

# Final Frontiers: Exploring Oceans, Islands, and Coastal Environments

Rachel  
Carson  
Center

**20-23 October 2011, Island Institute, Rockland, Maine, USA**

**Conveners:** John R. Gillis (Professor History Emeritus, Rutgers University), Franziska Torma (Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society)

**Participants:** Jeffrey Bolster (University New Hampshire), Joseph Christensen (Murdoch University), Philip Conkling (Island Institute), Paul D'Arcy (ANU College of Asia and the Pacific), Robert Deal (Marshall University), Christian Fleury (University of Caen Basse-Normandie), John Gillis (Rutgers University), Glenn Grasso (US Coastguards Academy), Ingo Heidbrink (Rachel Carson Center), Stefan Helmreich (MIT), Julia Heunemann (Bauhaus-University Weimar), Ryan Jones (Idaho State University), Adam Keul (Florida State University), Petr Kopecký (University of Ostrava), Alexander Kraus (University Muenster), Matthew McKenzie (University of Connecticut), Steve Mentz (St. John's University), Stuart Morrison (University of Stirling), Samuel Senayon Olaoluwa (Osun State University), Chris Pastore (University of New Hampshire), Michael Pearson (University of Technology, Sydney), Kimberly Peters (University of Sheffield), Michael Reidy (Montana State University), Helen M. Rozwadowski (University of Connecticut), Rob Snyder (Island Institute), Alistair Sponsel (Harvard University), Philip E. Steinberg (Florida State University), Franziska Torma (Rachel Carson Center)

---

Despite the enormous advances that have taken place in environmental humanities, environmental research still remains—to a great extent—landlocked. Because oceans are perceived as belonging to nature rather than to culture, they are thought to be in the domain of the sciences rather than the humanities. The conference, *Final Frontier: Exploring Oceans, Islands, and Coastal Environments*, considered ways in which the inclusion of oceans, coasts, and islands can alter practices and paradigms in the environmental humanities. The conference took place at the Island Institute, Rockland, Maine and consisted of six workshops, each containing three individual papers. Each session was chaired by one expert in the field, including W. Jeffrey Bolster, Michael Pearson, Paul D'Arcy, Helen M. Rozwadowski, Philip E. Steinberg, and Steve Mentz. To open up the field for interdisciplinary discussions, the conference gathered (cultural) geographers, social anthropologists, literary scholars, and historians.

The first panel entitled *Finding a Place for the Oceans: Geographies of Seas, Shores, and Islands*’ investigated three different approaches to the sea as geographical space. One of the most important issues was the question of whether the oceans have been geographically, socially, or culturally constructed or if they also existed as environmental entities beyond human perception. Discussants considered how humanities scholars are able to understand and analyze this natural ‘reality’ of the sea.

The second session, *Waterlands: Islands, Coasts, and Estuaries*, dealt with environments where land and water intersect—such as swamps and coastal spaces. Parts of the discussion focused on the extent to which land-based paradigms, such as wilderness or semi-wilderness, could be applied to fluid environments. The inclusion of interdisciplinary research methods, for example of archaeological evidence, was one methodological link to the third session. This panel (*Beyond the Atlantic World: Perspectives from Other Oceans*) left the Atlantic Ocean, one of the most common research topics of maritime environmental history. Instead, questions of ecological imperialism and the co-evolution of environmental and cultural change took center stage. This panel also highlighted the fact that marine animals are part of environmental humanities’ engagement with the sea.

The fourth panel (*Reimagining Oceans: Marine Arts and Literatures*) focused on the various depictions of the oceans in the cultural realm. Novels were not the only medium considered, but the maritime culture in general was also scrutinized. These papers shared the common idea that the sea provided different forms of meaning, and self-definition for human protagonists of both history as well as literature.

The fifth session, *Historicizing Seas and Marine Life*, dealt mainly with fishing, and fishing communities, but in the broader context of how these issues were also culturally and socially framed. The papers highlighted the fact that issues of marine resources and resource use move beyond economic aspects and also touch on social, legal, and cultural interests and needs.

The sixth panel (*Epistemologies: Science and Local Knowledge*) investigated different scientific approaches to oceanic environments and considered how knowledge about the sea has been produced, mediated, and framed. In historical travels and travel writing, the oceans have been conceived of as an outdoor laboratory and research field for geographical and bio-geographical approaches. One of the key issues in this session, however, was whether the land-based metaphor of the research field can be applied to fluid environments.

The conference program was accompanied by a public evening lecture at Farnsworth Art Museum about islands in global perspective, complemented by special perspectives from the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Additionally, the conference’s participants also encountered the everyday and present

life of Rockland, which is a port and fishing town, in field trips to Rockland's Working Waterfront and to Port Clyde.

The final discussion highlighted three topics as further perspectives for research: Firstly, boundaries and intersections of oceanic environmental humanities with other approaches such as maritime history need to be clarified in the future. Secondly, the language of how one talks, writes and thinks about fluid environments was under scrutiny: Is it adequate to use metaphors such as research field and area, which are clearly associated with the land and with territorial thinking, for analyses of the oceans? In this respect, the impact of social anthropologists and literary scholars might be of great interest for future research. Thirdly, the discussants agreed that the manner in which the oceanic environment can be integrated into projects—and even endowed with 'agency'— will shape future research in environmental humanities.

--Franziska Torma