

SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #10 | 2026

July



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THE BEST IS YET TO COME: LATIN AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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Springs
The Rachel Carson Center Review

10 • 2026

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We humans are animals, our bodies teem with microscopic life, and our societies have developed in constant interaction with a material world that we call nature—a term that sustains the illusion that we are separate from it. In telling stories of our past we were often guided by that division, treating human history as largely self-contained: shaped almost exclusively by people and affecting just us. Other consequences were long placed outside the domain of history and were relegated to the margins of our narratives. Examining the human past as intertwined with the rest of nature has gained traction in recent decades, leading to the formation of a flourishing academic field called environmental history.



Lourdes Grobet, *Rosarito, Baja California Norte* from *Olmayaztec* series, ca. 1990–95, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2022.R.6. © Lourdes Grobet. All rights reserved.

In Latin America—my region of the world—this kind of research began to pick up pace a quarter of a century ago. Thanks to the efforts of scholars based both in Latin America and North America, joined by a small number of Europeans, it has gained variety, depth, and growing influence. For all its vitality, however, our scholarship has not yet achieved its ultimate goal: to change the broader understanding of Latin American history—both within and beyond academia. Plus, it could benefit from being more global in scope.

Along with India and South Africa, Latin American countries play a leading role in contributions from the Global South to environmental history. Within the uneven global landscape, some regions are still warming up to the field, whereas in others its influence has extended into other areas of inquiry, plus historical syntheses are now unthinkable without an environmental dimension.¹ That is the case in North America, where success has paradoxically raised concern that what once was

cutting edge has become a tent so big that it now accommodates views for which the environment is incidental rather than central.²

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Far from such worries, the body of research on Latin American environmental history is growing, though dispersed across geography and outlets. The region has the significant advantage of Spanish—and, to a lesser extent, Portuguese—as lingua francas; yet many of the most influential monographs have been published in English in the United States rather than in Latin American countries. These works are produced mostly by North American scholars, though some Latin Americans—working in the United States and in our home countries, including myself—have also contributed. The pressure to produce such work to secure a permanent position in US universities helps explain this imbalance.

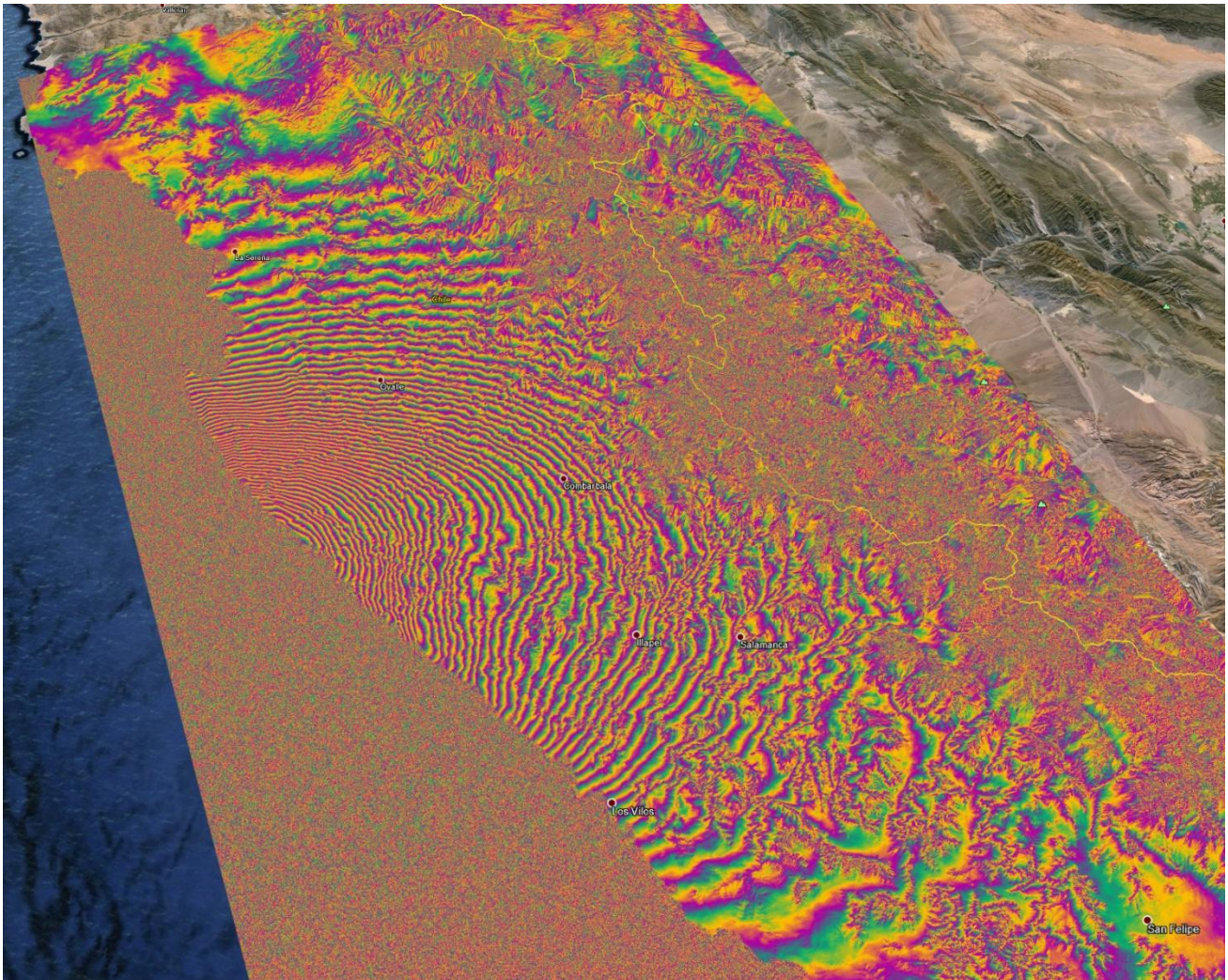
These books don't travel easily, but pirated copies can often be found online. Still, unauthorized sharing has its limits. The online [Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History](#) is an excellent resource, with around 50 environmental history entries by some of the field's leading scholars. Its reach, however, is constrained by the paywall, which excludes most scholars and students affiliated with Latin American institutions—even though some authors are based there.

