

Environmental Humanities Summit

30 June–2 July in Hohenkammer, Germany

Report by Katie Ritson

The first-ever international summit in the Environmental Humanities (EH) brought together those scholars who are shaping the field through their leadership roles at the helm of EH organizations or institutes, together with young scholars who are among the first to begin their careers in this field (see appendix A for a list of participants). The aim was to create an open space for dialogue across generations about the direction the field might take, and the challenges of its institutionalization.

The summit started with guided tours of the Rachel Carson Center (RCC) and an introduction by director Christof Mauch that embedded the institutional history of the RCC within a very brief environmental history of Munich. RCC staff members briefly presented the different programs that make up the center's work—the fellowship program, Environment & Society Portal, publications, Environmental Studies Certificate Program, and the Doctoral Program Environment and Society. The summit then moved to the conference center at Schloß Hohenkammer, where the group was able to hold in-camera sessions over the following two days.

[I] The first session in Hohenkammer focused on the Marie Curie-Skłodowska Innovative Training Network (ENHANCE-ITN), a joint endeavor of the University of Leeds together with the RCC and the KTH Stockholm. The 12 early stage researchers in Environmental Humanities for a Concerned Europe (ENHANCE) are doctoral students whose projects draw on a broad EH base and who are poised for careers in EH both inside and outside academia. Following a short introduction to the ENHANCE-ITN by program coordinator Roger Norum (University of Leeds), the workshop session took the form of a carousel, in which members of the ENHANCE-ITN engaged three or four senior scholars in a discussion about their doctoral project for 12 minutes at a time before moving on to the next group. The carousel left all the participants somewhat dizzy, but all were excited by the breadth of the projects and the passion and commitment of the individual students. The students themselves remarked that the format was both exhausting and extremely useful in practicing how to communicate the essence of their project to a multidisciplinary and international audience.

[II] In the second, thankfully stationary session, the floor was opened for discussion. Christof Mauch gave a short opening statement, outlining some of the main drivers of and obstacles to EH scholars today. We are all pioneers, both those scholars who have set up or lead initiatives or organizations in EH, and those young scholars who are set to forge new paths in this emerging field. We are pioneers in trespassing on new disciplines and making new connections. We share concerns about resources and funding, about our position in the university system, and our position in the world more generally. Part of the reason for this summit is to chart both what we have in common, and also how diverse we are; some of us are motivated by fear, some of us by hope. It is not the intention to start the summit with a

lament, but to be constructive in staking out our identity as institutions and as a field. The summit participants divided into pairs to discuss the question of what motivates each person individually, and the results of these conversations were collected and displayed during the subsequent discussion.

