

The United States in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This seventh issue of *USAbroad* aims to look at American history and politics through an environmental lens and reframe the United States' upward trajectory as a world power in the context of the Anthropocene. In particular, each article offers a unique way to view the intersection of American history, politics, society, and natural resources, showing how the rise of US power—from the late 19th-century imperial project to 20th-century techno-politics—is inextricably linked to the natural elements.

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Gaetano Di Tommaso is a researcher at the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies in Middelburg, the Netherlands. His research focuses on the role of natural resources in US history. In particular, he is interested in how US extraction and use of raw materials, especially fossil fuels, have impacted life and politics on different scales, from local environments and communities to global ecosystems.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, ‘Anthropocene’ has emerged as a powerful term to indicate a new epoch in Earth’s history, marked by the significant impact of human presence on the planet’s climate and ecosystems. Although the term still awaits formal approval by the scientific community as an official geologic time division, its scholarly relevance is broadly recognized. This appellation reflects the nature of the modern age, dominated by human-made processes with profound environmental implications. Industrial emissions, crop pollination, and species extinction are only a few indicators of an era in which human activity has become the dominant force affecting global change, surpassing even geological forces in its impact.¹

In this transformative era, the United States has been a central actor of change. There are several inescapable signs of the country’s impact on the planet. The US accounts for about 20 percent of global energy consumption. It boasts the world’s largest economy and military capabilities, is the leading oil producer and consumer, and represents the primary source of hazardous waste and plastic. Its disproportionate influence on the global environment’s anthropization in the last century can be followed through the rate of its CO₂ emissions, which is still about twice that of all EU countries combined; its increasing mechanization and industrialization of agriculture; its continuous investments into extractive practices; its progressive commodification of natural resources; and the resulting degradation of land, water, and air.²

The role of the US in propelling the so-called ‘Great Acceleration’—the most recent stage of the Anthropocene age, defined by the rapid and unprecedented increase in human activities, particularly in the second half of the 20th century—cannot be overstated.³ The progressive intensification of human-nature interaction has led to profound alterations in Earth’s ecosystems and biogeochemical processes, precipitating critical existential threats, including ocean acidification, deforestation, desertification, and biodiversity deterioration. The optimistic narratives of technological advancement that have characterized visions of American progress in the last century have long obfuscated more critical assessments of US involvement in these ongoing transformations of local and global environments. In fact, US private and public parties have spearheaded innovations that, while driving economic growth, have had far-reaching and, at times, irreversible environmental consequences. The mass adoption of automobiles, petrochemical industry expansion, nuclear technology proliferation, and widespread use of digital communication emblemize American ingenuity’s far-reaching implications for landscapes and planetary health. In the last few decades, this duality has prompted a reevaluation of the relationship between technologically driven, American-led growth and the management of environmental resources, urging scholars to consider the sustainability of such advancements and their impact on ecosystems at multiple scales.⁴

1. Purdy Jedediah, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
2. See, for example, Lucas Bessire, *Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Katherine C. Epstein, *Torpedo: Inventing the Military-Industrial Complex in the United States and Great Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Hannah Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of “Green” Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Bob Johnson, *Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019); Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); John Lauritz Larson, *Laid Waste! The Culture of Exploitation in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Marco Armiero, *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Adam M. Romero, *Economic Poisoning: Industrial Waste and the Chemicalization of American Agriculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021); Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
3. John R. McNeill, Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
4. See, for example, Christina Dunbar-Hester, *Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *Poison in the Well: Radioactive Waste in the Oceans at the Dawn of the Nuclear Age* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Gabrielle Hecht, ed., *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); David Kinkela, *DDT and the American Century: Global Health, Environmental Politics, and the Pesticide that Changed the World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Alice Mah, *Petrochemical Planet: Multiscalar Battles of Industrial Transformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023); Edwin A. Martini, ed., *Proving Grounds: Militarized Landscapes, Weapons Testing, and the Environmental Impact of US Bases* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015); Martin V. Melosi, *Effluent America: Cities, Industry, Energy, and the Environment* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001); Neil Shafer Oatsvall, *Atomic Environments: Nuclear Technologies, the Natural World, and Policymaking, 1945-1960* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2023).

