

The Role of oral history in environmental history¹

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The advantage of an historian researching the second half of the 20th century is that he or she can interview people involved in the events being studied. Oral history is often used to supplement and confirm the information found in the documentary evidence. However, very often this documentary evidence is lacking because of the fact that archives are still closed because of the 30 years rule, or simply because material is lost or does not contain the information one is looking for. Oral history is certainly not a historical research tool that is exclusive for environmental history. There are however a few characteristics that makes it a challenging technique for environmental historians. It seems that oral environmental history has a unique characteristic that makes it stand out in comparison to other environmental histories. In the following I will use some examples from my personal experience to show where oral history in environmental history does not differ from other environmental histories. Subsequently the paper will explore where oral history has some distinctive characteristics that should be used by anyone studying the interaction between humans and the environment during the last sixty years or so.

Oral history aims in most cases to supplement the incomplete written record and reconstruct networks, policy changes, and personal decisions taken by individuals involved in certain events. There are two compelling reasons for undertaking an oral history. Firstly, there is the eventual loss of people involved in certain events, developments or organisations during a particular period and, connected to this, is the richness of personal accounts and interpretations that cannot be reclaimed otherwise. Many important management decisions at different levels were never recorded in official documents, memoranda or correspondence. Secondly, there is the difficulty of retrieving certain important historical data, since many old records have been destroyed or are simply not available.

An example where oral history has been used was in the context of a PhD research project looking at the environmental record of the forestry commission.² For this aim a sample of

¹ Paper presented at the annual meeting of the European Association for Environmental History - UK Branch, Open University, Milton Keynes, 21 May 2004. Available from www.eh-resources.org.

² Jan Oosthoek, *An environmental History of State Forestry in Scotland, 1919-1970* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Stirling, 2001).

former employees of the forestry commission was selected including individuals from all levels: foresters, foreman, district officers all the way through to the top of the forestry Commission, i.e. Director Generals and Commissioners. In addition people involved in environmental NGO's such as the RSPB and the National Trust for Scotland were interviewed.

One of the greatest challenges with any oral history project is to get people talking freely and not justifying themselves or attacking others. That proved in the context of this forest history project to be an illusion but it was also a boon, something that only became apparent later. Here is an example that illustrates this.

One of the people interviewed, a person high up in the hierarchy of the FC, was extremely helpful and sent material in advance of the interview: wonderful leaflets of the 1950s and 60s explaining the good work of the Forestry Commission. During the interview the person explained in detail and very openly that the FC had been always very green and that the groups attacking the Commission were wrong. He defended the actions of the FC, and himself, systematically and convincingly. That was one of the first interviews. It was all very convincing and his opinions highly influenced the subsequent research only to discover that it was a dead end path. The documentary evidence did not support the oral evidence.

For this reasons second opinions are always needed either in the form or additional interviews or sometimes unexpected routes. About a year after the first interview these additional views came at a conference where the interviewee gave a talk for a forest history conference. The person told the audience almost exactly the same story. When finished some elderly people in the room quite savagely attacked him. After some inquiries afterwards it turned out that these people had worked for environmental organizations opposing the Forestry Commissions management and planting policies as well as colleagues who clearly disagreed with some of the opinions aired at this meeting. With that knowledge in mind it was time to return to the documentary evidence and the documents now made much more sense than before. What had become visible at the conference was part of past power struggles, political games and personal animosities that are normally not recorded in the official documentary evidence. But with this knowledge one can read between the lines what had happened and explain better the outcome of certain developments.

This kind of additional evidence from oral history is not unique to oral environmental history. It is just one of the tools available in the toolbox of the environmental historian. As said before oral history in general helps to supplement the incomplete written record and reconstruct networks, policy changes, and little power games that were never recorded.

The crucial question is where oral environmental history does differ from classical oral history. First of all, Environmental history of the latter half of the 20th century is not complete without putting on boots and going out to see what the forests, mountains, industrial landscapes, any environment looks like. What happened in reality does often not match what a historian may find in his sources. This gets even better when accompanied by a person with knowledge to show you around. In the case of forest history this means to take foresters into the forests to show where they had worked and what the result of this work was. In the context of the history of the forestry commission project it proved more successful in more ways than one. It did not only provide expert opinion of what had happened on the ground in the forests but these foresters also started to talk in ways never possible in an formal oral history interview. One example was striking: interviewing a district officer at his home was very very difficult because he did not talk about the issues that were prepared for discussion: forest management practice, objections of conservationists, development of forestry policy, experimentation etc.

A couple of months later the same forester was taken to one of the forests he had managed and while entering the forest he completely transformed. It turned out that he had brought a picture book with photos of locations we were visiting, some documents relating to his work as a district officer and the forest we were visiting. Best of all was that the locations visited brought back memories and opened the floodgates to past stories. The couple of hours in the forest resulted in more information then during an entire afternoon interviewing at home of the forester. Again, environmental history cannot be conducted in the seclusion of the archive reading room only. One has to get out into the woods and other environments and experience it, see the real thing. Take interviewees out to the environs we write about as environmental historians and let them talk and show how it was. Colors, smells and sights bring memories better back then anything else. Maybe that is the case with more conventional oral history as well, however, environmental history is perhaps more then any other historical discipline about the outside world. What better place to interview a person than under a pine tree when talking about a pine forest?