

# Opportunities and Needs in Environmental History



**10-12 June 2010, Washington, D.C.**

**Sponsors:** Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich; National History Center; Center for the American West; John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress

**Conveners:** Christof Mauch, Patricia Limerick (unable to attend), John Gillis, James Banner, Miriam Hauss Cunningham

**Participants:** James Banner (National History Center); David Blackbourn (Harvard University); Carolyn Thompson Brown (John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress); Peter Coates (University of Bristol); Kimberly Coulter (Rachel Carson Center); Miriam Hauss Cunningham (National History Center); John Gillis (Rutgers University); Arnita Jones (American Historical Association); Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center); John McNeill (Georgetown); Martin V. Melosi (University of Houston); Marta Niepytalska (Rachel Carson Center); Stephen Pyne (Arizona State University); Mahesh Rangarajan (University of Delhi); Harriet Ritvo (MIT); Libby Robin (Australian National University); Frank Uekoetter (Rachel Carson Center); Richard Walker (University of California, Berkeley); Douglas R. Weiner (University of Arizona); Richard White (Stanford University); Frank Zelko (University of Vermont).

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Environmental history is young, dynamic, and poised to contribute knowledge and understanding to a variety of problems facing the entire planet. While its roots as a discipline lie in environmentalism and in the cultural construction of the environment, its desirable future subjects, collaborators, and impacts are up for debate. Is environmental history our best hope for the future? This question, posed by Patricia Limerick in a conversation with Christof Mauch, ignited plans for a more in-depth discussion about the future of the field. The resulting invitation-only workshop drew environmental historians from four continents to Washington D.C. to discuss “opportunities and needs in environmental history.”

**Patricia Limerick** (Center of the American West at the University of Colorado) encouraged participants to evaluate five premises: 1) environmental historians can positively affect public thought and decision-making by showing why we should take the lives of our ancestors and descendants seriously; 2) by publicly communicating a long historical view, environmental historians can show

how roles in environmental disputes are seldom purely “preservationist” or “utilitarian”; 3) environmentalist causes benefit more from critical writings than from cheerleading; 4) as a young, agile, “barnacle-free” field, environmental history is well positioned to explore the practices and rewards of applied history; and 5) environmental history can contribute most broadly through its interdisciplinarity. These themes arose in each of the workshop’s three sessions: “opportunities,” “needs,” and “frontiers” of environmental history.

The first session, “**Opportunities: Is Environmental History our best hope for the future?**” yielded different interpretations of the question. **David Blackburn** (Harvard University) expressed regret that de-exceptionalist narratives frame so many environmental histories. He suggested multiple alternative opportunities for environmental history: to return to material history, to write “big” histories, to restore the spatial dimension to history, to explore links with physical scientists, and to write across temporal “scales.” Most environmental histories begin in other disciplines, and institutionalizing the field risks its ghettoization. While environmental histories do challenge national, subnational, and supranational frameworks, he argued that they still remain stubbornly nationally defined and can benefit from interdisciplinary and international encounters.

Agreeing that environmental history needs to become more collaborative, **Richard White** (Stanford University) argued that in order to get around our intellectual (disciplinary) differences, we first have to admit and understand them. White suggested that environmental history would benefit from adopting practices and tools from the social sciences, such as employing more political economy approaches, more attention to space (e.g., Lefebvre), and more consideration for both human and nonhuman actors. Until we can write such histories, he said, environmental history is not fulfilling its own promise.

**Harriet Ritvo** (MIT) argued that if “we” means people, we are in trouble. When academics influence policy, she said, it is either because they have moved into a power position, repackaged their work to reach broader audiences, or matched the “scale” of their work with practitioners’ needs. She suggested two issues to consider: 1) while most environmental historians do integrate “relevant” science into their work, they could be more comprehensively versed in scientific theories; 2) environmental historians should work to create synergies with other fields, such as geography, to protect against the blindness that can come from deep immersion in a culture.

“Get out more!” was the recommendation of **Richard Walker** (University of California at Berkeley), who argued that if environmental history is to make a dent in the public discourse, it needs to get some “edginess.” He offered four principles: 1) borrowing from Foucault, we can write the history of how we arrived at the present condition, 2) learning from Weber, we can recognize the need for causality as well as deep theory in what we do; 3) learning from Marx, we can aim to both analyze and change the world. Ideology critique needs some purchase on the affairs of the world; and 4) we should not be afraid to embrace environmental movements and speak to the public.

Focusing her remarks on public discourse, **Libby Robin** (Australian National University) drew attention to the meanings of “environment.” The category of “environment,” she argued, is politically suicidal for environmental history, as environmentalists reinforce nature as something separate from and victimized by human beings. She suggested that a future history should offer a narrative of despair followed by hope, and that environmental historians should build and promote knowledge of other eras, but also build practical partnerships.

For others, “hope for the future” meant direct alliances with practical problem-solvers. As an editor of the environmental history magazine [Solutions](#) (contributions must provide both academic insights and concrete solutions to environmental challenges), **Frank Zelko** challenged environmental historians, when completing a book, to ask themselves: Is there anything of practical value that the non-specialists can draw from my work? Any lessons from the past? Can I craft a coherent policy statement? He invited participants to write an editorial or article for *Solutions*.

