and support, Brazilian farmers and public authorities had mixed feelings about US ideas and practices, and project implementation entailed protracted negotiations. Dutra e Silva narrates the history of the Brazilian West as an agricultural frontier in the context of a Westward March, being a government project from the 1930s through 1950s. He considers how expanding settlement transformed the natural environment and examines the myths that were fashioned about the region as a Promised Land. He analyses Brazil-US relations with the frontier as an agency for interacting with nature and transforming it. The Brazilian West was not only a frontier for agricultural activities but also for livestock raising and mining.

Collections

Dozens of collections have been published about Brazilian environmental history and it would be impossible to list all in this brief Notepad. Two are especially comprehensive and were written by authors who are representative of Brazil's academic arena.

- José Luiz de Andrade Franco, Sandro Dutra e Silva, José Augusto Drummond and Giovana Tavares (eds), *História Ambiental*, 2 vols. [Environmental History] (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2012/2016).
- Eunice Nodari, Miguel Mundstock de Carvalho and Paulo Zarth (eds), *Fronteiras fluidas: Florestas com Araucárias na América Meridional* [Fluid borders: araucaria forests in South America] (São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2018). 201 pp.

The first work offers over thirty essays covering a range of topics, eras and regions across the history of Brazil; there are contributions by Rogério de Oliveira, Lise Sedrez, Haruf Espindola, Alessandra Carvalho, Jó Klanovicz, Gilmar Arruda, Eunice Nodari and José Pádua, as well as by all editors. The second collection includes seventeen essays focusing on araucaria forest destruction, extractive activities, symbolic and cultural meanings, and protection and conservation. The chapters are by Ely Bergo de Carvalho, Marlon Brandt, Esther Rossi, Marcos Gerhardt, Samira Moretto, Robson Laverdi and others, in addition to the editors.

REGINA HORTA DUARTE
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil

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