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The night before I began working on this book, I had a nightmare: seated in a small, rickety airplane somewhere over Russia, I was going through one-landing after another on bumpy runways. Aware that the plane had nuclear bombs on board, I was trembling in a state of constant panic. Fortunately, I soon awoke. The dream was not difficult to interpret as the barely concealed expression of a feeling of unease. I used to dismiss global overviews in environmental history and called for a "middle level." Now I myself was venturing into world history: would I find reasonable landing places along the way? Would the many years I spent in the field of nuclear technology prove to be risky baggage? What did the ecological and economic disaster of the communist bloc mean for that kind of environmental history whose basic assumptions would have led one to assume that a socialist state-run economy would be able to undo the environmental damage caused by the private profit motive?

Some time after my fiftieth birthday, I came across a reference in an article on the history of forestry in India to an ancient Indian ideal of the human life-cycle. According to this idea, it behooves a person at the age of fifty to venture into the forest in search of the truth.¹ That idea appealed to me, since the history of the forest has long been one of my favorite topics. But what is the historical wisdom with which one returns from the forest? It is surely not as thunderous as that of the prophets who come from the desert; instead, it is quiet, restrained, occasionally wised, like light falling through the leaves. An environmental historian who has absolute certainty about what he does need not go into the forest at all.

Eric L. Jones once remarked that to write universal history, he had to transform himself from a hedgehog into a fox.² As for myself, ever since acquiring my own garden, I have turned increasingly into a hedgehog, intellectually too, and I have often had the feeling that the secrets of history are hidden above all in micro-cosms and therefore elude the habitual gobetrotters. World history can achieve genuine breakthroughs only with the help of regional field research. Whenever there was a doubt in my mind as I was researching this book, I therefore tended to give credence to works with such a local flavor. But it does, even regional studies are constructed around more generalized images of history and are therefore often strikingly similar. Once in a while one must range further afield to discover local peculiarities. Even Oliver Rackham, who never tires of mocking a pseudo-universal environmental history that is built on sweeping preconceptions,