

Unit 3: Video 1 Transcript

Q1 Introduction

A: I'm Sean Kheraj. I'm an environmental historian and a historian of Canada here in the Department of History at York University. I teach a wide range of courses in both Canadian history and environmental history. So I teach a survey course in Canadian history. I also teach the history of Toronto. And then I teach courses about the relationship between Canadians and the rest of nature. So I teach a general course on Canadian environmental history, and I teach an introductory course on the history of the European colonial expansion in North America from an environmental perspective that looks at the consequences of European colonization through the introduction of new plants and animals and diseases to North American environments. And each of these teaching areas roughly corresponds to areas that I do research in, which include Canadian history, urban history, and environmental history.

Q2: Discuss the transfer of biota to Canada.

A: One of the things that environmental history can really add to our understanding of Canadian history is thinking about the ways in which nonhuman actors influenced the past. And in the past 30 or 40 years, historians have been rethinking European colonization of North America. And, of course, Canada is a part of that.

And what we've discovered is that European colonization was profoundly influenced by the politics of European empires and the economies of those empires. But it was arguably as much influenced by biological factors, including the transfer of novel plants, animals, and diseases from Eurasia to North America. So we'll take, for example, smallpox. Prior to 1492, smallpox was unknown in North America as a viral agent that causes a devastating illness that kills people. Europeans introduced that disease to the North American environment beginning in the late 1400s. And over the course of successive centuries, it spreads through Indigenous populations of Americans, all the way through what becomes parts of Mexico, the United States, and Canada, de-populating most of the continent.

This has enormous consequences for colonization. Cartier, Champlain, George Vancouver, James Cook, other famous European explorers encounter environments that they then later assume to be uninhabited and empty. When, in fact, they're walking in environments that previously had been inhabited by many thousands and, in some cases, millions of people who had died as a result of the introduction of these diseases. So this is one area where

I think environmental history can actually change our understanding of the Canadian past.

And then on top of that, if we think about the spread of agriculture as a foundation for providing subsistence for European colonists to spread across what becomes Canada, much of that agriculture is predicated upon the introduction of certain food plants that are not Indigenous to North America. Wheat, for example, becomes a predominant food plant across the prairies, where native grasses of the prairies are replaced by an introduced grain crop, which provides a food foundation for an expansion of a European population in the West. So these are a couple of the ways in which I think environmental history can help us think about Canadian history in new ways.