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978-0-521-84853-4 - An Environmental History of Latin America

Shawn William Miller

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AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICA

This book, in a series of short historical episodes, narrates the mutually vital and reciprocally mortal relationship between tropical nature and human culture in Latin America. Covering a period that begins with ancient Amerindian civilizations and concludes in today's pulsating cities, the work offers an original synthesis of the current scholarship on Latin America's environmental history and argues that tropical nature has played a central role in shaping the region's historical development. Human attitudes and appetites, from Aztec cannibalism to more contemporary forms of conspicuous consumption, figure prominently in the story. However, characters such as hookworms, whales, hurricanes, bananas, dirt, butterflies, and guano make more than cameo appearances. Recent scholarship has overturned many of our egocentric assumptions about humanity's preeminent role in history. Seeing Latin America's environmental past from the perspective of many centuries illustrates that former American civilizations were more powerful than previously thought, and that current civilizations are potentially as vulnerable.

Shawn Miller is the author of *Fruitless Trees: Portuguese Conservation and Brazil's Colonial Timber* (2000) and has published on Latin America's environmental history in the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Forest & Conservation History*, and *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*.

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If there is an earthly paradise anywhere on earth, I judge it is not far from these regions.

Amerigo Vespucci

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SHAWN WILLIAM MILLER

Brigham Young University



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Despite the youthful nature of environmental history both in and of Latin America, there is a small but growing body of exciting work on which I have depended heavily. New historical studies are appearing each year on an ever-expanding range of topics. Moreover, Latin America's environmental past has interested more than just historians, and I have consulted excellent studies by geographers, anthropologists, natural scientists, and others. I have kept footnotes and other scholarly apparatus to a minimum, but those authors whose names appear in this book's "Suggested Further Readings" have made direct contributions to this survey's contents as well as to my own thinking. Some of the research and conclusions are my own, for which I take sole responsibility. As the field is new, consistently bear in mind that we have only just begun to seek answers to questions about the historical experience in tropical nature, and we have certainly not yet asked the most important questions. Many of my most forceful assertions may in fact be open questions, and the best measure of this book's success will be if readers take an interest in the questions rather than accept what I present as uncontested ground.

By name, I thank Herbert Klein, Stuart Schwartz, Kendall Brown, and Jeffrey Shumway for their personal encouragements and professional contributions to this book. Above all, I thank my family, especially Kelly, to whom this too is dedicated.



Map 1. Middle America. Drawn by author. (Baseline map courtesy of the Department of Geography, Brigham Young University.)

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Map 2. South America. Drawn by author. (Baseline map courtesy of the Department of Geography, Brigham Young University.)