Equally important is the intersection of environmental justice and social inequality, which has added a complex layer to the Anthropocene discussion. The nation's policies and practices—and their projection on a global scale—have placed a hefty burden on marginalized and low-income communities and have highlighted the nexus between social injustice and environmental degradation. In response to the increasingly evident imbalance in societal environmental exposure and pressure from activists, historiography has evolved to develop approaches that examine the ecological footprint of American choices and scrutinize the social structures that perpetuate inequality. Integrating considerations of race, class, and gender into the study of environmental history has proved essential for a more multifaceted and in-depth understanding of the current era, one that recognizes the differential impacts of environmental change and the importance of equitable solutions.⁵

The very concept of the Anthropocene compels us to reconsider the actual scope and methodology of historiography. As historians confront the vast scale of human influence on the planet, they increasingly adopt interdisciplinary approaches, combining insights from the natural sciences, economics, and cultural studies. This integration enriches our historical understanding and opens up novel perspectives on the multifaceted relationship between humanity and the natural world. Such cross-disciplinary collaboration is essential for crafting narratives that are planetary in scope, transcending national boundaries to explore truly interconnected dimensions of human-environment relations. This call for a planetary narrative emphasizes the need for histories attuned to the diversity of experiences and the specificities of place, underscoring the varied ways different communities engage with and affect their environments.⁶

Scholars have worked to integrate environmental considerations into the humanities and social sciences, leading to a rapidly expanding scholarship that dissects the ties between culture, politics, and the environment in the United States, a country that has been appropriately defined as a 'superpower by nature.'⁷ This issue of *USAbroad* seeks to further this dialogue by situating the US in the context of the Anthropocene and exploring how the American socio-political-economic trajectory and the environment combined. This 2024 issue focuses on understanding America's dynamic exchanges through various issues and approaches, with articles that help us uncover new historiographical opportunities and foster further reflections on human-environment interactions and the critical issues of our time.

The foundation for this issue was laid during a workshop titled "The United States in the Anthropocene," held in June 2023 at the University of Bologna in Forlì, Italy. The event featured nine presenters from six countries and involved Kristin Hoganson (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) and Davide Orsini (Rachel Carson Center) as keynote speakers. The two-day event fostered discussions on a wide range of topics and intertwined different disciplinary fields with thematic panels such as "Ideas, Narratives, and Actors of Anthropogenic Change," "Critical Approaches in Art and Literature," and "Policies and Strategies of Environmental Governance." The conversation stressed the environmental undertones in American historical and political discourse and was enriched by the exploration of environmental dimensions in US culture, arts, and society.

The two keynotes very fittingly bookended the event. Davide Orsini's talk, "US Nuclear Power and the Global Environment: An Epic of Solutionism from Containment to Climate Change," combined the findings of his most recent work with current environmental struggles. His address challenged the resurgence of nuclear power as a sustainable energy solution by highlighting unresolved issues in nuclear waste management and safety. Kristin Hoganson, instead, presented the early framework of her new research project, "Expanding Footprints, Imperial and Carbon: US Infrastructure Building in the Circum-Caribbean during the Bad Neighbor Era." Her proposed study aims to examine the envi-

5. Robert D. Bullard, *The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Lerner Steve, *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Ellen Griffith Spears, *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).
7. Netherlands American Studies Association, 2021/2022 conference, 'Superpower by Nature: The Environment and American Studies,' University College Utrecht, May 20-21, 2022.

ronmental implications of US business ventures and imperial power projection, linking infrastructure development in the Circum-Caribbean to broader environmental and geopolitical narratives.

This 2024 issue collects a portion of the workshop's contributions and enriches the field of American studies in Italy. It also contributes to a global conversation on environmental themes and the US's role in environmental change. Each article offers a unique way to view the intersection of American history, politics, society, and natural resources. Such research shows how the rise of US power—from the late 19th-century imperial project to 20th-century techno-politics—is inextricably linked to the natural elements.

Four of the articles—Dean Clay's examination of the Sierra Club's role in conservation and the expansion of US power projection, Paul Hutchinson's analysis of masculinity and environmental disaster in Dust Bowl-era photography, Ludovica Di Gregorio's essay on the Reagan Administration's environmental diplomacy, and Leonardo Gnisci's study of Russell E. Train's influence on American environmental diplomacy—directly address the interplay between the US and its environment. The fifth, Jacopo Bonasera's exploration of W. Vogt and H.F. Osborn's neo-Malthusian approach to discussing the balance between natural resources and population growth, shifts the framework of analysis. It broadens the conversation to incorporate global and existential concerns that have shaped the debate around the use and abuse of natural resources many times during the last century. Collectively, the articles highlight the interdependence between human activities and our shared environment and further emphasize the need to integrate the study of natural characteristics into our understanding of modern society.

