

Environmental History: McNeil's *Something New Under the Sun*, Warren's *The Hunter's Game* & Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons." By Xaq Frohlich.

1) In his concluding chapter, McNeil describes history and ecology as “supremely integrative,” and suggests that the innovation of the 1970s environmental movement is to unify our conceptions of society and economics with nature and our natural environment. Yet, in the preceding chapter McNeil states that: “what people thought specifically about the environment, nature, life, and such mattered only very marginally before 1970,” while, “other kinds of ideas governed the human behavior that most affected the environment” (p. 326). By drawing this ideological divide, isn't McNeil falling into the trap of accepting the pre-1970s modernist's myth of a separation between nature and man? Along this vein McNeil privileges pre-1970s conservationists, such as Aldo Leopold, when he ascribes them non-temporal foresight. Leopold's role in park-building conservation in New Mexico, for example, involved him in land disputes between white settlers and Native Americans, the latter of whose traditional practices Leopold incorrectly considered “destructive” and “savage” towards the environment. (Louis Warren's book *The Hunter's Game* discusses Leopold in New Mexico in this context.) Is McNeil's picture of environmentalists, particularly wealthy nations environmentalists, too rosy?

2) Several times McNeil makes reference to Hardin's “The Tragedy of the Commons” (for example, he draws a particularly clever analogy with his “microbial tragedy of the commons” antibiotic resistance, p. 202). One criticism of the “tragedy of the commons” theory (again, made by Warren) is that the concept of the “commons” is problematic, in that it is overly simplistic and a reduction of the complex social regulations that were in play in the British and American commons. Hardin argues that a shared resource will necessarily be over-exploited in a free-market economy because the tenants' individualistic aims will push them to utilize as fully as possible the resources in competition with the others resulting in the commons' depletion. Warren, however, argues that in rural communities shared resources have historically not been over-exploited, and this is because there operated social practices that served as checks on the overuse. These checks were inclusive and exclusive, but existed in communities long before the modern environmental movement. In this context, is it possible that McNeil's “something new under the sun” is not so much a new communal identity as much as its global dimensions? Part of what allowed rural communities to successfully sustain their use of the commons, was their intimate knowledge and understanding of their social and natural community. Is it possible to build such a responsible, knowledgeable and intimate community at a global level?