

HUMBOLDT AND THE HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT

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A panel session on “Alexander von Humboldt and the History of Environmental Thought” was featured at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Society for Environmental History, held jointly with the Forest History Society in St. Paul, Minnesota. The panel was organized and chaired by Aaron Sachs, an assistant professor of history at Cornell University, and comprised four papers. Sachs and the other presenters (Laura Walls, Jason Lindquist, and myself) have been active contributors—along with numerous other scholars—to the ongoing revival of interest in Humboldt and the continued rethinking of his influence on environmental and scientific ideas. This surge of interest stems in part from the renewed recognition that Humboldt was arguably the most influential public intellectual of the nineteenth century. Humboldt met and influenced such major political, cultural, and early environmental figures as the “Liberator” Simón Bolívar, U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, the biologist Charles Darwin, and the painter Frederic Edwin Church. The renewal is taking place amid growing concern over the marginalization of intellectuals in public life. Another source of the expanding interest is Humboldt’s renowned vision of nature and landscapes through a perspective of the inseparability of humans and the environment. As a result, Humboldt’s oeuvre has regained relevance in the context of today’s heightened concerns over environmental change, human-induced crises, and conservation.

Aaron Sachs’s paper, “A Thousand-Mile Walk through the Cosmos: John Muir as Radical Humboldtian Explorer,” addressed Humboldt’s influence on Muir, widely regarded as one of the founders of American environmentalism. Muir is known to have proclaimed, “How intensely I desire to be Humboldt” (quoted in Sachs 2006, 27; Tsing 2005, 96), in describing his aspirations for travel and for the combined aesthetic and scientific study of nature in the Sierra Nevada of California. Sachs’s presentation pointed to Muir’s proclamation as one piece of evidence for Humboldt’s far-reaching influence as a so-called cosmopolitan environmentalist. To Muir and other early environmental thinkers, Humboldt represented a pinnacle of unceasing commitment and a model of accomplishment in the understanding of nature and global environments in relation to human activities, human presence, and, more generally, the human condition, relationships Humboldt developed most fully in his magnum opus *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (1846–1862). Sachs fully develops his thesis of Humboldt’s defining influence on modern environmentalism in *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (2006; see Walls, “The Search for Humboldt,” *Geographical Review* 96 (2006): 473–477).

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