

# Introduction

## Getting Our Hands Dirty

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ONE OF THE CHIEF aims of this volume is to address one of the most persistent and troublesome questions in colonial studies, namely, what specifically is *colonial* about the colonial state? What distinguishes its actions from those of other states? How does power change in the process of being exported overseas? This question has been traditionally discussed in highly theoretical terms and has produced elaborate schema of the many varieties of colonialism and colonial power.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades it has inspired groundbreaking studies of neocolonialism, internal colonialism, informal empire, the colonial gaze, and decolonization; it also informs many foundational texts of the broad intellectual movement known as postcolonialism.<sup>2</sup> And yet, partly because colonialism has been so vigorously theorized, defining it has become increasingly complicated. The essays presented here demonstrate how analyses of environmental practices in colonial contexts can clarify the nature of colonialism by showing how colonialism worked on the ground and in practice. In *Cultivating the Colonies: Colonial States and Their Environmental Legacies*, we examine how states translated ideas about the management of exotic nature and foreign people into practice, how they literally “got their hands dirty” in the

business of empire. The relationship between power and nature can reveal much about the nature of power.

As Richard Grove, one of the leading figures in the study of the environmental history of colonial empires, pointed out more than ten years ago, there are two reasons why the history of colonialism is important to understanding the global history of the environment. First, European rule in the tropical colonies showed the extraordinary impact of humans on the environment and the speed at which they could destroy nature through deforestation, agricultural projects, and building new settlements. Second—and as a reaction to the first impact—it was under colonialism that states first began to take a scientific interest in nature protection through soil and forest conservation.<sup>3</sup> One of the contributors to this volume, Peder Anker, has demonstrated elsewhere how ecology as a discipline developed in the context of British imperialism and how its principles were influenced by the language of colonialism. Managing plants and managing people were not, after all, very different from each other, according to the views of men like Jan Christian Smuts, who supported a holistic and Romantic version of botany during his political career in South Africa and as chancellor of Cambridge University.<sup>4</sup> Other environmental historians who have turned their attention to empire agree that “European imperialism was . . . inseparable from the history of global environmental change” (Beinart and Hughes 2007, 1).<sup>5</sup> We might therefore think of the colonial milieu as the generator of extreme human reactions to the environment, expressed as both positive and negative forces. When Europeans were not clearing the tropical forests, they were discussing how to manage them at meetings of the Royal Geographic Society in London and l’École nationale des eaux et forêts in Nancy. By choosing to focus on colonial states’ treatment of nature in this volume, we have selected a fertile field that shows us an impressive array of examples of colonial power and its workings. The diversity of cases presented here of the colonial treatment of nature lead us to a deeper understanding of the nature of the state itself.

The contributors to this volume offer no easy answers to the question of what is colonial about the colonial state. Some emphasize similarities between colonial states and other regimes, arguing that

colonizers exported domestic policies to foreign locales, or demonstrating profound continuities between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial attitudes toward the environment. Others contend that colonial policies represented departures both from the domestic agenda and from precolonial practices. As Peter Marshall (2003) has put it, the colonial state can be understood as both an evolution from its predecessor states and a revolutionary new development. Which of the two it was appears to be contingent and dependent on time, place, and the circumstances of the environmental transformation. We have therefore chosen to present a variety of answers in the case studies in this volume. Our general conclusion, based on the studies in *Cultivating the Colonies*, is that, owing to their global scope and perspective, at least some colonial states had the potential to configure power differently than their precolonial predecessors did, but this potential was not always realized in practice.