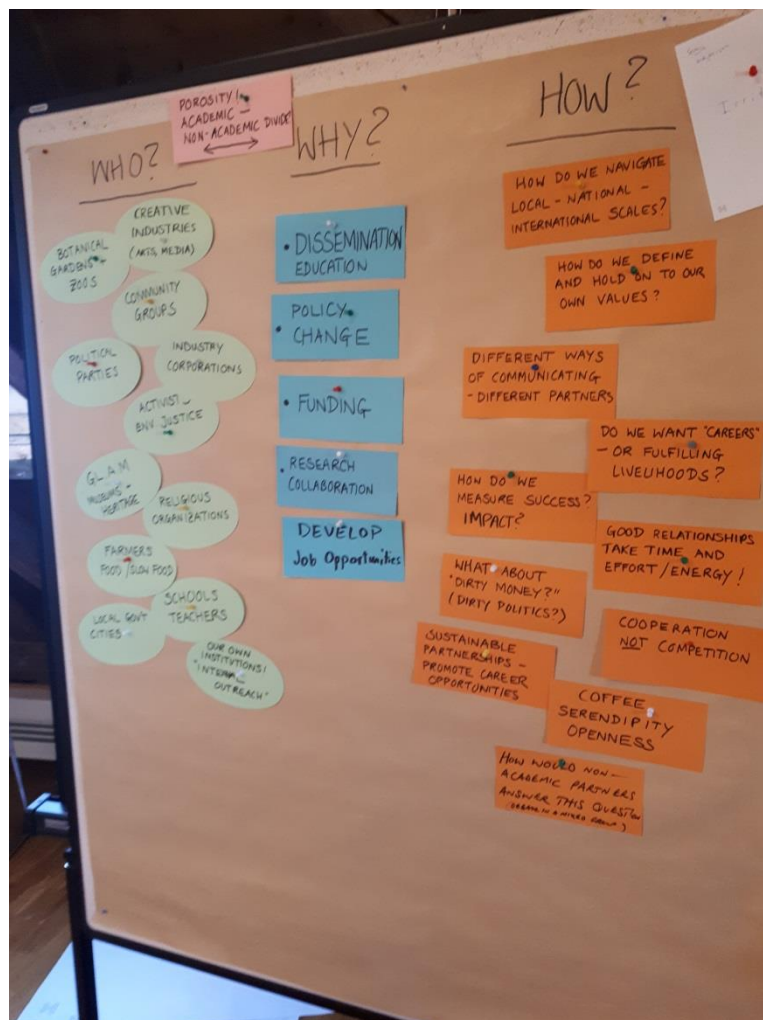


Summarizing the discussion, Christof Mauch pointed out that so many of the driving factors were forward looking and characterized by openness and freshness. They also highlighted for many of us the way that our personal experiences and trajectories were entangled with our academic interests. We are political in seeking to define ourselves in the light of current issues; we are driven collectively by a sense of accountability, by our responsibilities as citizens of the globe. The EH umbrella shows how it is the coming together of individuals in communities—intellectual, civic, countercultural—that provides the impetus to keep going.

The day ended very much in the spirit of community, with a shared meal and many more conversations.

[III] The following day started with a short presentation by Verena Winiwarter (University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna), who outlined the challenges and opportunities faced by doctoral students with interdisciplinary projects and/or in interdisciplinary programs. She decried in particular the “interdisciplinary veneer covering disciplinary hegemony.” The main part of the session was on the topic of cooperation with nonacademic partners, in which participants shared their own experiences and expertise in small groups.

Each group brought together intergenerational groups of scholars from different countries and institutions to discuss the question of the ideal nonacademic partners for cooperation ventures. Many scholars could talk about past successes or current projects with nonacademic partners and share advice and expertise. The groups reported back to plenum and brought their ideas together in a productive discussion. The different reasons for cooperating in the first place were seen to be critical to selecting the right partners, with possible reasons being dissemination/education, to effect a change in policy, to attract funding, to further research aims, or to develop job opportunities. Depending on the kind of collaboration, nonacademic partners from the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, museums) sector, from creative and media industries, from community or activist groups, local government and political parties, private sector corporations/foundations, schools, religious organizations, and from farms or botanical gardens could all be suitable, not to mention collaborating with people from within our own institutions (internal outreach).



[IVa] The afternoon session was split into two parts. The first of these, on the topic of how the natural sciences should be integrated into EH, was kicked off by a short provocation by Marcus Hall (University of Zurich) and Christoph Küffer (ETH Zurich/Hochschule für Technik Rapperswil). A plenary discussion ensued, reaching consensus around the following points:

- EH is not just a tool to translate science, but a field of enquiry in its own right.
- “Science” is not a single, monolithic entity, but a set of methods. Social sciences are, for the most part, aligned with the sciences through their largely quantitative approaches and arguments. “Humanities” incorporates what used to be “Arts and Humanities.”
- We share many things with the sciences; we are all curious and driven by our desire to understand things better. Humanities plays an important role in using instruments such as affect, memory, perception, and attitude in order to explain things. Humanities and sciences need each other.
- We can and should work well with sciences, and they with us. Interdisciplinary collaboration is rewarding and worthwhile. But we need humility, respect, and trust on both sides. We need to be careful in the way we ourselves use language, using jargon only when we really need it and not as an expression of power.
- EH does not just have the *potential* to change the world through its role in bringing humanities methods to environmental problems, and through working together with scientists and policymakers—it is already doing so.

