Vernon L. Scarborough

Vernon L. Scarborough is Distinguished University Research Professor and Charles Phelps Taft Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Cincinnati. His work emphasizes sustainability and global water systems. By examining past engineered landscapes, he addresses both ancient and present societal issues from a comparative ecological and transdisciplinary perspective. Geographically, his published work has included studies about the U.S. Southwest, Belize, Guatemala, Indonesia, Greece, Pakistan, and Sudan. He has been funded by the National Science Foundation, National Geographic Society, Alphawood Foundation, Taft Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation and the School of Advanced Research. In addition to editing Water and Humanity: A Historical Overview for UNESCO, he is a steering committee member of IHOPE-Global located at Uppsala University (Integrated History for the Future of the People of Earth--ihopenet.org) and an active organizer of the subgroup IHOPE-Maya. He is a Senior Editor for WIREs Water Journal (Wiley-Blackwell) and a Series Editor for New Directions in Sustainability and Society (Cambridge University Press). He has published seven books—including five edited volumes (three more in press)—and over ninety book chapters and journal articles. His most recent field work is at Tikal, Guatemala and Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (uc.edu/orgs/qarg/members/faculty/vernon-scarborough.html).

WHAT I KNOW: Vern is interested in the built environs and how society has been influence by those inexorable landscape changes affecting it. Specifically, water access and management have informed his work for thirty years.

All we really have to do is shut off the taps for a day or two to appreciate our biological dependency on freshwater. In the context of water history, however, we are allowed the opportunity to chart our societal worldviews, where they come from, and the primacy of water in how we are institutionally organized. Water as a societal prime mover is essential, controllable, and primarily responsible for configuring both the natural and the built landscape. From an economic focus, water is the basis of subsistence – it is even more fundamental than food, another resource that is largely dependent on the availability of water. From the standpoint of production, distribution, exchange and consumption, water access is frequently ‘assumed’ in most of today’s developed world; a position that is becoming increasingly dangerous, if not foolish, and one that the rest of humanity perceives very differently. Given its finite availability, our growing populations and our propensity for polluting the planet, freshwater is an increasingly scarce resource.

At the level of political organization, water has been the subject of several tomes, perhaps the most influential being Karl Wittfogel’s Oriental Despotism in the late 1950s. Although much of his original thesis has been strongly challenged, there is little doubt that social control and power are commanded by those with immediate and deliberate access to water when the resource is scarce or is made scarce or insecure. Both beneficent and despotic leaders affect groups decisively through time.

Nevertheless, much of the societal conditioning or mindset that influences water allocation is embedded in a group’s worldview or ideology. How water is acquired, allocated and consumed is frequently based on accepted generational memories of agreed-upon group beliefs, behaviors, actions and norms legitimised by certain legal sanctions. All societies have ‘traditional formulae’ for addressing water allocations derived from rational acts (Scarborough, 2003). However, they can sometimes seem nonsensical to another culture or group interacting at the same time or place – or may even be perceived as absurd within an archaeological span, both temporally and geographically – when earlier societal and environmental conditions have altered.

What connects all water users and allows for cross-cultural comparisons and insight is that water acts/reacts to the same physical properties everywhere. It boils and freezes at prescribed temperatures and pressures whether you are in Belize or Bali, and it nourishes or degrades predictably in the same manner. The subject of water allows scholarly cross-cultural assessments of comparable units of analysis in a manner unlike any other medium of production, exchange or consumption. Conveying history by following the flow of water temporally and spatially is
WHAT I WANT TO KNOW: Specific to this workshop, can we address the interpretive distance between what is climatically produced on a landscape or biosphere, as opposed to what is a consequence of human modifications on that landscape? If we are to understand the impact of climate change on society and its well being today, we are in need of this separation to best evaluate and control for the kinds and degrees of environmental changes on the landscape. Because we view the ancient Maya as our best-studied, deep-time bellwether of tropical society today, a society without our technological advancement but institutionally and structurally organized as a hierarchical state, it suggests a highly simplified model of human-nature couplings. Our IHOPE-Maya approach has allowed and will continue to allow a transparent assessment of significant aspects of our current extremely convoluted and nonlinear complexity, reduced to a scale manageable for holistic assessment of long-term environmental and social change (Chase and Scarborough 2014). Because the tropics are the seat for perhaps half of all biodiversity on the planet, an evaluation of past effects of climate variability on plant communities and geomorphologic processes has immediate resonance.

More specifically, and in keeping with the IHOPE-Maya agenda, I would like us to consider: (i) an examination of regional climatic influence on the environment independently of human action or reaction in the Maya lowlands, (ii) drawing upon our IHOPE-Maya work in identifying the controlled temporal development of the engineered landscape constructed by the ancient Maya, and (iii) an assessment of the actual impact of climate change on social change.

CURRENT RESEARCH: In addition to finalizing three editing projects (i) Water and Humanity for UNESCO (noted above), (ii) The Resilience and Vulnerability of Ancient Landscapes: Transforming Maya Archaeology through IHOPE, with A. F. Chase, and (iii) Tikal: Water, Landscapes and Resilience, with David Lentz and Nicholas Dunning, I am working on the role of cooperation as the set of default behaviors which societies employ in times of both abundance and stress as opposed to elevated levels of conflict and violence. By examining past societies in the context of resources stress, I hope to place many societies in a transparent context of collaborative order. My past work on Bali, recent experience with the prehistoric Puebloan US Southwest, and a long-term commitment to the ancient Maya will allow the integration of a theme. The themes of this gathering under the umbrella of “sustainability” are anticipated to elucidate further reflections on the role of cooperation in both the past and the present.

Recent References:
Books


Chapters and Articles