The organization of the essays in *Cultivating the Colonies* is based on the idea that colonial perceptions of the environment generally preceded colonial management of the environment. The first section, “Perceiving the Colonial Environment,” includes four essays, by Andrew Wear, Daniel Steinbach, Greg Bankoff, and David Biggs, on subjects ranging from health in the colonies to the use of aerial photography in managing farming. The second section, “Managing the Colonial Environment,” contains essays by Christopher Morris, Julia Lajus, Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, and Phia Steyn on the colonial manipulation of nature, including of wetlands, fisheries, medical practice, and the diet of indigenous people. The third section, “The Legacy of Colonialism,” concludes with essays by Elizabeth Lunstrum, Peder Anker, and Joseph Hodge that cover the postcolonial period and demonstrate how the experience of colonialism changed nature and the human relationship to nature profoundly, not only in colonial territories like Mozambique, but also in centers of knowledge production such as Oxford.

We have chosen this principle of organizing the book by the stages of colonialism and its interaction with the environment in order to deal effectively with essays ranging over a time period and geographical scope that are enormous. For example, Julia Lajus’s essay,

“Colonization of the Russian North: A Frozen Frontier,” begins in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with the settlement of a cultural group, the Pomor, in the Arctic and subarctic regions enclosed by the Barents and the White Seas. At the other chronological end of the scale, Elizabeth Lunstrum’s essay, “State Rationality, Development, and the Making of State Territory: From Colonial Extraction to Post-colonial Conservation in Southern Mozambique,” places us in a more conventional colonial environment, the southern part of Africa, and brings us to the latter half of the twentieth century, ending with the present-day debate over the design of an international park, the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park on the borders of Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

Within the three sections of *Cultivating the Colonies*, these authors debate and disagree with one another over our chief question: Is colonial management of the environment unique, or are its fundamental aspects common to all modern states? Or, to put this more directly with respect to the environment: Is there any evidence that colonial states were more destructive toward or transformative of the environment in larger ways than other modern states were? As the concept of colonialism evokes mostly negative connotations for the twenty-first-century reader, perhaps the immediate response would be in the affirmative: Colonial states must have been more destructive and more callous toward the environment than other states were. One need only think of what they did to people—who had agency; who could protest, run away, take up arms, and so on—in order to imagine what the colonial state and its agents would do to trees, which could not. Yet, as these authors reveal to us in their case studies, the answer is not so simple. Before summarizing the contribution of *Cultivating the Colonies* to this messy issue, we turn to some of the current scholarship on this question.

### *Colonialism and “High Modernism”*

Many scholars have studied colonialism by paying specific attention to its most obvious manifestation: the violent territorial aggression of

European states against the indigenous peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Other scholars, however, have chosen to focus on the study of colonialism as ideology. They investigate the colonial relationship not by examining the oppression of and abuses perpetrated against specific populations and regions by foreign powers, but by exploring modes of thought that permitted and even promoted these activities. Among the most influential of such works is James C. Scott's (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Scott's seminal book, while frequently cited in discussions of colonialism, is not explicitly about colonialism at all but rather about a type of state ideology that he calls "high modernism." Through a study of government-sponsored projects in early modern Europe, Soviet Russia, and elsewhere, Scott demonstrates a correlation between each state's political objectives and its preference for scientific theories and statistical data over folk knowledge and local practices. According to Scott, the theories and data deployed by technocratic authorities frequently minimized the complexities of local production, and development planners exploited science to transform these complexities into a simpler and more manageable reality. For example, a single-minded drive to increase agricultural yields in British-ruled Tanzania was rationalized by experts who proposed systems of monocropping, while discouraging efforts to understand the value of polycropping and ignoring local justifications for such an approach.<sup>6</sup> Science became a tool of the high-modernist state.