In his insightful “The Sierra Club: Environmental Activism and US Empire, 1892-1900,” Dean Clay (Wilberforce Institute) discusses the Sierra Club's role in the American conservation movement and its inadvertent contributions to the expansion of US imperial interests between 1892 and 1900. By advocating for the preservation of natural landscapes and the establishment of national parks and forests, the Sierra Club influenced the country's conservation ethos. However, through the promotion of wilderness areas as pristine and untouched, it also fostered an approach that aligned with imperialistic practices and objectives, such as the marginalization and displacement of indigenous populations and the expansion of federal land control. Clay's analysis, mainly focusing on the Club's efforts around Mount Rainier National Park and the formation of the National Forest Commission, reveals how conservation efforts were entangled with national identity, US power, and governmental sovereignty over natural resources.

Paul Hutchinson (University of Bristol), meanwhile, focuses on the Farm Security Administration's photographic documentation during the 1930s Dust Bowl. Here, the spotlight is on the representation of masculinity. While iconic images like Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* have received much attention, Hutchinson's “Picturing the Migrant Father of the Dust Bowl” uncovers the lesser-explored narratives of men, especially fathers and farmers, grappling with the crisis. The FSA's photographs present a critique of men's agricultural practices and depict them as requiring governmental direction, all the while striving to maintain traditional patriarchal family structures. Hutchinson's article significantly enriches our understanding of masculinity and its representation in the face of environmental disasters.

Moving forward into the twentieth century, in “Freedom from What? Environment and Population in W. Vogt and H.F. Osborn,” Jacopo Bonasera (University of Bologna/Italian Institute of Philosophical Studies) delves into the influential works of William Vogt and Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr. within the environmental conservation movement. The article examines the crucial intersection of population dynamics and environmental sustainability, drawing upon Neo-Malthusian principles. Vogt's and Osborn's seminal works, *Road to Survival* and *Our Plundered Planet*, challenged contemporary growth and consumption policies, advocating for a reconceptualization of progress within environmental constraints. By highlighting their arguments' ethical and societal implications, Bonasera's article underscores the enduring relevance of their ideas in contemporary conversations on environmental sustainability and the necessity of achieving a balance between development and the natural environment.

Russell E. Train, another figure deeply embedded in the political debate around environmental issues in the second part of the twentieth century, is instead the focus of the article by Leonardo Gnisci

(University of Cassino and Southern Lazio). Train's formative influence on American environmental diplomacy under President Nixon is aptly presented in Gnisci's study. As a committed environmentalist, Train's contributions were instrumental in incorporating environmental protection into national and international agendas. His activism facilitated the use of environmental issues as diplomatic instruments, exemplified by the US-USSR environmental bilateral agreement and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement with Canada in 1972. "Russell E. Train: The Man Behind Nixon's Environmental Diplomacy" effectively shows how Train's endeavors marked a shift in diplomatic approaches to environmental issues while fostering US leadership in international environmental negotiations.

The discussion of US environmental policies continues in "The American Presidency's Discretionary Power in the Adoption of Bilateral and Multilateral Environmental Agreements: the Reagan Administration in the 1980s." In her article, Ludovica Di Gregorio (Catholic University of Milan) critically examines the Reagan Administration's stance on international environmental diplomacy in the 1980s, focusing on the contrasting outcomes of the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion and the US-Canada acid rain negotiations. Di Gregorio argues that Reagan's economic-focused domestic agenda and administrative powers played pivotal roles in shaping the United States' participation in these environmental agreements. While Reagan's strategic support was crucial to the success of the Montreal Protocol, his domestic priorities impeded progress on acid rain issues with Canada. This analysis sheds light on the complex dynamics at play in international environmental policy, demonstrating how presidential aims and domestic agendas can both facilitate and hinder environmental protection efforts at the global level.

Davide Orsini (Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society) authored the column *Bringing History Back In*, which centers on nuclear technology's promise and inevitable limits in solving our current energy and climate crises. Orsini argues that the optimistic expectations for nuclear energy are based on an ideology of containment, a set of discursive and material practices fostering the belief that nuclear technology can be effectively isolated from the environment. Based on a discussion of the historical evolution of containment strategies and recent nuclear decommissioning cases, "The Nuclear Anthropocene and the Myth of Containment in the US" shows that such a conviction is still wishful thinking more than an achievable goal.

By examining the US's impact on the use, exploitation, and conservation of natural resources, this issue of *USAbroad* discusses how human, political, and social geographies have interacted with the physical surroundings. It explores actions, ideas, and technologies that explain environmental outcomes. More broadly, it seeks to understand how the environment figures in the study of American history, culture, and politics. This endeavor represents not just a culmination of scholarly work but a step in an ongoing dialogue that challenges us to reconsider contemporary historical and political narratives in the age of the Anthropocene.