

# How to Get Published in Environmental History

By Mark Cioc,

University of California – Santa Cruz

It is difficult to answer the question “How do I get published in *Environmental History*?” without resorting to a cliché: “Submit a cogently argued, polished, and original essay that forces readers to rethink their conceptions about the field.” Presumably all scholars are already striving to achieve that goal. Here are a few concrete suggestions that might prove more helpful.

The members of the Editorial Board are especially interested in environmental topics that resonate with other fields and subfields in the natural and human sciences. Essays that draw on more than one area of scholarly literature (the intersection of environmental history and labor history, for instance) are highly valued.

We are equally keen on ensuring that the journal remains the first choice of publication for all graduate students and recent Ph.D.s. We tend to receive two types of dissertation-based submissions: those that originated as chapters in dissertations and have been reconceived as “stand alone” essays; and those that are distillations of entire dissertations. The second type of essay is quite challenging, but also often more rewarding.

*Environmental History* is a refereed journal, and the most important part of the publication process is the review by internal and external readers. Reader Reports vary enormously in style, length, and sophistication, but certain critiques surface repeatedly. Three are worth enumerating here.

By far the most common critique is the “can't tell the forest for the trees” complaint: the author's head is so deeply embedded in the data and narration that s/he is not able to place the story within a larger framework or explain its broader significance. An author can typically resolve this problem by paying closer attention to the introduction and conclusion and by addressing the “so what?” question.

The second most common critique is that the “author claims too much originality and newness.” Authors often compose their essays as if they were overturning large bodies of earlier work rather than building on previous generations of literature. Only on rare occasions do outside reviewers agree. Mostly they conclude that the author has not read the previous

literature carefully enough or has caricatured the conclusions of earlier researchers. Authors can resolve this problem by summarizing previous literature early in their essays and then signaling how they plan to build on, and diverge from, the earlier scholarship.

The third most common critique—the “timid conclusions” complaint—is the opposite of the second one. After spending months or years in the archives going through vast amounts of contradictory material, many scholars are hesitant to draw clear-cut conclusions or provide clear summations of their research results. This hesitancy, though understandable, comes across as wish-washy. It also prompts reviewers to raise the “so what?” question: Does it really take twenty pages to tell us that some rural farmers in the U.S. Midwest might have been environmentally aware, while others might not have been? Or that some forest policies were perhaps somewhat more ecologically sensitive than others? Or that some historical periods may have been a bit more environmentally progressive than others? An author can resolve this problem by eliminating as many qualifiers (“might lead one to conclude,” “would suggest,” etc.) as possible and by drawing bolder conclusions.

There is no magic formula for getting published in *Environmental History* or any other scholarly journal, but authors can augment their chances by addressing these three common critiques before they submit their essays for review. Of course, it never hurts to send a “cogently argued, polished, and original essay that forces readers to rethink their conceptions about the field.”

**(*ASEH News*, spring 2006)**