**Stephen Pyne** (Arizona State University) spoke of his experience working with scientists and practitioners on issues of the history, ecology, and management of fire. In such engagements, normally funded by the sciences or operations groups, he reflected on the difficulty of getting human stories or connections to cultural or political contexts into the mix. Humanists can show what doesn’t work, but for problem solvers, that’s only the beginning. Pyne cautioned that the historian can find himself in the role of “court poet,” narrating the “story of the clan,” but that this is a story that ultimately may fail to connect to practitioners’ decisions.

In an effort to shape a constructive agenda for the field, the second session focused on **“Needs: Which fields and questions have been neglected in the past and where should we go from here?”** **Douglas Weiner** (University of Arizona) began by asking if environmental history is even a coherent topic of study or a program with definable interests. Weiner questioned whether environmental history even has a set of common problems and questions that its practitioners seek to address. He called for an “acid-bath” analysis of all the terms that environmental historians use as a matter of course: *environment*, *environmental harm* (to whom?, from whose perspective?), *nature*, and *green*, among others. He also stressed the importance of communicating the public value of cultivating diverse – sometimes inconvenient – ideas.

Globalizing environmental history was on the mind of **Frank Uekötter** (Rachel Carson Center), who acknowledged that because creating one big reading list and reading everything would be impossible, environmental history could instead make global *simpler* by stressing similarities across the globe. Using the example of his project on the environmental histories of plantations, he suggested that environmentalism might be growing because the “age of territoriality” is ending. He suggested that “going environmental” is one of the last roads for the nation-state.

The most daunting task environmental historians face, according to **Martin Melosi** (University of Houston), is integrating environmental history into mainstream historical narratives from the local

to the global. He suggested considering environmental history as one “angle of attack” for looking at environmental issues rather than as a “field.” Environmental history, he observed, is dominated by grassroots themes and the cultural construction of the environment, and there is little exploration of technology beyond declensionism. With his colleague Joe Pratt at the University of Houston College of Business, Melosi has initiated a new project on issues of environment and energy. Their “Energy Capitals” project at the [Center for Public History](#) connects siloed projects looking at economic development and regional outcomes, stressing the local-global relationship of how communities bear the environmental risk for production of goods sold worldwide.

Considering how we can best serve the field of environmental history, **John McNeill** (Georgetown University) suggested that environmental history needs more work on: 1) Russia, the former USSR, and the modern Middle East; 2) pre-1880 events; 3) themes such as the industrial transformation of East Asia since 1960; and 4) urban environmental histories outside the U.S. and Europe, and of megacities in particular. McNeill further argued for environmental histories on topics that other historians care about (e.g., the U.S. civil war, slavery, and the French Revolution), as these could deepen environmental history’s impact on history as a whole. Bigger themes, he suggested, serve the field better. Finally, he called for more environmental histories on topics of relevance to environmental studies and policy, such as oil spills.

The topic of the workshop’s final session was “**Frontiers: Environmental Historians’ Encounters with the Natural Sciences.**” Focusing on opportunities and constraints of UK funding councils and assessment exercises, **Peter Coates** (University of Bristol) explained the UK research excellence framework’s new category to measure quantifiable policy impact. As part of a special AHRC Research Network initiative on “Arts and Humanities Approaches to Researching Environmental Change,” Coates has won funding for the network “[Local places, global processes: Histories of environmental change.](#)” involving three site-based workshops in England, planned collaboratively with site owners/managers, and aiming to benefit the sites.

Pointing out that not all environmentally conscious histories call themselves “environmental history,” **Mahesh Rangarajan** (University of Delhi), explained that as a result of India’s colonial history and rapid recent emergence as a global economic power, many environmental concerns are approached from perspectives of how to manage economic growth while dealing with the hardships and vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect members of lower classes. He cited emerging areas of cooperation in recent years between environmental historians and communities of scientists and of practitioners, for example in examining perspectives of land and wildlife classification and management, or working for political interventions addressing economic injustices.

In the concluding discussion, participants suggested three ways environmental historians can set the stage for a constructive future. First, they should take an active role in shaping assessments, reminding evaluators that environmental historians can provide meaning and understanding of the human condition. Second, they can regard their subjects as interdisciplinary phenomena and pursue collaborations with scientists to create practical learning opportunities. Third, they can only make an impact by improving external communication. **John Gillis** (Rutgers University) cautioned environmental historians against feeling tyrannized by “reference groups” when our most important reference group is a public eager for good writing on the environment. He agreed that “creative nonfiction” is what environmental historians do best—and encouraged them to hold onto this as an organizing principle.

At the workshop’s conclusion, **James Banner** (National History Center) summarized his outsider’s view of the field as a dynamic discipline at an early stage, whose work is in demand by the world at large. **Christof Mauch** (Rachel Carson Center) suggested a future workshop about connecting with other disciplines, other professions, and the public. To this end, the organizers hope the meeting will generate focused agendas for future meetings, such as the 2012 meeting of the American Historical Association. Mauch additionally invited all participants to continue the conversation with contributions to [RCC Perspectives](#), an interdisciplinary series of papers and essays in environmental history, environmental studies, and related fields.

-- Kimberly Coulter