

**Andrea Duffy**

*The Nature of Empire: Modern Imperialism and the Roots of the Anthropocene*

London: Routledge, 2025

ISBN: 978-0-367-76015-1 (PB) £41.99. 258pp.

*The Nature of Empire: Modern Imperialism and the Roots of the Anthropocene* provides a powerful and timely study of the complex association between modern imperialism and contemporary environmental consciousness. Andrea Duffy is an associate professor of history at Colorado State University. She presents a global environmental history that actively involves Western and non-Western empires in spreading the idea that imperial experience underlies the development of modern environmental science, conservation practices, and even the concept of the Anthropocene.

The book is structured into three thematic parts, with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction begins with the provocative ‘fly whisk’ incident of 1827, when an Ottoman governor attacked a French advisor with a fly swatter, thereby sparking the next French occupation of Algeria (p. 1). The narrative device effectively illustrates Duffy’s main argument, which holds that environmental factors have been intricately linked to the process of imperial relations throughout the history of modernity. The introduction provides the scope of the book, tracing the historical path of the five major empires – Britain, France, Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Japan – since 1800 until now, and outlines three main strands of environmental history: exploitation, challenges and perceptions.

Part I, ‘Environmental Exploitation’, is composed of three chapters, which discuss the environmental dimension of imperial expansion. Chapter 1 explores how the environmental features interacted and shaped colonial conquest, interregional conflicts and resistance movements. As Duffy suggests, guerrilla fighters often armed the environment with some tactical weapons, such as wildfires, traps and land mines, while imperial military campaigns left forests, fields and cities in ruins. Chapter 2 addresses forests and agricultural lands and shows how imperial empires systematically deforested lands, transformed forests into plantations, and divided agricultural landscapes into metropolitan spaces.

Part II, ‘Environmental Challenges’, takes an opposing viewpoint to show the extent to which environmental factors influenced imperial societies. Chapter 4 focuses on climate change and the occurrence of natural disasters, how volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, droughts and famines shaped policy in the empire, and how they formed perceptual models. Duffy argues that the experiences have been central to the emerging idea of climate variability and human effects on the environment. Chapter 5 critically looks into the nexus between health and disease and the role of tropical environments, epidemic

diseases and colonial peoples on the experiences of colonialism and the racial ideologies. Chapter 6 explores extreme environments – deserts, polar regions, high mountain ranges and marine ecosystems – as examples of how imperial exploration pushed the boundary of human endurance and provided new scientific knowledge about the environmental limits.

Part III, ‘Environmental Perceptions’, is a critical examination of how experiences of empire have transformed the human idea of the natural environment. Chapter 7 is an evaluation of the environmental civilising mission which highlights the amelioration of colonial environments by imperial power agents who followed systematic drainage, irrigation and afforestation programmes. Chapter 8 takes a critical look at conservation and preservation movements and shows that many of the early national parks and nature reserves were established in colonial contexts, often at the expense of local people. Chapter 9 records the history of environmental science and the Anthropocene paradigm, arguing that imperialistic interests in climate specifically enabled the emergence of meteorology, climatology and finally, the recognition of anthropogenic climate change.

The conclusion returns to the ‘Paris Climate Agreement’, using this point in global environmental diplomacy to highlight the inequalities that persist as legacies of imperialism (pp. 205–206). Duffy argues that the richest countries, which built their industrial empires based on colonial exploitation, have avoided much responsibility regarding climate change, but their former colonies suffer disproportionately.

Duffy’s work makes a number of substantive contributions to environmental history. Theoretically, the comparative methodology across five empires outlines trends and links that are often lost in country-specific studies. The inclusion of non-Western empires (Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Japan) provides a really global perspective, hence challenging Eurocentric views on the origins of environmentalism. Substantively, the book demonstrates that contemporary conservationism and environmental science do not arise despite empire but, in some measure, because of it, since the agents of imperial rule witnessed significant environmental changes and sought to understand and govern them.

However, the book’s ambitious scope necessarily involves some trade-offs. Some empires are described in more detail than others, with the colonialism of Britain and France particularly well documented, while the cases of Japan and the Ottoman Empire are valuable but lack a comprehensive description. Furthermore, despite Duffy’s presentation of the disastrous consequences of imperial environmental policies on colonised peoples, the views of colonised peoples themselves are sometimes less conspicuous than those of imperial agents and scientists.

These limitations notwithstanding, *The Nature of Empire: Modern Imperialism and the Roots of the Anthropocene* is an important contribution

REVIEWS

to the study of environmental history and imperialism. The book succeeds in showing that a thorough comprehension of contemporary environmental issues requires addressing their imperial foundations. To scholars and students in environmental history, and in international environmental politics, Duffy's work is a vital source for exploring present environmental issues. Its clear writing, logical arrangement, and the timeliness of the subject matter make it particularly valuable in the pedagogical setting for engaging people in the discourse about the environment.

MINTING HE AND XUEFENG WANG

*College of Fine Arts, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China*