

From Exploitation to Sustainability? Global Perspectives on the History and Future of Resource Depletion

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Center

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The international workshop “From Exploitation to Sustainability” turned out to be something of a matchmaker. On the first day of the conference, twenty-three doctoral students presented their research projects to each other in speed-dating format. The speed-dating exercise was more than just a networking opportunity for the members of two PhD programs—the graduate research institute “Interdisciplinary Environmental History” at Göttingen University and the Rachel Carson Center “Environment and Society” program at LMU Munich—it also demonstrated to conference participants the huge breadth of research interests on the interface of nature, culture, and environment at these two institutions. The young scholars, who were generously supported by the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in the organization of this workshop, were able to prove that current research in the environmental humanities defies and transcends both disciplinary and national categorization.

The interdisciplinary and international nature of the research lends it its dynamism to new ideas and enterprises, as LMU Munich President **Bernd Huber** and Bavarian Minister for Research **Wolfgang Heubisch** put it in their welcome addresses. The PhD program “Environment and Society” is a case in point; the brainchild of the Rachel Carson Center, the PhD program was launched in the winter semester 2010/2011 and was officially opened during this workshop. The individual workshop sessions took participants on a journey across various continents, both in terms of the contributors and the topics they presented. Leading environmental historians discussed the present

status and future of resources, their exploitation, and their sustainability, from comparative global perspectives.

John McNeill (Georgetown University, Washington D.C., USA), sketched a transnational environmental history in his contribution “The Ecological Atlantic, 1500-1850,” which included American, European and African coastal regions. Using examples such as that of plantations and various transatlantic transfers e.g. of plants and animals, McNeill demonstrated that both the natural world and changes in the natural order yielded social and political effects.

Jane Carruthers (University of South Africa, Pretoria) gave a presentation entitled “Vanishing Herds” which examined the changes in attitudes to wild game and hunting in South Africa from the 1830s through to the present day. Her research led her to conclude that in this area, the concepts of “exploitation” and “sustainability” could not be kept apart as contradictory principles, but linked together as mutually inclusive.

A “Love-Hate-Relationship with Land in Australia” was the title of the presentation given by **Libby Robin** (National Museum of Australia) and which related to treatment of the concepts of “exploitation” and “sustainability” by regional museums. This question led her to a quest for new concepts for the integration of environmental history into Australian history in future museum exhibitions.

The contribution by **José Augusto Padua** (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) on “The Politics of Forest Conservation in Brazil” emphasized the tense relationship between the lack of action in the past in respect of tropical deforestation on the one hand, and the new tendency towards rainforest conservation which has emerged in the last few years. According to Padua, the change in attitude and the accompanying political measures do not mean that current ideas of “conservation” are adequate, for example in the case where different landscapes make competing claims, or new paradigms for ecological restoration are being developed.

Ranjan Chakrabarti (Jadavpur University, India) gave a presentation entitled “History and Future of Water in South Asia,” which examined the close relationship between water and society. He criticised the tendency to treat a resource as if it is simply there; rather, resource use is a social construct. For this reason, the analysis of how the scant resource water is used in South Asia could hold the key to the future, in particular with regard to the challenges that the region will face as a result of climate change.

In “The Other Frontier,” **David Moon** (Durham University, UK) made a comparison between the narratives of the Great Plains in the USA on the one hand, and those of the Russian steppe on the other. Looking at the last one-hundred and fifty years, he pointed out astonishing similarities in the ways in which these two “environments” have been perceived and interpreted. Moon pointed out that there is a need to look at the interactions between humans and their environment over a much longer timeframe; an environmental history of the twin concepts of “exploitation” and “sustainability” and beyond could be the basis for new criteria for analysis.

Martin Melosi (University of Houston, USA) presented critical retrospective energy consumption in the USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in his presentation “Coping with Abundance Revisited.” In particular, he put forward the need for greater differentiation and contextualization of the common perception that the centuries saw the development of specific, dominant energy sources that led to the overall dominance of coal and oil. Historical insights, according to Melosi, point us towards a more realistic picture of the future, in particular in respect of the political hopes of one new “alternative fuel.”

The connections made here between the range of contributions on the past, present, and future of environmental history demonstrate that this workshop did more than simply unite scholars from different regions and nations: it proved that environment and history have an important relationship with each other. Another important success of the matchmaking exercise!

— Elisabeth Zellmer