

# Asian Environments: Governing Nature, Negotiating Knowledge, Constructing Subjectivities

Rachel  
Carson  
Center

**30 November – 02 December 2012, Rachel Carson Center, Munich**

**Conveners:** Ursula Münster (RCC/ LMU Munich), Shiho Satsuka (University of Toronto, RCC), Gunnell Cederlöf (Uppsala University)

**Presenters:** Gunnell Cederlöf (Uppsala University), Sanjukta Das Gupta (Calcutta University, India), Iftekhar Iqbal (University of Dhaka, Bangladesh), Eleana Kim (University of Rochester, USA), John Knight (Queen's University, UK), Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (Australian National University, Australia), Ralph Litzinger (Duke University, USA), Bridget Love (University of Oklahoma, USA/ RCC), Celia Lowe (University of Washington, USA), Anna Lora-Wainwright (University of Oxford, UK), Ursula Münster (LMU Munich, Germany/ RCC), Arupiyoti Saikia (Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India), Shiho Satsuka (University of Toronto/ RCC), Fei Sheng (Sun Yat-Sen University, China), Vipul Singh (University of Delhi, India), Ling Zhang (Boston College, USA)

**Chairs:** Peter Boomgaard (KITLV, Netherlands, RCC), Sabine Dabringhaus (University of Freiburg, Germany), Frank Heidemann (LMU Munich, Germany), Siddharta Krishnan (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, India/ RCC), Daniel Münster (Martin Luther University Halle, Germany), Derya Özkan (LMU Munich, Germany)

---

The Asian Environments Workshop was held from 30 November to 2 December 2012 at the Rachel Carson Center, with the aim to discuss in a comparative fashion how people in Asia have experienced, negotiated, and resisted changing forms of environmental governance across space and time. The conference reflected on the agency of the non-human environment in shaping institutions and forms of governance in the colonial and post-colonial period, how different and often competing forms of environmental knowledge have informed governance, rule, and the management of Asian environments, and how diverse environmental subjectivities emerged during these complex struggles over nature.

The workshop brought together an exciting group of researchers from China, India, Australia, the USA, Italy, the UK, and Germany in multiple disciplines with diverse sub-regional expertise. Through interdisciplinary dialogue, the event addressed both the commonality and diversity of historical trajectories that inform current environmental issues in Asia. The conference was based on short pre-circulated position papers. In order to have a highly interactive workshop and engaged discussions, each participant was assigned to prepare a ten-minute commentary on a colleague's position paper, which was followed by the author's response.

The workshop started with a brief introduction to the Rachel Carson Center's work by one of its directors, Christof Mauch. It was followed by the opening remarks of the conveners, **GUNNEL CELDERLÖF, UR-**

**SULA MÜNSTER**, and **SHIHO SATSUKA**. In the first session on “Landscape-Making and Unintended Consequences,” chaired by **FRANK HEIDEMANN**, the role of nature’s agency, unpredictability, and fluidity for understanding histories of environmental governance emerged as a central theme in the discussions. **PETER BOOMGAARD** commented on **GUNNEL CEDERLÖF’S** paper on the “Rule against Nature” in India’s northeastern frontiers between the 1790s and the 1830s. The paper highlighted the difficulties the British East India Company faced when trying to establish control over territory and people in northeast Bengal. The region’s climate and ecology, especially its fluid riverine systems, were incompatible with the ruling methods and the land-revenue settlement the East India Company tried to establish. The ephemeral nature of the land itself made the region an “ungovernable” space for the British rulers.

The next paper in this session, by **LING ZHANG**, presented “A Journey of Sand,” describing the previously neglected importance of sandification in the environmental history of North China’s Yellow River over the past two millennia. **IQBAL IFTEKHAR** commented on the paper, comparing the novelty of the focus on silt in the river’s history to Don Worster’s innovative focus on dust in his famous book *Dust Bowl* on North America’s Great Plains. Zhang’s paper argued that the huge amount of silt that the Yellow river was carrying along with its water was more destructive than any serious flood of the Yellow River. Sand ruined the fertility of soil, inflicted sandstorms, desolated the region, and made it almost inhabitable. The environmental, economic, and social legacies of this crisis remained profound even in the twentieth century.

The last paper in this session, by **CELIA LOWE** and her co-authors Suraya Afiff, Mia Siscawati, Nathan Anderson, Sarah Boone, and Emir Hartato, was discussed by **SANJUKTA DAS GUPTA** and shifted the focus from the past to the present, turning to unintended consequences that come along with the implementation of new forms of international green governmentality to mitigate global climate change. The paper presented ethnographic data conducted by a collaborative research project on the recent implementation of the United Nations initiative on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) in Indonesia, which applies a payments for ecosystem services (PES) approach to environmental conservation. The authors departed from the standard criticism of REDD+ in political ecology literature. Instead of portraying REDD+ negatively as a basically neoliberalist and neocolonialist program, Lowe et al.’s paper saw moments of possibility in the program, as it holds prospects for stakeholders to promote progressive change in the areas of land tenure, indigenous rights, and corruption.

