

Copperbelt Environmentalism: Mining and Environmental Values on the Central African Copperbelt, 1950-2000
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My project deals with the environmental history of industrial copper mining on the Zambian and Congolese Copperbelt in the second half of the twentieth century. By unpacking and historicizing notions of waste, pollution and profit, this study offers a fresh perspective on changing environmental values. In the 1950s mining communities still accepted smoke as a necessary accompaniment of industrial modernity, but by the 1990s complaints about noxious pollution had surfaced. Attitudes towards the environmental impacts of industry have been successfully studied in the European and North American context (e.g. Thorsheim, 2006; Tarr, 1996), yet they have hardly been explored on the African continent. Inspired by environmental psychology (Steg & Vlek, 2009), my research will scrutinize topics such as air, water and cleanliness on the Copperbelt. I consider not only mining engineers and investors, but also mineworkers, their families and broader mining communities. This study investigates notions of environmental (in)justice across the (post)colonial frontier, whilst tracking local and international knowledge flows. Why did the 1990s see a sudden upsurge of environmental protest movements across the Copperbelt? How can historical understanding contribute to debates on sustainability in the Anthropocene?

Since the beginning of the twentieth century the copper mining industry on the Zambian and Congolese Copperbelt has moved billions of tonnes of earth and drastically impacted on the landscape. Yet although mining is one of the dirtiest of all industries, its role in transforming environments remains underexposed (Ross, 2017). Notwithstanding profound changes to the air, water and soils, environmental aspects of mining on the Copperbelt have been largely overlooked until the early 1990s. Whereas government officials and mining engineers either naturalised environmental harm as collateral damage of mining profit or fostered a belief in technology to solve problems of production, mining communities learnt to live with pollution rather than staging environmental protest (Lora-Wainwright, 2017). This proposal seeks to problematize the (in)visibility of the environmental impacts of mining on the Central African Copperbelt, relying on previously unused archival sources and oral histories with more than 100 long-term residents of the Zambian and Congolese Copperbelt. Moreover, by examining Copperbelt environmental history from the 1950s onwards, the sudden 'discovery' of pollution in the 1990s can be contextualized as a local and (inter)national phenomenon. Looking at Zambia and Congo comparatively brings out striking parallels and differences in environmental policies and thought. How did environmental values change? What was perceived as waste and what as profit?