Of Guava, Goats, and Gardens – Recovering Histories of Ecological Change

Pacific island histories have been marked by successive waves of exotic arrivals. Canoes and tall ships had carried to island shores not just new people and material objects but also new flora and fauna. Tahiti, from the mid-eighteenth century, became a trading hub that increasingly fostered the exchange of plant and animal species from around the world. There are numerous sources for tracing the trade of species over the period. European visitors and islanders over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries wrote, drew, inscribed, told and retold stories of their encounters. More challenging for the historian is trying to establish the impacts of those exotic introductions. Observations recorded by ship’s captains, traders, high ranking Ari’i, priests and artists provide complex, often surprising views for interpretation. In this paper, I will use two case studies to illustrate what can be recovered of the impacts of exotic species on Tahiti’s ecological and cultural environments.