

Call for Papers
Final Frontiers:
Exploring Oceans, Islands, and Coastal
Environments

Rachel
Carson
Center

Date: 20 – 23 October 2011

Location: The Island Institute in Rockland, Maine, USA

Conveners: John Gillis (Rutgers University), Franziska Torma (RCC)

Despite the enormous advances that have taken place in environmental history, the field still remains, to a great extent, stubbornly landlocked. The enduring notion of the eternal sea has exempted oceans from historical examination, assigning them to maritime history which has been concerned primarily with what takes place on, rather than in the sea itself. In a similar manner, the idea that the sea is a “placeless place” has put it off-limits to geographers. In the same way, lands most closely associated with water such as islands and coasts have remained unmarked, unexplored categories. Environments where earth and water meet and mix, notably wetlands, are only just beginning to be explored. “Always the edge of the sea remains an elusive and indefinable boundary,” wrote Rachel Carson. Regrettably, this remains the case today.

Because oceans are perceived as belonging to nature rather than to culture, they would seem to be in the domain of the sciences rather than the humanities. But this too must be questioned now that we are beginning to understand the ways in which oceans themselves are cultural constructs and how much they signify. The epistemological frontiers of environmental history are among the things we wish to explore in this interdisciplinary conference through both theoretical reflection and empirical study.

This conference will consider the ways in which the inclusion of oceans, coasts, and islands would alter the practices and paradigms of environmental history. It will bring together junior and senior scholars, including W. Jeffrey Bolster, Michael Pearson, Paul D’Arcy, Helen M. Rozwadowski, and Philip E. Steinberg, in an effort to chart the future of the field. In an attempt to close what constitutes a “blue hole” in environmental history, we invite papers from junior scholars of all world regions. Contributions from the sciences and social sciences are welcome as long as they are concerned with change over time in the interaction of humans and the natural world.

This event will consist of a series of workshops designed to lead to a set of essays that may be collected in a book exploring the possibilities and consequences of bringing oceans, islands, and coasts into focus. Proposals for papers should indicate how their content might contribute to such a rethinking of the field in one of the six areas indicated below. They should deal with the time period between 1700 to the present, but can focus on any world region. The papers will be precirculated so as to ensure maximum discussion and collaboration. Workshop topics will include:

Beyond the Atlantic World: Perspectives from Other Oceans
Reimagining Oceans: Marine Arts and Literatures
Historicizing Seas and Marine Life
Oceanic Epistemologies: Science and Local Knowledges
Waterlands: Islands, Coasts, and Estuaries
Finding a Place for Oceans: Geographies of Seas, Shores, and Islands

“Final Frontiers: Exploring Oceans, Islands, and Coastal Environments” is supported by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, Germany. Applications (in English) should include a 400 word abstract and a short curriculum vitae. They should be submitted to John Gillis (gottgillis@cs.com) and/or Franziska Torma (franziska.torma@carsoncenter.lmu.de) by 31 March 2011. Travel expenses and accommodation will be covered by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. All applicants must indicate how their submission contributes to one or more of the conference’s six major themes and to the general repositioning of oceans, coasts, and islands in environmental history.