**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**Excrement and Empire: The Ecological Motivations for Imperialism (Chapter 18)**

**SLIDE 18.1**

The War of the Pacific, fought between Chile and Peru from 1879 to 1884, has the distinction of being the first major conflict in the industrial age that was fought primarily over a commodity. But the resource that sparked this war may surprise you. It was not iron ore or rubber that drove combatants but rather guano—that is, bird excrement.

**SLIDE 18.2 [Image: Plantation Life in the Caribbean]**

The intense demand for guano, which is rich in nitrates, was due to its use in several processes. Industrialists used it to produce sulfuric acid, an important component in many industrial processes. Nitrates were also required to create high explosives, used in such activities as mining and war. In addition, the nitrates, phosphates and potassium in guano made it much sought after as a fertilizer, especially useful in renewing soils exhausted by intensive farming or the cultivation of plantation cash crops.

**SLIDE 18.3 [Image: Industrial Britain]**

So guano was a central component in a number of industrial processes, important for sustaining plantation agriculture and contributed to growing the food to feed the new working classes. It was an important commodity for the industrial age. Even before the war, competition over guano in the Pacific was intense. Some of the most isolated islands of the central Pacific, where over centuries seabirds had created deep deposits, were swept into this new wave of imperialism.

**SLIDE 18.4 [Map: Pacific Oceania]**

As the scramble for guano intensified, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, the United States, New Zealand and Australia competed alongside European powers and Japan to extend their empires in the Pacific. It was guano that was the driving force which brought many tiny, remote Pacific Islands into the much larger wave of colonialism discussed in this chapter.

Many Pacific islanders suffered similar fates to those of the native societies in the Americas, Australia and New Zeeland before them. European diseases decimated many populations and outsiders often exploited local labor and natural resources, although some Pacific islanders found the opportunity to extend their resource base by working in guano mining operations.

While guano is still in demand today particularly among organic farmers, its importance declined rapidly in the early twentieth century when new industrial processes allowed for the creation of cheaper chemically-based fertilizers. However, the input-intensive farming practices that guano helped to establish continue today. Now fossil fuels underpin modern mechanized agriculture and new generations of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides are regularly applied to farmland across much of the globe.

The scramble for guano heralded the beginning of a new phase in a much older ecological story, one which is still impacting our environment today.