Monographs in Spanish and Portuguese face even greater obstacles to circulation and tend to move through personal networks. Most Latin American production, however, takes the form of theses (from undergraduate to doctoral) and, more importantly, of articles published in a wide range of venues. These include edited volumes—some available to download for free—and journals of Latin American history, all of which are open access, in marked contrast to the situation in the Global North.

Among these journals [Historia Ambiental Latinoamericana y Caribeña \(HALAC\)](#), stands out, highlighting the importance of community building in the field. Founded in 2011 as the journal of the Latin American and Caribbean Society for Environmental History, [SOLCHA](#), HALAC has grown substantially since around 2020. However, the publication relies on the support of a local university and the leadership of one visionary individual, Sandro Dutra e Silva, which may threaten its long-term success.

HALAC's centripetal pull, which counteracts the field's inevitable dispersion, could be reinforced through syntheses of its innovative research, presented in an accessible format for nonspecialists. Following Shawn Miller's pioneering overview of Latin American environmental history in 2007 and the edited volume on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries published in 2018, it is time for fresh assessments that would strengthen the field's influence and show how it can reshape our understanding of the region's past.³

I don't mean just contributing to a more complete past, as if adding pieces to a puzzle, but something larger: understanding that the social world develops through continuous interplay with the natural world. This transformative potential is especially powerful in two trends that have gained momentum within and beyond environmental history globally. The first is the rise of more-than-human approaches. Most historians of Latin America readily acknowledge that, for instance, deforestation is part of the region's shared past. But they are far less comfortable treating animals, minerals, rainfall, and other entities and forces as makers of history in their own right. A recent essay by sociologist Magdalena Gil—within a book that pushes in this direction—shows how earthquakes helped shape the Chilean state, illustrating how such approaches can mold understandings of social change.⁴



On 16 September 2015, a three-minute long, 8.3 magnitude earthquake struck the coast of central Chile. By combining Sentinel-1A radar scans from 24 August and 17 September, the rainbow-colored patterns in the image show how the surface has shifted as a result of the quake. Courtesy of the European Space Agency (ESA). Contains modified Copernicus Sentinel data (2015)/ESA SEOM INSARAP study PPO.labs/NORUT. [CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO](#).

The second trend—deep history—connects the history of societies, measured in centuries and a few millennia, to that of life and Earth and in this way can alter profoundly the way we conceive of our place as humans on this planet. However, we don't need to go back that far for environmental history to thoroughly impact Latin American studies by modifying notions of time. It is enough that it stretches historical time beyond 1492—a revolution, I believe, that is already under way, which can bring us closer to the “Old World,” where history has always been longer.

