

Doctoral Workshop on Environmental History

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsor: The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Conveners: Uwe Lübken, Franziska Torma

At the invitation of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, around 30 academics from a range of disciplines came to Munich to discuss their dissertational projects in the field of Environmental History. Based on the abstracts circulated in advance, seven panels were formed and a total of 16 dissertations from different subject areas were presented and discussed. These discussions were enriched by mentors, not just from the ranks of the RCC Fellows but also from acclaimed environmental historians **Dorothee Brantz**, **Franz-Josef Brüggemeier**, **Christian Rohr**, and **Verena Winiwarter**. This workshop, which took place in the seminar rooms of the Kerschensteiner College at Munich's Deutsches Museum, was conceived in order to draw together environmental history research within the German-speaking world, from various disciplines, and to offer young academics a forum in which to critically review their work.

The first panel was concerned with the transformation of urban and rural landscapes. **Martina Fendt** (Darmstadt) used Mainz and Wiesbaden as examples in her analysis of approaches to public green spaces since 1960. This in-depth look at two neighboring but very different cities allowed her to present a critical discussion of the "individual logic" of urban communities in relation to the historical development of green spaces. **Eike-Christian Heine** (Braunschweig) focused on the transformation of rural spaces in his examination of the effects of the construction of the North Sea - Baltic Sea Canal. While the canal created an efficient link between the two seas, it both disrupted and dismantled traditional communication routes. This fundamental transformation of the regional water economy had far-reaching consequences - from the severe damage to the local peat trade to the effects on biodiversity in the truncated or diverted waterways.

The second panel started with the discussion of an abstract by **Anne-Kathrin Steinmetz** (who was unfortunately prevented from attending the workshop in person) concerned with the development of ideas about the environment and conservation in East and West Germany. Two contributions, both from a DFG (German Research Council) project, took up the subject of “Waldsterben,” forest dieback. **Laurent Schmit’s** dissertation project is concerned with this debate in France and emphasizes its transnational aspect. Both the “discovery” and the “revealing” of the “mort de la forêt” involved West German experts to a high degree, for example in the role played by German forestry workers in the examination of forest damage, and through publications which were also read and reviewed west of the Rhine. However, the lack of trusted scientific proof about the causes of forest dieback led to the experts being for the most part ignored by the French political establishment. There was also much less debate about forest dieback in the GDR, compared with the Federal Republic, as **Tobias Huff** stressed. As reasons for this, he cited among others the delayed crystallization of an “environmental consciousness,” as well as the much longer history of forest dieback in what was to become the German Democratic Republic, which meant that the damage to the forests was far less marked than in the FRG.

The history of the forest was also central to the third panel, which however concentrated mainly on its utilization and cultural role. **Gisela Kangler** (Munich) is tracking the definition of the term wilderness in her dissertation, using the Bavarian Forest as a case study. Her research is on both cultural representations of the forest in literature and its practical function in landscape planning and conservation. **Johannes Zechner** (Berlin) is concerned with the constructions and transformations of the “German Forest” between 1800 and 1945, which spans its evocation as a romantic landscape of yearning right through to its utilization to legitimize national socialist ideology and rule. The emotion, with which these imagined landscapes are imbued, according to Zechner, is still current today and can also explain the level of intensity of the (West German) debate about forest dieback.

The forest also played a large part in **Doris Jansen’s** (Kiel) dissertation project, which opened the fourth panel. Jansen uses biological methods to reconstruct the prehistoric forest and forestry practice in northern central Europe. The analysis of pollen, macro remains and charcoal, yields information about the way forests were used by human society from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age. With initial recourse to two case studies – prehistoric settlements in Oldenburg and Flintbek – Jansen has examined the use of different kinds of wood as well as wood shortages and wood management. **Ulrike Anders** (Göttingen) pursued the changes in land use in central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her instrument is the retrospective recording and evaluation of urban “ecosystem services,” that is to say the structures and processes of natural ecosystems which

are needed to support human life. These can be of material but also immaterial character – for example, the aesthetic qualities of a particular landscape. Anders based her analysis on meteorological records, geodesic data and the incidence of particular flora and fauna and used remote sensing data which allows the evaluation of societal impact on the landscape.

The fifth panel took as its topic one of the classic topics of environmental history writing, that of resources, but used two methodologically innovative projects to offer a new perspective. **Lars Schladitz** (Erfurt) analyzed whaling in Japan from 1868 – 1940 as a transnational cultural practice, concentrating in particular on the question of how the perception of nature was altered by intercultural knowledge transfer about whales and whaling. In Schladitz' project, nature appears as both a cultural construction and a factor which restricts human actions. **Klaus Angerer** (Berlin) has centered his dissertation project around the discourses, practices, materialities, and economic dimensions of bio-prospecting, that is the practice of collecting potentially viable biological materials for commercial use. As well as written sources, his research draws on interviews with relevant actors and results from participating observations. Angerer's work is therefore positioned on the interface between political ecology, the history of science and of pharmaceuticals and anthropology.

The last panel of the day saw **Nadja Turke** (Potsdam) present her dissertation project, with which she aims to contribute to a stronger awareness of environmental topoi in literary studies. She is concerned with re-reading works not yet stamped as “eco-texts” in relation to the portrayal of nature, landscape and environment. One possible methodological approach is Niklas Luhmann's system theory. Following this presentation, **Indre Dopcke** and **Annika Schmitt** introduced their research, which forms part of a joint project run by the Universities of Oldenburg and Osnabrück aimed at linking research, museological documentation and didactics. One important aim of the project is to ensure that environmental history is given a greater role in school curricula and public exhibitions. The academic focus of this research is on the struggle for resources in the Early Modern Period; in terms of applied didactics, it benefits from close cooperation with two secondary schools and with the open-air museum Cloppenburg.

The first contribution to the final panel which dealt with climate change and natural disasters was provided by **Seline Reinhardt** (Basel) who is using Lyotard's understanding of “grand narratives” to shed light on the religious dimensions of current discourse on climate change. Following on from this, the abstract sent by **Susanne Leikam** (Regensburg) was discussed, despite the absence of its author; this dealt with remembrance of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, in particular in terms of visual representations. The final presentation was provided by **Doris Hallama** (Innsbruck), whose research is concerned with the question as to how the discourse about protection from

natural hazards in the Alps is reflected in the perception and anesthetization of alpine landscapes. The closing discussion made it once again very clear how the breadth of subject-matter and the difficulties connected with interdisciplinary cooperation are, in the end, of enormous benefit to the field of environmental history.

-- Agnes Kneitz and Sonja Weinbuch