

**Running on Empty?
Anxieties over Resource Exhaustion
across Time and Place
AHA Panel**

Rachel
Carson
Center

Friday 4 January 2013, New Orleans, Louisiana

Chair: David Kinkela, State University of New York Fredonia

Panelists:

- Paul E. Sabin, Yale University “The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and the Gamble over Earth’s Future”
- Andrea E. Ulrich, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich (ETH) “Peak P revisited: Been There, Done That?”
- Jeffrey T. Manuel, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville “Was Scarcity the Mother of Invention? How Engineers Used Worries over Resource Exhaustion to Promote Specific Technological Fixes”
- Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, University of Minnesota “National Decline as the End of the World: The ‘Peak Oil’ Movement in the United States, 2005–10”

Comment: Frank Uekötter, LMU Munich

The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society sponsored a panel and comments at the 127th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association. The session historicized today’s anxieties over energy and resource scarcity by exploring the dynamics and results of previous resource depletion. Paying particular attention to how different groups of people understood and represented the subject over time. The topic allowed for a diverse panel of historians, who attempted to add depth to and improve historic analyses of exhaustion narratives—considered to be an increasingly important task for environmental history in the twenty-first century.

Analyzing the role of scarcity debates in the context of modern environmentalism and the conservative backlash that frequently accompanies it, Paul Sabin’s presentation drew attention to the renowned mineral price-bet of the 1980s between Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon. He argued that such an analysis shed light on how disagreement within science over the future development of resources triggered polarity in the United States in respect to environmental regulation.

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson's paper analyzed the recent history of the American "peak oil" movement, which warns that a decline in global oil output will ultimately result in the collapse of the modern world. Schneider-Mayerson interpreted his empirical data from a cultural-history perspective, drawing attention to the nature of the average American "peakist" and the individual solution paradigm that is being pursued as alternative to an oil-intense life-style. Moreover, he linked the inherent concerns of the oil depletion movement with general fears about national decline.

Andrea Ulrich's paper looked at how a historic perspective may play a role in the sustainable use of natural resources (phosphorus case), one of the major challenges of the twenty-first century. Ulrich stressed that a better understanding of past developments creates a more credible basis for shaping future management options and policy action. Anchoring past knowledge turns out to be a particularly important field—for policy makers, resource managers, and environmental system scientists alike.

In his paper, Jeffrey T. Manuel gave weight to the long history of a variety of different mineral depletion anxiety narratives and resulting "technological fixes" in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Manuel illustrated how fear of depletion led to the promotion of technological innovation as a kind of panacea, shifting the often unsubstantiated "run out" threat to an issue of overabundance.

Commenting on the work of the panel, Frank Uekötter stressed, among many other issues, the importance of linking present concerns about resource availability with historic developments and perspectives. He concluded that repeated claims for the importance of a specific resource over others might be misleading. Instead, a perspective of "all resources are special" in their own way might be a more helpful approach in promoting the integration of historical analysis in today's human-environment system discourse.

- Andrea Ulrich