Colonial and postcolonial history certainly provide many examples of high modernism at work and of this ideology's disastrous effects on the environment.<sup>7</sup> However, as other scholars have argued in response to Scott, high modernism does not account for all aspects of colonial practices. Detailed, empirical knowledge of a region's ecological conditions could also be enrolled in the political and bureaucratic operations of the colonial state. Suzanne Moon (2004, 2007), for example, has focused on the case of early twentieth-century Netherlands East Indies, where a controversy over the sustainability of sugar and rice production offers insight into the political and economic motivations that spurred agricultural experts to seek ever-more-detailed empirical knowledge, the ultimate effect of which was to create an

unwieldy bureaucracy that made the colony harder rather than easier to manage. This technocratic approach became a crucial factor in consolidating the authority and credibility of the Netherlands East Indies Department of Agriculture as a producer of scientific knowledge, and in establishing this knowledge as the privileged basis for policies of colonial development.<sup>8</sup>

Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, which is referenced by many contributors to this collection, provides an important context for the case studies presented here by reminding us that much about colonial power was not unique to colonialism. There was often considerable continuity between the exercise of power in the colonial state and in the states that preceded and succeeded it. Furthermore, the picture of power is complicated by the fact that colonial states also often included dependencies and semicolonial areas. In early nineteenth-century Madras, for example, most minor court cases were heard by people whom the British referred to as "village headmen." This was part of the philosophy of "native agency" formulated by Thomas Munro, then governor of Madras, which also directed the colonizers to incorporate indigenous systems of land tenure and tax collection into their administrative policies. Although a chief obstacle in this respect was determining how these traditional systems actually functioned, "native agency" was viewed as an effective method of state-building during this early stage of colonial rule. After the crisis of the Sepoy Rebellion, and the establishment of the British India Office in the mid-nineteenth century, however, British-ruled India began to change and resembled the Mughal Empire less closely than it had before.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the answers offered in *Cultivating the Colonies* challenge the notion that the colonial state had such a deep and profoundly destructive effect on the environment as we might assume. For example, Phia Steyn's essay, "Changing Times, Changing Palates: The Dietary Impacts of Basuto Adaptation to New Rulers, Crops, and Markets, 1830s–1966," finds "very limited evidence that British colonial rule had any direct impact on Basuto food consumption."<sup>10</sup> European foodstuffs, such as tea and sugar, were instead introduced by French missionaries, who also created a market for wheat and maize that ultimately led to a regional shift from a sorghum-based diet to one based

on maize. Changes in the agricultural practices and environment of the Basuto people had thus already taken place by the time British indirect rule commenced in 1868, Steyn concludes.

In “The Science of Nature and the Nature of Science in the Spanish and American Philippines” Greg Bankoff examines how one colonial state perceived another. Bankoff sees the Spanish achievements in the fields of acclimatization and meteorology as the product of local knowledge that was discounted by the Americans when their occupation of the Philippines began in 1899. This dismissal, he claims, was part of the American strategy of colonial dominance and bore no relation to the actual merits of Spanish accomplishments. Little about the practices of these sciences in the Philippines changed in the transition from one colonial regime to another, even though the Americans declared that great scientific “progress” was made under their administration from the previous regime of unenlightened “darkness.” In fact, as Bankoff convincingly argues, the differences between Northern European and Southern European scientific traditions made it impossible for the Americans to appreciate the Spanish scientific contributions properly.

Kavita Sivaramakrishnan’s study, “Recasting Disease and Its Environment: Indigenous Medical Practitioners, the Plague, and Politics in Colonial India, 1898–1910,” analyzes how indigenous medical practitioners responded to the crisis in colonial relations precipitated by an outbreak of plague in urban Punjab at the turn of the twentieth century. Sivaramakrishnan’s essay avoids simple notions of a homogeneously hostile reaction to colonial directives from Punjabi physicians and instead highlights the sophisticated strategies they adopted to preserve their authority as healers. If anything, these physicians seemed more in agreement with colonial administrators than with the general population, and the distinction between elite and popular concepts of disease was probably as significant as differences between “Western” and “Indian” concepts. In some instances Punjabi physicians collaborated with British authorities and emerged as crucial links between the people of the region and the colonial administration.

