

Green Cultures: Environmental Knowledge, Climate, and Catastrophe

Rachel
Carson
Center

9 – 10 July 2010, Munich, Germany

Sponsors: The Bavarian American Academy (BAA) and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Conveners: Christof Mauch (RCC) and Sylvia Mayer (BAA)

Based on the premise that environmental problems must be located in larger historical, societal and cultural settings, the conference “Green Cultures” focused on the contribution that the social sciences and the humanities – most importantly the disciplines of historiography, political sciences, geography, and literary and cultural studies – provide to the field of environmental knowledge production. Against the widespread notion that it is largely, or even exclusively, the (natural) sciences that are responsible when it comes to coping with environmental problems, the panel presentations, the keynote address and the plenary discussion demonstrated the relevance of environmental scholarship developed in disciplines beyond the sciences. These events showed that the social sciences and the humanities can provide comprehensive and profound data that complements scientific knowledge and can contribute significantly to processes of environmental decision making.

The conference conveners, **Christof Mauch** (RCC) and **Sylvia Mayer** (BAA) assembled a multidisciplinary, international group of scholars whose work focuses on the analysis of environmental knowledge production in the United States. Particular emphasis was on the impact of both natural disasters and of public debates on climate change and environmental threats. In five diverse panels, various scholars presented the results of their scholarship.

Panel I, “Natural Hazards and the Making of America,” and Panel II, “Ambivalent Legacies: Environmental Imperialism and Notions of Progress” focused on historical phenomena in U.S. environmental history and beyond. In her talk, “Foreign Interest and the Cuban Earthquake of 1880: Disremembering Disaster in the Age of Laissez-Faire,” **Sherry Johnson** (RCC / University of Florida) spoke on the problematic issue of hitherto neglected historical environmental events. She also high-

lighted the need to explore the potentially instructive knowledge they can provide for devising protective measures in the future. **Lawrence Culver** (RCC / Utah State University) analyzed how American narratives of space must be re-read in terms of focusing on climate perception and ecological assumption in his talk, “Manifest Disaster: Climate and the Making of America.” In “Buffalo Commons: The Past, Present, and the Future of an Idea,” **Andrew Isenberg** (RCC / Temple University) discussed the project of re-introducing buffalo onto the Great Plains and the instability of ecological narratives. Finally, **Gordon Winder** (RCC / LMU Munich) explored the commercial factor of environmental knowledge production in his analysis of advertisements for agricultural machines in “The Other Machine in the Garden: The Reaper, the Great West, Wilderness, and the American Mind.” In all four presentations, the importance of tracing the emergence of environmental problems historically and analyzing the various political, economic, and cultural factors that cause them was emphasized. This type of scholarship is crucial for current environmental thought and practices – including the political process of environmental decision making

Panel 3, “Understanding Disaster – Explaining Politics,” shifted attention to the fields of geography and political science. In “Natural Disasters and Cultures of Risk: A Radical Constructivist’s Perspective on Risk,” **Heike Egner** (RCC / University of Mainz) discussed notions of risk and catastrophe from the perspective of system theory. Her counterpart on the panel, **Andreas Falke** (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), critically addressed the complex issue of U.S. environmental policy making in “Why is the U.S. a Laggard in Climate Change Policy or is it?” In Panel 4, “Forgetting and Remembering Catastrophes,” the presenters drew attention to the political and cultural functions of remembering natural disasters. **Uwe Lübken** (RCC / LMU Munich) explored aspects of flooding and collective memory in “The 1937 Ohio River Flood: A Forgotten Disaster?” **Craig Colton** (Louisiana State University) addressed the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in “Forgetting the Unforgettable: Losing Social Memory and Resilience in New Orleans.”

The next panel, Panel 5, “Environmental Knowledge and the Imagination: Literature and Film,” once again shifted attention to the contribution of a further field of study, that of literary and cultural studies. **Stacy Alaimo** (University of Texas, Arlington) examined “Trans-corporal Knowledges: Science, Environment, and the Material Self.” **Alexa Weik** (RCC / University of Fribourg, Switzerland) discussed “Facing *The Day After Tomorrow*: Filmed Disaster, Emotional Engagement, and Climate Risk Perception.” Both presentations demonstrated the relevance of language, narrative, and texts for processes of environmental knowledge production.

The panel presentations were complemented by a public keynote address and by a panel discussion (in German, also open to the wider public). In his lecture on “Sustainable Development – The New

Name for Peace?” former Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and founding Director of the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies in Potsdam, **Klaus Töpfer** discussed the close links between environmental problems and issues of global, political and social peace. The panel discussion addressed the question “Was können Deutschland und die USA in Sachen Umwelt voneinander lernen?” (What can Germany and the USA learn from each other in terms of the environment?). The panel was chaired by **Jeanne Rubner** (Süddeutsche Zeitung). Participants included **Albert Göttle** (President of the Bavarian Environmental Protection Agency); **Karsten Smid** (Greenpeace Deutschland); and **Christof Mauch** (RCC / LMU Munich). In the discussion the participants explored differences and parallels in American and German environmental history as well as in current issues of environmental policy making. They also considered divergences in attitude, the role of consumerism and the impact of industrial lobbyism on political decision making.

On both days the conference attracted a large audience, both academic and non-academic, including graduate students and younger scholars from several Bavarian universities.

-- Sylvia Mayer