



Conference report

Birds on the wing: environmental history in Europe, and beyond

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The rising enthusiasm for environmental history among European (and other) scholars should be of interest to – and perhaps concern for – historical geographers. Fifteen years ago, a handful of scholars, aware of the growth of environmental history in the United States and concerned about the relatively low profile of the field in Europe, founded the European Society for Environmental History. The organization's first biennial conference, attended by slightly more than 100 people, was held in St Andrew's, Scotland, in 2001. A dozen years later some 630 people participated in an immensely successful 7th conference in Munich. Membership in ESEH had pretty much doubled since 2011 (to include approximately 800 people from almost 50 countries) and the Munich conference was also about twice the size of its predecessor in Turku. In 2014, the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations – which emerged as a formal organization from the first World Congress in Environmental History organized as a joint effort with the fifth ESEH biennial meeting in Copenhagen – held its second congress (they are scheduled to take place every five years) in Guimarães, Portugal. Despite the costs of international travel, and the intervening opportunities presented by the regional/national conferences of a growing number of environmental history organizations, it drew about 600 people from six continents. The 8th ESEH will take place in Versailles between 30 June and 3 July 2015 (immediately before the 16th International Conference of Historical Geographers, scheduled for 5–10 July in London).

These developments have generated a great deal of corollary momentum. The Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society, founded in 2009 as a joint initiative of Munich's Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität and the Deutsches Museum, with the generous support of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, has become an important catalyst, advancing research and promoting discussion with the broader aim of 'strengthening the role of the humanities in current political and scientific debates about the environment.' ESEH and RCC have collaborated on the development of *Arcadia*, an online platform offering short, illustrated environmental histories on specific topics; initiated a book series; and established a book prize. Both organizations have organized smaller occasional conferences and workshops (including a writing workshop for graduate students held in conjunction with the Munich ESEH conference); ESEH has also run successful 'summer schools,' in France (twice) Italy, Russia, Switzerland, and Portugal.

The 2nd WCEH was hosted in July 2014 by the University of Minho in the recently-restored buildings of the Couros leather-making district, hard by the centre of the exceptionally well-preserved old town of Guimarães. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site for its rich building typology exemplifying the development of Portuguese architecture between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the historic town was an exceptional site for a conference with an intentionally broad and inclusive theme: 'The Making of Environmental History.' Not surprisingly, sessions and papers were stimulating for their sheer diversity. Among the approximately 135 sessions (other than plenaries and round tables) there were discussions focused on Dangerous Trades; the Environmental Hazards of War; Wetland Cultures; Agricultural Colonization on the Brazilian Frontier; Ligurian Landscapes; Comparative Fisheries; The Power of Birds; Coping with Pests; Reconstructing the Climate in South Africa; Behaving Badly in the Great Outdoors; and much more. The program offered something for everyone among registrants who declared a wide and fascinating range of disciplinary affiliations. That there were significant numbers of participants from departments of History, Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, and even Economics is not surprising; the number of people associated with cross-disciplinary institutes is perhaps more so. Their affiliations, with units such as Development Studies, Ecosystems Research, International Studies, Natural Biodiversity Centres, Environment and Resource Studies, and Transdisciplinary Research, reflect both the broad-tent attractions of environmental history and the ongoing reconfiguration of universities around the world.

Particularly worth note here was the involvement of several geographers in two sets of sessions that served, incidentally, to highlight the linkages between the disciplines of History and Geography. David Lowenthal convened a pair of very well-attended sessions on George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* at 150 (which included presentations from Lowenthal and Dan Gade), and Kent Mathewson and Judith Carney organized three equally well-regarded sessions on 'Unsettling Crosby's Euro-centered Columbian Exchange,' in which they and fellow geographers Chris Duvall, Case Watkins, Manuel Fernandes and HariPriya Ragan reconsidered environmental historian Alfred Crosby's seminal thesis alongside students of medical history, biodiversity, English, and the history of science. Another 25 or so geographers, from Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, Germany, South Africa, the UK and the

USA also fit their work seamlessly into the sessions of which they were a part.

