

Unwelcome News from the Field: Transformations in the Environment and Societies of Ancient Asia

Philippe Forêt

Today, we are more willing than before to consider climate's salient role when a society is delicately poised (Diamond 2005). This explains the recent interest and high quality of the study of climate history (Goudie 2006). The discovery of global warming, which was first announced 55 years ago with a short article on variation in the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, has unfortunately obscured an older debate on the “Dessiccation of the Earth” (Kropotkin 1904). My project on the different steps of the debate—fieldwork in Kazakhstan, Iran, and Xinjiang; mapping of historical evidence; elaboration of climate theories; and, finally, a collective failure to appreciate landscape, culture and climate as dynamic entities—could be a valuable contribution to the review we must conduct of the history of the discovery of global warming (Weart 2008). This review may answer a vexing question: Why did Kropotkin's contemporaries deny that the environment and societies of Asia had a history of transformations?

To challenge the historiography and periodization of climate research (Fleming 1998), I will examine the assumptions that American, European, and Russian scientists harbored on the immutable nature of the environment and societies of Asia (Huntington 1907 and 1915). The information they gathered (Norin 1967) will allow me to criticize what historians at Harvard have written about climate change and the collapse of civilization (Oreskes and Conway 2014). I therefore plan to rewrite the history of the discovery of global warming through an examination of how early-twentieth-century exploration, armchair geography, and peer review influenced the analysis of transformation in the Middle East and Central Asia. In testing the resilience of historical data and theories on climate change, I will review the peer-review guidelines that scholarly societies enforced last century. *Unwelcome News* will explain why one century ago the Royal Geographic Society—and with it the European academic community—vetoed the proposition that climate had changed in Asia, rejected any connection between transformation, environment, and society, and eventually silenced climate theoreticians and field-workers.

My research topic addresses the management in Europe of disruptive knowledge regarding Asia's societal responses to climate change. My analysis promises to add historical and cultural as well as scientific perspectives to climate research today and to raise provocative questions on the place of ideology in scientific practices. I will deconstruct the argumentation that early-twentieth-century geographers elaborated on when they dismissed the motion that changes in climate could occur in historical rather than in geological times, could have an impact on culture and civilization, and could encourage human agency. To do so, I plan to retrace the intricate ways in which topographical survey and map-based analysis led to public lectures and yielded a disciplinary consensus—a consensus, however, that the data from the field could not possibly back up. *Unwelcome News* will combine contributions from the history of science, environmental history, the geosciences, climatology, and the recent exploration we have conducted in Iran and the Pamir with support from National Geographic (2013–2018). We are especially pleased with our control of the quality of early-twentieth-century data through geovisualization and repeat photography techniques in the [Sven Hedin Project](#).

Unwelcome News will allow me to engage fully with the topic of transformation within the environmental humanities, a field that has emerged in Munich, Berlin, Zurich, and Stockholm (Forêt et al. 2015). My project will deliver new information on the profound role of scientific consensus in framing our relationship with nature. The collections gathered in the national archives and libraries of Stockholm, Zurich, and Almaty on the environmental history of Central Asia are uniquely rich, but have not yet been exploited to question the narrative on the discovery of global warming (Gregory 1914, Callendar 1938, Keeling 1960, Fleming 1998, Brown 2005, Weart 2008). My assessment of the data collected between 1900 and 1910 would also align well with the interests of environmental historians in connecting borders, landscapes, and times (Münster, Satsuka, and Cederlöf 2014). Finally, compelling answers to fundamental questions on the “uses of the past” (HERA 2015) may help improve our ability to theorize transformation and anticipate crises.