The discussions in the next session on “Health, Uncertainty, and Environmental Subjectivities,” chaired by **DANIEL MÜNSTER**, focused especially on people’s experiences, reactions, and adjustments to uncertain and extreme environmental conditions – for example, environmental disasters, floods, droughts, or situations of severe industrial pollution and environmental degradation. First, **ARUPJYOTI SAIKIA** commented on **ANNA LORA-WAINRIGHT’S** paper, titled “The Inadequate Life: Rural Industrial Pollution and Lay Epidemiology in China,” which presented an ethnography of villagers and laborers in rural China and their responses to the health risks they face due to severe exposure to industrial pollution. A lively discussion ensued about China’s current environmental predicament, rural people’s environmental consciousness, local notions

of illness and pollution, and emerging environmental/social movements. Uncertainty, as Lora-Wainright argued, is reinforced in China's rural and polluted landscapes by the current social and political economic situation. People feel a lack of entitlement to environmental justice and have become accustomed to illness due to years of living with industrialization and pollution.

**RAPLH LITZINGER** commented on the next paper in this session by **KUNTALA LAHIRI-DUTT** that dealt with a very different kind of uncertainty: that of the Bengal delta's "hybrid environments," a fluid and ephemeral landscape where the demarcation between land and water is unfixed and constantly shifting. The character of Bengal's ephemeral charlands posed a situation of uncertainty especially for colonial British rulers, who tried to fix the boundaries between land and water through the Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Act passed in 1825. The law aimed at permanently separating land and water, privileging land over water, with profound ecological, economic, social, health and political consequences, and far-reaching changes for the agrarian communities living in this riverine landscape.

Saturday's third session, titled "Emerging Futures, Ecological Decline and Marginalization," was chaired by **SABINE DABRINGHAUS**. **JOHN KNIGHT** discussed **RALPH LITZINGER'S** paper on "Labor, Life and Death: The Campaign against Apple in China," which introduced us to the rising environmental protest amongst China's urban factory workers. The paper presented novel coalitions that are currently forming between labor movements and environmental movements in China. The global economy has produced new subjectivities in the workers, whose attitudes are increasingly informed by a transnational movement critical of the disastrous social and environmental effects of global capitalism.

Subsequently, **FEI SHENG** commented on **BRIDGET LOVE'S** text, titled "Decentering Japan: Ecomuseums and Activism from the Regions," which raised questions of how people adapt to landscapes and regions of environmental and economic decline. Love presented us with an ethnography of an ecomuseum initiative in rural Japan that goes along with decentralization reforms. The initiative can be interpreted as part of the state's neoliberal agenda, creating new environmental subjectivities and promoting the idea of citizen's self-responsibility, but also as a struggle of rural people to adapt to a marginalized landscape exposed to environmental and economic decline.

Finally, **LING ZHANG** discussed **VIPUL SINGH'S** paper, which spoke about the causal relationship between colonial and postcolonial environmental governance of the Gangetic Basin and the severe, often irreversible, ecological, social and economic effects that can still be felt today. Governing, administering, and controlling the Ganges river system has resulted in environmental degradation and the transformation of a flood-dependent agrarian economy into a landscape vulnerable to the destructive power of floods.

On Sunday, 2 December, the second day of the conference, one particular focus was the effects of different forms of environmental governance on human/non-human relations. The day started off with a session titled "Commodifying Nature, Knowing Landscapes, Preserving Ecology," which was chaired by **SIDDHARTA**

**KRISHNAN**. First, **GUNNEL CEDERLÖF** commented on **JOHN KNIGHT'S** paper addressing the problematic relationships between monkey tourism and conservation initiatives in postwar Japan. The discussion drew attention to the paradoxes of Japanese conservation in a project aimed at conserving macaques in their original forest habitat while allowing tourists to feed them, trying to balance the middle class desire to re-connect with “nature” but risking the habituation of animals to humans. Knight’s case study provided a vivid example of the blurring of culturally produced binaries between “domestication” and “wildness,” “dangerous” vs. “tame,” and “human” vs. “nature.”

