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The quest for the world’s remaining natural resources has intensified markedly in recent years. A salient and controversial point of debate in this context has become the extent to and ways in which old colonial relations live on in a new global “resource colonialism.” Although Sweden is rarely thought of as a colonial power, Swedish actors are currently very active when it comes to resource exploitation globally. As a small, neutral country with an excellent international reputation and virtually no enemies, we argue that Sweden, in fact, has been able to mobilize the international resource system to its benefit much more effectively than many other European countries.

The paper, which combines history of science and technology approaches with an environmental history lens, takes an historical perspective on the present by exploring the origins of Swedish interests and activities in the colonial resource arena from around 1870 to 1930. We study three basic dimensions in the natural resource arena: science, industry, and politics. More precisely, we analyze and compare Swedish natural resource interests in three colonial arenas: Africa, Caucasia, and the Arctic. In the case of Africa, we explore Sweden’s virtually unknown – but highly active – participation at the Berlin conference in 1884-85. In the Caucasus case, we reinterpret the Nobel brothers crucial role in creating Baku’s oil industry as a salient example of Swedish involvement in Russian resource colonialism. In the Arctic, we explore the connections between state and private interests in coal mining in Spitsbergen. An essential research issue concerns the extent to which it is possible to discern a common Swedish ‘style’ with regard to the country’s interests and activities in colonial areas.