Another way for Latin American environmental history to expand its reach is by embracing broader dialogues, particularly those promoted by the environmental humanities, which bring together different disciplines to explore how “diverse human cultures have made themselves at home in a more than human world.”⁵ While these fields have converged in some regions, in Latin America this sister area is still barely recognizable. In Australia, the two emerged together as anthropology, literary studies, and others joined efforts to integrate the environment in thought and action—history was part of this larger shared arena. In Europe, institutions have been pivoting in this direction, partly due to funding for large, multidisciplinary projects.⁶ In the absence of a critical mass to jumpstart a chapter of environmental history, Nigeria too has moved to create a Pan-African umbrella under that integrative banner.

This convergence fosters deeper understanding, greater impact, and might point to a future path in Latin American studies. Ecocriticism—an area of literary and cultural studies that examines how the natural world is represented—has recently taken the lead to try to carve out a space known as the environmental humanities for this region.⁷ Within this specialty, a popular topic for Latin America has been how forests and jungles have been portrayed in novels and fiction and how these texts in turn have shaped environmental imaginaries.⁸



Frank George Carpenter, *Chile—Aconcagua Valley*, Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, between 1890 and 1930, Library of Congress Prints and Photography Division Washington, D.C., LOT 11356-19, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001704585/>. Public domain.

Film and visual culture have also been interrogated to explore how rivers, minerals, plants, and animals are conceived, valued, and treated. Various voices—among which those of Indigenous cultures figure prominently—are considered within these inquiries. While environmental history remains largely separate from ecocriticism, some of its best works establish meaningful connections between material processes and ideas and perceptions.

Political ecology—a field where anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers play a central role—shares interests with environmental history and is sometimes subsumed within the environmental humanities, although not in Latin America. In this region, the field enjoys a solid development, based on topics such as deforestation in the Amazon, struggles over mining in the Andes, and agribusiness expansion in Brazil and Argentina. These studies look at the roles played by capital, state, and local

communities, and ask who benefits and who loses from economic and environmental transformations. Some of the articles published in *HALAC* fall into this realm and the work of socially and politically engaged environmental historians—such as Manuel González de Molina and his collaborators—demonstrates how these fields can be brought into dialogue. In this kind of research, the past sheds light on contemporary issues of sustainability, inequality, and justice.

While both ecocriticism and political ecology help to make us acutely conscious that we humans belong to a broader and complex natural world, environmental history does so by using a historical lens that opens our eyes to the dramatic changes in how societies and social groups have interacted with their environments, transforming everything: the air, the biome in our guts, and what we think a good life is.

While entrenched academic silos remain a significant obstacle to integration, as do often-limited disciplinary perspectives, broad views that combine cultural meanings, material processes, historical trajectories, social justice, and environmental ethics are highly desirable in these times of global change and deepening inequalities. Whether or not the environmental humanities consolidate as a distinct field, the confluences that define it are already taking shape.

However, more important than academic partnerships is the engagement with the world beyond academia—something that part of the environmental humanities actively promotes and in which environmental history in Latin America has made advances.⁹ Although both fields are largely based in universities, their role of changing worldviews and practices is inherently social. It is therefore vital that they forge connections with museums and grassroots movements, with schools and policymakers, and with the many publics who can contribute to and benefit from their insights. Engaging in public debates, taking part in or illuminating social struggles, and shaping more sustainable futures are necessary engagements for environmental history in Latin America.

Its expansion should also be geographical. As in the world at large, environmental history has an uneven presence within the region: Brazilians and Mexicans stand out, followed by Colombians, Chileans, and Argentinians; Costa Ricans, Panamanians, Cubans, and Ecuadorians have also made important contributions; while Uruguayans and Venezuelans, among others, have been much less represented. Our aspiration is to thicken the network—both by expanding geographies and constituencies—so that taking nature into account when considering the past becomes the norm everywhere.

Unlike several European countries and the United States, Latin American nations did not develop an imperial gaze that reaches beyond the oceans.

Hopefully, doing so will come with a more global perspective. Unlike several European countries and the United States, Latin American nations did not develop an imperial gaze that reaches beyond the oceans. For that and other reasons, we have mostly tended to focus on our own realities, drawing on our own archives, within national or even local frameworks and giving limited attention to the wider world. While this is changing, there is still ample room for perspectives that situate the region within broader global contexts.

This limitation is related to the place of Latin America and Latin Americans in the global environmental-history landscape. The region stands out through SOLCHA—a robust network and community—which organizes biannual congresses and graduate schools in alternating years. Without any funds of its own, it welcomes anyone who wishes to join and collaborate, plays crucial roles in supporting young scholars, and builds bridges with the global community of environmental historians. But there are limits to what this society can achieve.