Next, **CELIA LOWE** commented on **URSULA MÜNSTER'S** paper, “Working for the Forest: Invisible Labor, Skills, and Knowledge in Kerala’s Wildlife Conservation, South India,” which continued the discussion of the intensive management of human-animal relations, looking particularly at issues of biodiversity and wildlife conservation. In South India’s forest, the repercussions of colonialism, extraction-oriented state control of forest resources, and the more recent history of forest governance, law, and conservation have formed human/environment relationships at the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. Since colonial times, forest governance in the region is built on the expertise and physical hardships of low paid indigenous forest laborers, with the support of working elephants. Today, both elephants and humans continue to work together to produce the conservation landscape needed to ensure the survival of endangered mammals like the tiger, elephant, Indian gaur, and the leopard.

Last in this session, **BRIDGET LOVE** commented on **ARUPJYOTI SAIKIA'S** paper presenting issues of environmental governance in Assam from the 1830s to the 2000s. After traders from East India Company discovered Assam’s wild tea plants in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the commodification of this resource in the eastern border of Bengal radically transformed the ecological condition of the region. The wedding of capital and tea-plant was further strengthened in the late nineteenth century through a complex transformation of land laws. Science, law, and institutions of governance worked together to domesticate the plant and initiate major transformations of the landscape and ecology.

In Sunday’s second session, **DERYA ÖZKAN** acted as chair. “Contested Knowledge, Human Non-Human relations” stood in the spotlight when **ANNA LORA-WAINRIGHT** commented on **SHIHO SATSUKA'S** paper. Her work, titled “The Charisma of the Wild Mushroom: Envisioning Multispecies Commons in Post-Industrial Japan,” provided an ethnography of the *satoyama* forest restoration initiative in suburban Japan, where citizens have organized to restore traditional agrarian landscapes in order to produce matsutake, a highly valued edible mushroom, and thus cultivating an alternative environmental future for Japan’s post-industrial modernity. The ethnography presented how matsutake emerges as an icon of lost agrarian ways of living, as a bearer of Japan’s history of post-WWII industrialization, and as a “new commons” for contemporary Japan, building on the interrelations of various species in the *satoyama* forest landscape.

Subsequently, **SHIHO SATSUKA** spoke about **ELEANA KIM'S** paper, presenting ethnography on the co-production of the landscape and political ecology of the Korean demilitarized zone that divides North and South Korea. Kim’s paper on “Endangered Cranes and Construction Cranes: Knowledge and Temporality in

the Korean Demilitarized Zone” kindled a discussion about the human/environment symbiosis produced in this newly established zone of ecological conservation. In Korea, biological knowledge about cranes and their habitats was used to justify “eco”-industrial projects claiming to solve old struggles between development and conservation. Likewise, scientific knowledge about cranes was applied to justify and imagine the future scenario of ecologically managing the Korean demilitarized zone.

Finally, **VIPUL SINGH** commented on **SANJUKTA DAS GUPTA’S** paper on “Colonial Policies and the Transformation of Indigenous Production Systems in Bengal’s Western Frontier,” exploring the different ways in which colonial rule impacted the diverse production systems in the Chotanagpur Division, which constituted the western frontier of the Bengal Presidency under colonial rule. Here, colonial knowledge and techniques reduced local complexities into a monolithic system, which resulted in the sedentarization of indigenous *adivasis* through colonial rule, as well as limiting their access to environmental resources. Das Gupta’s paper triggered a discussion about the need to link India’s agrarian history with its environmental history, which have rarely been considered in conjunction. Additionally, participants debated whether the colonial empire marked the only major watershed in India’s environmental history, or whether a more nuanced and processual understanding of the history of ecological change in India was needed.

In the conference’s final session on “Governmentality and Movements,” **KUNTALA LAHIRI-DUTT** was the first to comment on **MAOHONG BAO’S** paper on the relation between the political culture of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and environmentalism in China. Here, Bao first of all distinguished between China’s environmentalism as ideology versus environmentalism as a social movement. The paper presented the argument that the making of China’s environmental governance depended on the interplay between state, society, and market that epitomizes the unique revolutionary ideology of the CCP.

The session ended with **ELEANA KIM’S** discussion of **IFTEKHAR IQBAL’S** paper on “Colonial Governance and Aspects of Eco-Subjectivity in the Bengal Delta,” where he examined the formation of environmental subjectivities in the colonial history of the Bengal delta, in the context of the British government’s efforts to make these uncultivable “wastelands” consisting of alluvial land, the “chars,” into productive space for agriculture. The paper analyses the colonial empire’s changing politics of governing people and nature and argues that a shift in the policy towards agro-ecological resources led to dislocations in the social organization of production, informing the subjectivities of the Bengali peasants, and leading to an increasing communalization of politics and the birth of Pakistan.

The workshop ended with a lively discussion that highlighted the value of intensive interdisciplinary discussion across space and time, initiating further future plans of collaboration and co-publication among authors working on common themes but different regions and times across Asia.

-- Ursula Münster