

RCC August Fellows Workshop

Northern Environments



10 August 2010, Munich, Germany

Sponsor: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), Munich

Conveners: Christof Mauch (RCC), Helmuth Trischler (RCC)

Presenters: Ingo Heidbrink (RCC / Old Dominion University), Shane McCorristine (RCC/University of London), Andrea Ulrich (ETH Zurich)

The RCC August Fellows Workshop “Northern Environments” at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) featured a contradiction which is illustrative of the global span and limitless potential of environmental history; the warm August day saw presentations centred around Canada, Greenland and the icy reaches of the Arctic.

In the first session, **Shane McCorristine** enchanted the audience with his nineteenth century arctic dreamscapes. McCorristine sketched a multilayered history of Victorian expeditions to what was – at that time - felt to be the end of the world, and their risky quest to find the cultural and ecological “Other.” British extreme tourism, with its most prominent example in the Franklin expedition of 1845, was responsible for constructing the essentialist identities of the *terra incognita* and its inhabitants. McCorristine made use of the concepts of embodiment and disembodiment of interpretation and knowledge in his analysis of the cultural categories which played a constitutive part in the imagination of the extreme Arctic landscape. Reports of traumatic voyages, homesickness, lovesickness, the appearance of spirits, and cannibalism were dominant narratives, both for the participants in exploratory expeditions and for the interested public at home in Britain. McCorristine showed how representations of “the Other out there” were not just a product of Victorian explorers but also of the dynamic processes of knowledge transfer between explorers and the indigenous population. This line of enquiry undermines the ontological dichotomy of animistic and superstitious “savages” and the contrasting figures of the rational and enlightened scientists and explorers. As examples of the porosity of Victorian and indigenous traditions of knowledge, McCorristine cited mesmeristic practices which denote the body as the site of magnetic waves and evoke spiritual

phenomena, and predictions by Victorian clairvoyants and their metaphysical journeys in the topography of Arctic identities as part of their search for the “heroic” explorer John Franklin.

In the second session of the workshop, RCC Fellow **Ingo Heidbrink** gave an outline of his current research project on the industrialization of Greenlandic society and the changing face of its risk acceptance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1850 the Danish colony was discovered to have large reserves of cryolite, one of the basic components needed to produce aluminium; cryolite mining continued up to the 1970s. Heidbrink’s project attempts to reconstruct risk acceptance in Greenland in its process of transition from a traditional to an industrial society. Two major catalysts in society’s relationship with nature were the focus of his environmental history of this period; firstly, the industrialization of Greenland in the second half of the nineteenth century which transformed a population hitherto focused on hunting, gathering and fishing. And secondly, Greenland’s independence from the Danish mainland during World War II. From 1940 to 1945, Greenland’s government had to organize its aluminium industry without input from Danish and American companies. Heidbrink shed light on the complex relationship of institutional and political networks in flux and the historical dynamic of risk management in the context of far-reaching changes to nature and society. In the discussion which followed, the problem of defining the concept of risk in traditional indigenous communities was questioned; ethnographical methods seemed to offer the best means of translating a western concept in a culturally sensitive way.

The third contribution to the workshop also made full use of the possibilities of environmental history. **Andrea Ulrich** from the ETH Zurich explored the sustainable management of phosphorus and water in Lake Winnipeg, Canada and the complex processes of intervention in phosphorus cycles and ecosystems, with all the consequences this has for nature and society. Since phosphorus is one of the main components in the manufacture of industrial fertilizer, its availability has a direct effect on agriculture and therefore on regional and global food production. The “peak phosphorus” scenario is however only one aspect of a wider problem. The historical acquisition and processing of phosphorus has led to an intensified accumulation of heavy metals in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. This process of eutrophication has in turn caused a fundamental transformation of ecological dynamics and fluvial landscapes. Ulrich’s paper showed the connection between agricultural production, food security, and the pollution of aquatic ecosystems and developed a narrative leading from the non-sustainable distribution of phosphorus in the past to a sustainable redistribution in the future. Lake Winnipeg and its environs served as an empirical example, showing both high agricultural production and increasing levels of eutrophication. The concept of peak phosphorus seems however not to have caught the public imagination to the same extent as peak oil: Ulrich suggests raising cultural awareness of natural processes using a process-orientated and transdisciplinary Ac-

tion Research approach. This aims to combine academic and non-academic perspectives into one central discourse. The integration of academic cultures with the strategic interests of stakeholders would result in new complexities which would help to structure sustainable policymaking. The subsequent, lively discussion centred on the potential and problems of synergies between environmental history and transdisciplinary approaches.

The RCC August Fellows Workshop revealed the complex dynamics which surround the cultural appropriation of northern environments in history. Interdisciplinary expeditions to these far-flung locations have hoisted the flag of environmental history in the icy northern winds.

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