Environmental historians are just beginning to explore the world of consumption. In the lead article in this issue, John Soluri provides a wonderful example of the insights that can come when we consider consumer tastes. To understand the environmental impact of the banana industry, Soluri shows, we cannot focus solely on shifts in methods of production. We also need to understand the history of marketing, including the changing demands of merchants and consumers. For decades, American consumers preferred one variety of banana, and that preference shaped the ways banana growers responded to ecological and economic change. Soluri’s analysis of the ties between production and consumption is a model.

Brian Bonhomme’s article on Soviet forest conservation adds to our understanding of a basic issue in forest history. Again and again, in nation after nation, state efforts to manage forests have brought social conflict. The early history of the Soviet Union was no exception. After the Revolution in 1917, the new government sought to increase state control over Russia’s forests, yet the Soviet conservation initiatives soon were undermined by the opposition of local forest users.

In the historical literature on American environmentalism, the period between the two world wars has received comparatively little attention. Neil Maher’s article on the Civilian Conservation Corps makes a powerful case for looking more carefully at the environmental initiatives of the New Deal. The work of the CCC had a lasting effect on the American landscape. By introducing more than three million young men to conservation work in the great outdoors, Maher concludes, the CCC also transformed environmental politics.

James Turner’s article on outdoor-recreation ethics is both a fine piece of history and a compelling contribution to “the great wilderness debate.” Hiking expeditions once were chances to practice the skills of woodcraft—to test yourself by living off the land. In the decades after World War II, a new ethic took hold: Backpackers sought to have minimal impact. Instead of chopping down trees to build fires and shelters, they carried everything they needed, so they depended more than ever on the products of the modern consumer economy. The “Leave No Trace” ideal allowed wilderness advocates to solve a difficult political problem. Yet, in Turner’s view, the new ethic illustrates the reluctance of environmentalists to face squarely the challenge of consumerism.

Philip Pauly’s article on the Hessian fly tells the story of the American and British response to a new threat to agriculture in the late eighteenth century. The story is thought-provoking. What was the nature of the threat? What sort of counter-measures were appropriate? In different ways, American and British officials struggled to answer those questions. They had to make decisions based on incomplete knowledge. They also had to consider the relationship of the Hessian fly problem to other issues of pressing national interest.

In the three issues I have edited, almost all of the articles have focused on the twentieth century. The journal’s emphasis on the recent past mirrors the trend in manuscript submissions. Roughly four-fifths of the manuscripts I have considered were wholly or partly about the period after 1900.
I am a historian of the twentieth century, so I understand the attractions of the period. As John McNeill argues in *Something New Under the Sun*, the human-made environmental transformations of the twentieth century were unprecedented in scope. The sources for twentieth-century environmental history are relatively abundant and accessible. Because we still are struggling with many environmental problems that have roots in the last hundred years, the history of the recent past often provides direct insight into contemporary policy questions.

Yet we miss a great deal by focusing so much energy on the twentieth century. For one, we make more difficult the challenge of persuading other historians that the human relationship to the non-human world is fundamental. We claim that environmental history can offer insight into every facet of the past. “In addition to opening up new areas of inquiry,” the journal’s advertising proclaims, “environmental history provides a new way of seeing familiar historical terrain.” That’s true, but not as true as it might be. If we hope to change the way people think about the past, we need to write about all periods of history, not just the last hundred years.

Thinking about earlier times also stretches our imaginations. American Historical Association president Lynn Hunt makes that argument in the May 2002 *Perspectives*. When we explore the worlds of long ago, she writes, we are pressed to imagine what was unimaginable to us before, and so we may be moved to wonder. I agree. In David Lowenthal’s neat phrase, the past is a foreign country, and studying the distant past offers the same kinds of satisfaction as traveling to distant lands. Encountering a very different world, we may come to see our own habits and values in a new light. We may even be able to envision new ways of dealing with the problems of our time.

I welcome more submissions about the period before 1900.

Adam Rome