

## ***Building an Online Forum for Environmental History***

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Conferences are vital to the development of environmental history. They are where scholars engage in dialogue, share research, develop ideas and subfields, and build communities – currently there is no substitute for the opportunities presented by in-person gatherings. Yet academic conferences will need to adapt in the near future to accommodate growing economic, environmental, and social concerns about their impacts on scholarly communities and local sites where they meet. How can we maintain the momentum while ensuring that opportunities to participate are equitable? As university budgets shrink, how can we curtail costs? How can we address the large carbon footprint of conferences? How can we bridge the distance between scholars that do not want or cannot travel to conference sites for political reasons?

This project will explore ways to expand the conference experience through remote participation. It will examine platforms that upload research materials and facilitate discussion on specific topics – before and after the meeting. It will produce recommended guidelines for professional societies and conference organizers in establishing an online forum using available tools and technology.

This forum will offer several advantages. First, it will render online sessions more efficient and more professional, allowing more time for the substance of the discussion rather than taking time to struggle with Skype connections that often work poorly and intermittently. Second, the forum will allow the momentum of discussion to continue after the conference. While the content of most conference sessions is fleeting, the forum will provide the opportunity for the discussion to grow and evolve. It will also continue the networking potential of the conference. Third, it could provide a repository for historical documents related to the session. Fourth, it will allow speakers (and possibly, attendees) to connect remotely, which could be an important option to scholars who cannot attend owing to constraints of time, money, or environmental and political concerns. A fee could be charged, ensuring continued revenue for the conference – yet the cost will be lower than if the speaker or attendee had also paid for travel, food, and lodging. Fifth, this forum takes advantage of the large pool of scholars that gather at the conference, making its scope and potential audience larger than that of most workshops. Lastly, it could expand connections among environmental history scholars with other communities.

This project also will address several questions: Who will be responsible for monitoring the forum? How will it get implemented? How will it expand and evolve over the years? How will it be funded? Where will it be housed? How will it be maintained over time?

In summary, this short-term project aims for long-term impact, advancing discussion among scholars and sharing of research across disciplines, strengthening the community of environmental historians and positioning them to continue their work in the future, and bringing scholars together with professionals, activists, and others.