Turning to a very different area of the world, Julia Lajus’s “Colonization of the Russian North: A Frozen Frontier” reminds us that the

reach of colonialism extended not just to the temperate and tropical regions but northward to the Arctic and subarctic ones as well. Her survey of the Russian colonization of the area between the Barents Sea and the White Sea from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries brings an unexpected part of the globe under the consideration of colonial history. The Russian state, throughout its various transformations, was a colonial power as well as a modernizing one, and Lajus demonstrates the effects of both these ideologies on the local people of the Russian North.

From the final section of the volume, Lunstrum's essay traces the history of state intervention in the environment of Massingir in southern Mozambique through three successive governments: the building of the Massingir Dam under the colonial Portuguese state; the reorganization of countryside into collective villages under the post-independence socialist government; and the creation, now in progress, of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park on the borders of Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. In her analysis, Lunstrum notes similarities among the three governments from the viewpoint of the local inhabitants of Massingir. Because the establishment of the park has displaced local residents for the third time in thirty years, many see the park as yet another attempt by the government to steal their land, even though Limpopo, located on the borders of previously hostile nations, was intended as a "Peace Park" that would turn the area into a neutral wilderness and help to heal old wounds. However, Lunstrum goes beyond this simple perception of an African nation in which nothing ever changes for the people over three successive governments. In fact, the socialist policies of the postcolonial government were an explicit rejection of Portuguese colonial exploitation and aimed to address the poverty of the inhabitants of Massingir. Thus—at least in the early days, before state promises of improvements failed to materialize—the socialist government enjoyed much more cooperation with the relocation from the residents than the colonial government had.

The third section of *Cultivating the Colonies* also includes Peder Anker's "Ecological Communication at the Oxford Imperial Forestry Institute," an analysis of a building that was constructed as a show-

case for many varieties of wood from throughout the British Empire. Anker contends that the architecture of this building mirrors British colonial policies and imperial values, creating a visual analog of the principles by which Occidental colonizers once ruled Oriental nature. Continuities between colonial and postcolonial environmental policies is also the theme of the essay that concludes the volume, Joseph Hodge's "Colonial Experts, Developmental and Environmental Doctrines, and the Legacies of Late British Colonialism." Instead of relying on interviews with local inhabitants, as Lunstrum does, Hodge examines the issue from a top-down perspective, looking at the careers of key British colonial officials to show how these individuals shaped the doctrine of development in the 1950s. The professional experience these men gained in the colonial service established them as credible authorities on now-independent states, enabling the perpetuation of their ideals and practices in the postcolonial world.

Collectively the case studies discussed so far offer a mostly negative answer to the question posed at the beginning of this introduction, asserting that there is little, if anything, specifically colonial about the power that the colonial state exercised over nature. By emphasizing the stability of African food ways and the careers of British agricultural experts who transitioned from a colonial to postcolonial world without missing a step on the ladder of promotion, the findings of these authors would suggest that there is little difference between a colonial use of power and how other states exercised their will. The significant aspect of state power is neither the use of a navy for overseas governance nor even the racial characteristics of colonizer and colonized, but the all-encompassing view of the state and its tools of cadastral maps and urban-planning commissions. These examples lead toward the conclusion that no specific environmental practices were unique to colonialism and that colonizers adapted rather than replaced existing strategies and mechanisms for managing both environmental resources and hazards.

While this is an important finding of several studies in this volume, other authors look to different colonial milieu, suggesting that the colonial and modern states are similar but not equivalent to each other. For example, in his essay, "Wetland Colonies: Louisiana, Guangzhou,

Pondicherry, and Senegal,” Christopher Morris argues that none of these river deltas in the United States, China, India, and West Africa

were pristine when colonized by Europeans, certainly not China and Asia, but not even relatively lightly touched North America. Nevertheless, the environmental transformations linked to colonialism were profoundly different, if not in scale, certainly in type, than any that preceded them. . . . It was the ideology of European colonialism, perpetuated by the modern state, rooted in Enlightenment science, economics, and political philosophy that made modern colonial environments different, because that ideology positioned Europeans, and Euro-Americans, as outside observers of the natural world and the people who inhabited it.<sup>11</sup>