No one person can identify the major or most intellectually exciting themes in a conference with 500 discrete presentations, but a few general observations are in order. Reflecting current concerns about global climate change (and perhaps the availability of research funds for work on this theme), much more effort is being spent identifying historical climate parameters than was the case a decade ago, and much of this research explores formerly untapped sources, often in innovative ways. In a possibly allied vein, energy consumption and energy transitions were examined in several settings. Pollution, disaster and risk, and questions about restoration and sustainability received a fair share of attention, as did more familiar topics such as parks and urban nature. Experiments with ‘new sources and methods’ – beyond those found in archives – were also the focus of specific discussion in Guimarães. Among the not-so-new sources attracting attention were the visual, with separate sessions given to Artistic Representations of Nature, Recording, Visualising and Disseminating Cultural Memories of Extreme Weather, and the ‘iconic turn’ in environmental history.

Three quite different plenary sessions aligned closely with some of the main themes identified here. Professor Mohan Munasinghe, a Sri Lankan physicist and economist with interests in energy, water resources, sustainable development, and climate change, who was Vice-Chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, opened the conference with a slide-rich presentation entitled ‘Learning from History to Envision a Sustainable Global Future.’ Mandy Martin, a talented Australian visual artist and Adjunct Professor at the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University, made ‘Peopling Landscapes Through Art’ the compelling theme of her plenary, with an engaged, and engaging, rumination on the ways in which art can advance understanding of environmental change and the cause of social justice. A third plenary featured a ‘state of the field’ address from ICEHO President Jane Carruthers of South Africa, with additional perspectives on local developments from representatives of environmental history organizations in Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia, and Australasia, each of which charted the expansion of the field and identified new intellectual challenges for the future.

From the outset, members of ICEHO and academic leaders of the University of Minho saw WCEH2014 as a stimulus to the development of environmental history and the advancement of a green or sustainability agenda in Portugal. To this end, the half-dozen most worthy environmental projects chosen from many undertaken in local schools were presented as posters alongside those of academic colleagues – and both they and the youthful teams who created them were impressive. Further, Professor Munasinghe conducted workshops in local schools and with local teachers, and

participants in the conference donated handsomely to a fund, doubled by ICEHO, for the encouragement of environmental education and environmental history activities in the Minho region. Finally, steps were taken to establish a Portuguese network of environmental history and humanities.

Reviewing the abstracts of presentations at WCEH2014, and reflecting on the gist of several conversations in Guimarães, it seems to me that participants shared a fundamental interest in understanding human–environment interactions (in the very broadest sense) in particular times and places past – a focus once largely the domain of historical geography. There was a good deal of interest in new approaches and fresh perspectives (to explicate, for example, the historical agency of non-humans) – but in general this work turned as much upon the use of new sources as it did on the adoption of ‘new’ theories; papers invoked a range of theoretical perspectives but few spent time genuflecting toward particular theorists. The influences of Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway and Edward Said were evident in the ways in which inquiries were framed and arguments presented, but rarely indeed were these or other theorists invoked as legitimating figures, and hardly a case study was presented as confirmation of their insights. Comparing the Guimarães program with those from most (historical) geography conferences, one might conclude that most participants in WCEH2014 were more interested in the past for its own sake than in writing a history of the present. Neither Keith Basso nor Arturo Escobar appear in the conference book of abstracts, but in some measure those abstracts serve to confirm their contentions that wisdom and culture sit in places.

My colleague Trevor Barnes has written of the Swedish geographer Gunnar Olsson’s move away from the ‘certainty, fixture, determinateness, and absolutes’ of geography’s quantitative revolution to the ‘treacherous shoals of ambivalence, mutation, chance, and relationality’ charted in his 1975 book, *Birds in Egg*. Those metaphorical birds took flight years ago, in great number and in many different directions, across the humanities and social sciences. In very broad terms, it might be said that the geographical flock flew toward the sun of ‘critical theory’ while others took wing along a somewhat different flyway, keeping a firm eye on the changing environment and finding much of interest in the specific features of the landscape – the lakes and fields and rivers and settlements – along the way. There is room and call, it seems to me, to bring these two flight paths closer together, as geographers guided by the cultural turn have largely forsaken the world for the word, and some environmental historians stand to have their inquiries illuminated by a little more reflection from the theoretical sun. Perhaps these trajectories can be bent toward convergence at the next ESEH meeting in Versailles, devoted to ‘Greening History, Studying the Environment across Disciplines: Past, Present and Future.’