

Book Review

– *Island historical ecology: Socionatural landscapes of the Eastern and Southern Caribbean*, edited by Peter E. Siegel. Berghahn Books, 2018

The Lesser Antilles, or the islands of the Southern and Eastern Caribbean – stretching from Trinidad to the Virgin Islands – were, most probably, the last parts of Central and South America to be settled by humans. Whether this was via island hopping, or long distance leaps, we are, as yet, unsure. In any case, much of the Lesser Antilles appears to have sustained the presence of human visitation, investigation and perhaps settlement from about 5000 BC. These same islands were then the first to be ‘discovered’ and occupied by Europeans. In the course of this passage of time, the landscape and biota of these islands have strongly determined if and how settlers could survive; while, concurrently, waves of human migrants and occupants bent the landscape to their will, intent, economic opportunity and technological possibilities with intrusive and aggressive practices. No wonder that Edward Warrington and David Milne (2018) speak of ‘plantation islands’ as one of seven types of island development profiles: cash crops like tobacco, sugar cane and bananas have been produced by, and in turn have sustained, various Caribbean societies, including those predicated on slavery. Such and other aspects of the ‘society-nature dialectic’ are at the heart of the science of ‘historical ecology’. This timely publication, edited by Peter Siegel on behalf of a team of researchers, is probably the first to assiduously apply the science and rigour of this field of knowledge to multiple small islands in the Southern and Eastern Caribbean.

The introductory pages of this book alert the reader to the very real challenges of the inter- and multi-disciplinary nature of the task at hand. Historical ecology requires a manifold expertise that is often compartmentalised in the departmental silos of archaeology, anthropology, geography, history and sociology; but also environmental science, biology, botany, chemistry, climatology, geology and zoology. Managing to combine these strands of knowledge into a separate and distinct science is difficult; but, when this feat is effectively accomplished, the results are rich and rewarding. The distinctiveness of the science is also a function of the singular data collecting technique applied by the scientific team led by Siegel: the protocol

consisted in systematically retrieving samples of soft sediment from various wetlands in the Caribbean archipelago using a modified rod-piston corer. The resulting sediments were subjected to a physical and chemical analysis, including pollen counts. Their outcome is the main focus and justification of this book.

The book has fifteen chapters; divided basically into two sets. The core of the book lies in Part II, with the nine chapters that review the results of this methodology, organised logically one per island, moving from Trinidad (close to the Venezuela coast) through the island chain up to St Croix (in the Virgin Islands). Of the remaining six chapters, four provide the critical context to the book, including an explanation of the research method and a brief overview of Caribbean historical ecology, foregrounded by waves of migration and colonisation. The remaining two chapters are attempts to depart the Caribbean: the first, by looking at comparisons with those two other, iconic island spaces (the quasi-lake Mediterranean and the immense Pacific); the second by adopting an outsider-insider approach to the text, offering some thoughts about a few themes – fire, volcanoes, risk, environmental catastrophe, colonisation, species extinction and invasion – plus suggesting future avenues of research.

There are two main disappointments with this book. The first is stylistic, and may have very well been driven by serious cost implications. All the fairly numerous images in my hard copy of the book are both rather small and come in monochromic (grey) shades. This format makes for a poor resolution and sometimes – especially for the landscape images – renders it very hard to identify what is being portrayed. (The e-book version, perhaps, allows for colour images to be shown?) The second relates to the analysis of the core sediments. Perhaps it is the social scientist and island scholar in me that was eagerly expecting the authors to present additional analysis that articulated the social, cultural, and possibly political and economic implications of their findings. This may be too much to expect from an analysis of core sediment; but even hypothetical trains of thought would have been appreciated.

By adding the adjective ‘socio-natural’ to the noun ‘landscape’, the authors of this book emphasise and acknowledge the “inextricably intertwined domains of human action and physical environment” (p. 338); a dynamic that has been in place for some 8,000 years in the Caribbean. The book cites the pioneering work of David Burney on human impact in tropical island ecosystems (Burney, 1997), noting his disappointment at the relative dearth of data. With their 24 cores drilled in 9 island locations, the work supervised by Siegel and showcased in this book is a significant contribution to knowledge and understanding of the unfolding of island life across time.

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References

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