In his comparison of four French colonies with similar natural environments, Morris shows that the colonizers not only acted upon the landscapes they found but also used their experiences in one region as a pattern for their activities in other ecologically comparable environments. If river deltas appeared familiar to European eyes, they probably had the same economic potential. It was the detached scientific gaze—described by Morris as the “ideology of European colonialism”—that could most readily recognize these commercial possibilities. Ideas about how to exploit this potential most efficiently for the benefit of the colonizers could be transferred from one river delta (or other natural phenomenon) to any other such location, including those back in Europe. Perhaps this potential was all the more apparent in places such as Guangzhou and Senegal because the scientist/colonial manager did not inhabit one colony only but circulated among several colonies throughout his career.<sup>12</sup>

The astonishing sweep of the global colonial gaze is also the subject of Andrew Wear’s essay, “The Prospective Colonist and Strange Environments: Advice on Health and Prosperity,” which explores the European discourse that flourished from the seventeenth to the twentieth century on prospective settlers’ health in foreign environments. Wear analyzes advice literature on how settlers could create healthier

environments by Europeanizing local agriculture. While temperate colonies were much more amenable to this process than tropical ones, Europeans also tried to find tropical landscapes that could be Europeanized, such as the hill stations in India and the highlands in East Africa.

Daniel Steinbach's essay, "Carved Out of Nature: Identity and Environment in German Colonial Africa," deals with a theme very similar to Wear's. It applies the much-studied and controversial concept of *Heimat* to an examination of how German colonizers understood nature in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Steinbach argues that German settlers dealt with the "strangeness" of their surroundings by reimagining African nature as identical with that of the *Reich*, as nature suitable to the development of the German national character. The barren deserts of Namibia, then a part of German Southwest Africa, were therefore regarded as an inhospitable climate in which the strong German character would be nurtured. At the opposite extreme were colonists who believed that the tropical climate of Tanzania, in what was at that time German East Africa, would weaken the German character, and that new settlers should therefore be routinely brought from the fatherland in order to safeguard the colonists' moral virtue as well as to promote the transformation of the African landscape through hunting and park regulations.

Morris's, Wear's, and Steinbach's contributions to this volume thus produce a slightly different answer to our question, which might be summed up as follows: The colonial state is one with a global and comparative perspective. Whatever a modern state did, the colonial state did in a bigger way, on a grander scale, involving more sites of contact and a more diverse range of people. Colonialism gave the French expertise in reengineering any riverine environment, not just that of the Rhône River. English colonists could speak with undisputed authority about temperate lands around the globe and the wealth and opportunity they offered to the potential settler, likening the climate of Tasmania to that of the French Riviera.

This global perspective had local applications. According to David Biggs in his essay, "Aerial Photography and Colonial Discourse on the Agricultural Crisis in Late-Colonial Indochina, 1930–1945," aerial

photography of the Red and Mekong river deltas conducted by the Service géographique de l'Indochine produced an Orientalist reading of human nature. It compared the methods used by northern and southern farmers to manage water, and supported the French belief that the genius of the intricate landscapes in the Red River delta was resident within northern peasants, and that the failure of flood dikes and canals in the Mekong Delta was due to southern peasants' inherent "laziness." While creating stereotypes, both negative and positive, about indigenous populations might appear to be a distinct feature of colonialism, one might also argue, in light of Eugen Weber's (1976) classic study, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*, that the French state had employed this strategy at home before putting it into practice in Asia. But what is remarkable about this particular instance of such mythmaking is its technology: the panoptic eye of the camera aimed from the heavens. Aerial photography was, as Biggs explains, pioneered by the French colonial military, as pilots, photographers, and camera technicians sought to prolong their employment within the military after World War I by transferring their skills abroad. These colonial practices were thus an outgrowth of military technologies, not merely an expansion of domestic cultural politics. The view of Vietnamese peasants created by the "God-eye" in the sky intensified the process of objectifying them beyond the methods available to nineteenth-century folklorists and linguists in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Our question about the nature of colonial power escapes definitive answers. But the contributors to *Cultivating the Colonies* establish beyond all possible doubt the importance of the environment as a locus for studying the power of the colonial state. If this power was at times scarcely distinguishable from that of precolonial states, postcolonial successors, and other modern states, this may not have made a great deal of difference for the trees and the animals that fell under its domain. Grove demonstrated that colonialism provided a powerful impetus toward nature conservation after having recognized its own profoundly destructive capacities. In a recent study, Jacob Tropp (2006) takes Grove's analysis one step further, pointing out that nature conservation under colonialism was also a means of exercising power