To start, the emphasis on Latin America and the predominance of Spanish, Portuguese, and Portuguese in SOLCHA's regional congresses provide focus and cultural cohesion but limit their appeal

for outsiders. Furthermore, Latin Americans are underrepresented at the US, European, and world congresses, where those studying or working abroad—along with Brazilians—make up the majority of the small contingents. To give an example, in the last world congress (Oulu, Finland, 2024), Latin Americans made up only six percent of attendees—and half of them came from US and European institutions. Restricted funding for travel is the main obstacle to broader participation, but language poses another barrier. Although most scholars read English, some are less comfortable speaking or writing in it.

In the last world congress, Latin Americans made up only six percent of attendees—and half of them came from US and European institutions.

As a Latin American who works in her country and is the current president of the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO), I am well aware of these imbalances. The global community is dominated by people from the United States first and Europeans second, with British and German scholars at the forefront and additional strongholds in places such as Scandinavia and Australia. A rapid expansion is occurring in China and East Asia, benefiting from the presence of an organized network. India and South Asia have a substantial and influential body of scholarship but lack a comparable organizational structure; Southeast Asia lags behind on both fronts; and southern Africa stands out within its continent.

Both the makeup of this community and the asymmetries in the way it comes together in international congresses make exchanges among people from the Global South, or between unusual partners such as Latin America and any part of Asia, less likely than others.¹⁰ The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (Munich, Germany), which greatly helped me gain a place within this community, has done more than any other institution to expand this network throughout the globe. But these exceptional undertakings don't last forever. In their absence, and through more specific efforts, much can be achieved.

Stronger integration of Latin America could both be accomplished by and result in much-needed comparative studies. These could focus on a range of topics, starting with the subject that marked the field's origins in this region: forests. As the most extensive vegetation cover and given the global alarm over tropical deforestation in the 1980s (especially in Amazonia), the first major and influential works traced this issue back in time, two hundred years for Cuba and five hundred for Brazil.¹¹ In India forests were also a starting point, despite being much less predominant, with scholarship emphasizing the impact of colonialism. This emphasis contrasts with Latin America, where colonialism lasted much longer but ended well before direct British rule took hold over all of India. Over time, research on Latin American forests took a more social and political turn, bringing it closer to Indian concerns.¹²



Forest, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. © Felipe Meneses on iStock. All rights reserved.

Other disparities could also be explored. While water and irrigation were relevant in Indian scholarship early on, they attracted less attention in Latin America, except for Mexico, where the arid north makes water management critical for agriculture.¹³ Having other realities as references reveals convergences and idiosyncrasies, and allows for narrating stories that are more amenable for nonconnoisseurs and more exciting for the local public.

They also make better histories, as the case of the study of export commodities, another early topic, shows. After following a trajectory that stems from economic history of concentrating on the producing countries, these studies soon evolved into connected histories that explored not only production within the region but also consumption in North America. Bananas grown in Central America became an item of mass consumption across the United States, while henequen, a fiber extracted from a tropical plant grown in Mexico, served to tie the wheat harvested in the Great Plains. Not surprisingly, it was North American scholars who took this step.¹⁴ Meanwhile, others moved to explore conservation, cities, rivers, agriculture, and animals, topics that are still expanding and enriching our understanding of the past. They have led to intraregional studies, comparisons, and collaborations, which point to the way ahead.¹⁵

Strengthening both Latin American and global networks will continue to realize the promise of environmental history and its ally, the environmental humanities.

The literature on climate and energy has also gained advocates. Studies show, for example, how the energy transition in Mexico came later than in Europe and the United States, and almost skipped the coal phase, as well as how environmental transformations of the first two centuries of colonialism were not only a product of the European invasion but of the cooler temperatures and increased rainfall brought about by the Little Ice Age.¹⁶ The three hundred years of colonial rule will probably never be the main focus of Latin America's environmental history, but studies on this period have multiplied as part of the general momentum. Some lines of inquiry merit more development, such as oceans and imaginaries, to name just a couple examples.

There is, therefore, ample room for expansion—not only in terms of themes and approaches, but also in collaboration and geographical scope. Strengthening both Latin American and global networks will continue to realize the promise of environmental history and its ally, the environmental humanities. They both open our minds by underscoring that human affairs cannot be surgically pulled apart from the broader natural world in which they are embedded. History provides depth to this insight by revealing changing entanglements since time immemorial. It is indispensable in an age of crisis, helping us to move forward in promising directions. Thus, even if what we have achieved so far is remarkable and exciting, the best is yet to come.