It was also agreed that place-based projects offer an ideal basis from which to explore interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate both humanities and sciences. One problem that was raised is the fact that policymakers engage with the research of scientists, whereas humanities research often speaks more to and is taken up by grassroots movements and activist groups. There is a power imbalance here and we need to think about ways to address it.

[IVb] Following the coffee break, a second pairing gave a short provocation on the relationship between EH and Environmental History. Andrea Gaynor (University of Western Australia) and Serenella Iovino (University of Turin/University of Chapel Hill, CA) saw no contradiction or dispute between Environmental Humanities and Environmental History; rather, extrapolating from a definition of Env. Hist. as “telling the stories the present needs,” Gaynor suggested that EH is an umbrella that gathers together all of the stories the present needs, whether told by anthropologists, literary scholars, historians, or others. Iovino, seeing interdisciplinary approaches superseding the “ossified” disciplines from which they draw, encouraged the group to think about what we stand to lose if the old disciplinary distinctions and conventions become extinct.

In small groups, participants discussed the necessity of “killing our fathers,” and working to undermine the disciplines (or disciplinary distinctions) in which we were originally trained. In summing up the session, it was agreed that we are all engaged in a process of changing the paradigms, not necessarily suddenly, but in increments, and this can create conflict; but that the diversity of our approaches is invigorating and encouraging. It was also acknowledged that those who have secure academic positions have an intergenerational responsibility; they have to confront conservative institutional politics, but also ensure that the next generation of scholars can access institutional acceptance, funding, jobs, and mentoring.

[V] The final day of the summit started with a morning session on the skillsets that EH draws on. In small groups, participants drew up lists of hard and soft skills required to engage in the kind of research that EH needs. The EH toolbox needs lots of skills that facilitate interdisciplinary project work and outreach—digital and multimedia literacy, filmmaking, ethnographic methods, intercultural skills, fundraising and budget management—but also tools that build our capacities to listen well, to tell stories engagingly (“to tell long histories in a short amount of time” as Dolly Jørgensen [University of Stavanger] phrased it), to speak multiple languages, and embrace diversity in all its forms.

The final part of the morning was an attempt to summarize the event and what we had gained from it. Christof Mauch opened the discussion by articulating his hopes that the summit would not be another conference with a preordained format and predictable outcome, but something more open and open-ended. He wanted us “see what happens” when EH leaders are all in a room together. The RCC is happy to serve as an administrative hub for the EH community and will coordinate a listserv of EH centers and organizations to help us all keep in touch, and also develop an EH bibliography; but the agenda should not be set by any one institution. So where do we go from here?

A number of suggestions for cooperations based on input during the summit were suggested by participants;

- A carousel model of (unpaid) visiting fellowships to different institutions in the EH network, to foster connections and promote movement;
- A collection of case studies of interdisciplinary collaborations, or cooperations with nonacademic partners, to showcase different approaches;
- A list of interdisciplinary methodologies;
- Skills workshops/summer schools for young scholars and doctoral students; sharing the expertise we have built up individually in, e.g., filmmaking, interview techniques, photography, etc. with a wider EH community;
- Collaborative writing projects, multi-authored papers in journals (also science journals, and even newspapers);
- The creation and cross-advertising of doctoral and postdoctoral positions in our institutions for young EH scholars;
- A further conference/summit (possibly to be held in Stockholm at KTH in 2020; possibly with an emphasis on teaching and learning)

It was agreed by all that EH needs to do as much as possible to break out of its Euro-American comfort zone. We need to learn new languages and embrace new places and adapt our understanding of EH to keep it truly diverse and inclusive. It was also emphasized that the focus in taking EH forward needs to be on the young generation of scholars; we need to foster their careers and assist them in developing the skills they need in the future. Our interest in mentoring younger scholars in EH needs to extend to include undergraduates, schoolchildren and their teachers, and even early years education.

The EH listserv has now been created and all list members can post to it using the address **rcc_envhum@lists.lrz.de**.