over native populations. Conservation, as practiced by the colonial state, was a form of Western knowledge produced in European centers, and could be used to discount indigenous knowledge and use of the environment in the Transkei, as well as in other regions governed by remote technocrats. African use of sticks and tree saplings in hut-building was labeled “vandalism” and “thieving” by forest officials, who attempted to discipline it through the issuing of permits and by surveillance of the African use of forests.

Not all colonial administrations were equally dismissive toward indigenous practices, but they could use the tools of science and conservation to consider other forms of knowledge only at their own prerogative. We learn through the case studies in *Cultivating the Colonies* that it is not possible to speak of a single, homogeneous colonial management of the environment. Rather, through an examination of British, French, Portuguese, German, Spanish, Russian, and American colonies, we see that there were different ways in which these states governed nature. Some of these methods were not distinguishable from those that these states had used to govern nature and people at home, but others were. Especially in the later stages of colonialism, the ability to manage nature on a global scale, surveying landscapes as different as Germany and Southwest Africa, Senegal and French Indochina from the privileged viewpoint of a single metropolitan center, produced more grandiose visions and transformations than those that had come before them. And, as Lunstrum’s essay, and the story of postcolonial Africa in general, amply demonstrates, these visions and their traces on the landscape did not end with the end of colonialism. The legacy of colonialism and of its coconspirators—such as “developmental policy” and “scientific management”—is still part of the global landscape in which the authors of this book situate their stories.

### Notes

1. Some examples of this theoretical work on colonialism and postcolonialism are Osterhammel, *Colonialism*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; and Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*.

2. Some examples of the expansion of the use of the term “colonialism” to apply to regions and developments other than those covered by traditional studies of imperialism include Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*; Schneider, *Italy’s “Southern Question”*; Johnston, “Hetroglossia and Linguistic Neocolonialism”; and Aguirre, *Informal Empire*.

3. Grove, *Ecology, Climate, and Empire*, p. 1. See also Grove’s masterly *Green Imperialism*, one of the seminal books in the field of colonialism and the environment.

4. Anker, *Imperial Ecology*.

5. Another work that makes a strong connection between colonialism and the environment is Griffiths and Robin, *Ecology and Empire*.

6. Scott cites Richards, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*. See also Beinart, “African History and Environmental History.”

7. In addition to Scott’s case studies in *Seeing Like a State*, see, for example, Conte, “Colonial Science and Ecological Change”; and Bonneuil, “Development as Experiment.”

8. Bhattacharya, Harrison, and Worboys point out in *Fractured States* how internally divided the colonial state in India was, and in practice very far from high modernism.

9. See Stein, *A History of India*; and Stein, *Thomas Munro*, 10. See Steyn’s essay in chapter 8 of this volume; the quoted passage appears on page 231.

11. See Morris’s essay in chapter 5 of this volume; the quoted passage appears on page 155.

12. For some examples of this circulation of experts and expert knowledge, see Drayton, *Nature’s Government*; Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion*; and McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*.

13. For discussions of this notion of *Heimat*, see Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*; and Rollins, *A Greener Vision of Home*.

14. For some examples of their methods, see Hoyt, “Dialects of Modernization in France and Italy.”

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