Notes

¹ Andrew C. Isenberg, "Introduction: A New Environmental History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195324907.013.0026>.

² Sean Kheraj, host, *Nature's Past: Canadian Environmental History Podcast*, episode 51, "Has Environmental History Lost Its Way?," 27 January 2016, <http://niche-canada.org/2016/01/27/natures-past-episode-51-has-environmental-history-lost-its-way/>.

³ Shawn Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800672>; John Soluri, Claudia Leal, and José Augusto Pádua, eds., *A Living Past: Environmental Histories of Modern Latin America* (Berghahn Books, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw04qzn>.

⁴ Magdalena Gil, "Forjadores de la nación: Rethinking the Role of Earthquakes in Chilean History," in *More-Than-Human Histories of Latin America and the Caribbean: Decentring the Human in Environmental History*, ed. Diogo de Carvalho Cabral, André Vasques Vital, and Margarita Gascón (University of London Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.14296/cmpd3083>.

⁵ Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, Matthew Chrulew, Stuart Cooke, Matthew Kearnes, and Emily O'Gorman, "Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-5, p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3609940>.

⁶ Libby Robin, Amanda Wells, Claudia Leal, Joana Baço, Cristina Brito, Patricia Carvalho, et al., "Transdisciplinary Histories and the Rise of the Environmental Humanities: A Conversation from the Fourth World Congress of Environmental History, Oulu, Finland, August 2024," *Global Environment* 18, no. 1 (2025): 138-72, <https://doi.org/10.3828/whpge.63837646622515>.

⁷ Gisela Heffes and Alejandro Ponce de León, "The Environmental Humanities Turn," in *New Approaches to Latin American Studies, Culture and Power*, ed. Juan Poblete, vol. 2 (Routledge, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003586661-2>.

⁸ See, for example, Victoria Saramago, *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America* (Northwestern University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv18phht8>.

⁹ See section "Historia pública y cotidianidades" in Pedro Urquijo, Adi Lazos, and Katherine Lefebvre, eds., *Historia ambiental de América Latina: Enfoques, procedimientos y cotidianidades* (Centro de Investigaciones de Geografía Ambiental, National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2022).

¹⁰ A pioneering example of what can be achieved is the publication of *The Great Convergence: Environmental Histories of BRICS*, eds. S. Ravi Ranjan and Lise Sedrez.

(Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹¹ Warren Dean, *With Broadax and Firebrand: The Destruction of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest* (University of California Press, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520919082>; and Reinaldo Funes Monzote, *De bosque a sabana: azúcar, deforestación, y medio ambiente en Cuba, 1492-1926* (Siglo XXI Editores, 2004).

¹² See, for example, Christopher R. Boyer, *Political Landscapes: Forest, Conservation, and Community in Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375876>.

¹³ S. Ravi Rajan and Rohan D'Souza, "South Asian Environmental History: An Overview," in *The Great Convergence: Environmental Histories of BRICS*, eds. S. Ravi Ranjan and Lise Sedrez (Oxford University Press, 2018); Alejandro Tortolero Villaseñor, *El agua y su historia. México y sus desafíos hacia el siglo XXI* (Siglo XXI, 2000); and Mikael Wolfe, *Watering the Revolution: An Environmental and Technological History of Agrarian Reform in Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373063>.

¹⁴ John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (University of Texas Press, 2005); and Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Two good examples are Netzahualcóyotl Luis Gutiérrez Núñez, Diana Alejandra Mendez Rojas, and José Alfredo Pureco Ornelas y Pedro Urquijo Torres, eds., *La Revolución Verde en América Latina: Debates, perspectivas e interdisciplina* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Instituto Mora, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.22201/ciga.9786075878140e.2025>; and Regina Horta Duarte, *Genealogia dos zoolos na América Latina: civilização, ciência e sensibilidades, 1875-1939* (Fino Traço, 2025).

¹⁶ Germán Vergara, *Fueling Mexico: Energy and Environment, 1850-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108923972>; and Bradley Skopyk, *Colonial Cataclysms: Climate, Landscape and Memory in Mexico's Little Ice Age* (University of Arizona Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv105bb5j>.



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Cite this article

Leal, Claudia. "The Best Is Yet to Come: Latin American Environmental History." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 10 (July 2026).
<https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-22548>.

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ISSN 2751-9317

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