



## A firmer footing for the environmental humanities

★ The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) is a leading centre for the study of the environmental humanities, a field that brings together elements of several disciplines. With funding from the Volkswagen Foundation, **Prof. Dr. Christof Mauch** and several colleagues at LMU Munich are now developing a masters programme to support the ongoing development of the field.

### The environmental humanities

has gained prominence as a field of research in recent years, with scholars bridging several different disciplines to bring a new perspective to environmental issues. As Director of the RCC, Professor Christof Mauch is now working with colleagues to put the study of the environmental humanities on a more stable footing and help strengthen the field in Germany. "In Germany there has been a lot of research in the fields of environmental science and environmental engineering, in applied science and technology, but not so much on the humanities," he outlines. This is a gap that Mauch and his colleagues at the RCC are working to fill by developing a masters programme through a project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. "The RCC has been a centre for advanced study in the environmental humanities over the last 13 years. The VW grant is now helping us to anchor this research in the university through a state-of-the-art graduate programme," he says.

### Environmental humanities

A major aim in environmental humanities research is to develop a deeper understanding of our relationship with the natural world and how that relationship has changed over time. One part of this is resource exploitation and sustainability concerns, while the field also touches on a wide variety of other issues. "It's also about topics like transformations of landscapes, natural disasters, our awareness of political engagement, and our understanding of the environmental situation that we are facing," says Mauch. The environmental humanities as a field is largely about concepts

and ideas, and while empirical information is important, in the main research is not data-driven. "The environmental humanities is predominantly a qualitative field," explains Dr Anna Antonova, one of the two Directors of Environmental Humanities Development at the RCC. "We collect data in the sense that we work in the field, we go out and speak to people and conduct interviews. In general, the field is interested in asking questions about topics like values, responsibility and justice."

The Rachel Carson Centre has been a centre for advanced study in the environmental humanities over the last 13 years. The Volkswagen grant is now helping us to anchor this research in the university through the **establishment of a new graduate programme and a variety of international events.**

This discussion is heavily influenced by non-western perspectives and criticisms, reflecting the uneven impact of the environmental crisis on different parts of the world. The masters programme at the RCC will include a wide variety of different perspectives, building on the centre's history of inviting and hosting researchers from all over the world. "The masters programme grew out of this international focus, so we are exposed to these different perspectives at the RCC," outlines Dr Antonova. Ultimately we all share the same planet, and issues in one part of the world can soon affect another, as illustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic. "One of the concepts that we work with is planetary health. This is about the connection between the health of individuals and societies, and the health of the

planet as a whole. A disease can be carried in a plane to pretty much every point on the globe," outlines Mauch. "There is this commonality, so you cannot view issues in isolation from each other, which is something we're very aware of as humanities scholars."

The aim now is to develop a masters programme in the environmental humanities at LMU Munich. The programme will be open to students with a BA degree across a broad variety of different disciplines, with Dr

Antonova saying the key criteria is an interest in environmental issues. "We will accept students with a background in the humanities, social sciences or natural sciences, as long as they can demonstrate that they have an interest in the environment. We test this through an essay which applicants submit as part of their application," she outlines. While some areas of research are quite narrowly focused, the masters programme is designed to encourage students to think differently and develop a broad understanding of the environment. "We believe that people who understand the mechanisms of nature, and understand the mechanisms of different disciplines and methodologies, are better communicators on environmental issues," says Mauch.

This is partly about reflecting on the environmental situation that we are in today. The strength of the humanities is in identifying the range of problems, and therefore the need for a range of solutions. "We aim to prepare students to take on these environmental challenges in a number of different ways," outlines Dr Antonova. One of these challenges is climate change, and this is often the topic that stimulates an interest in the environmental humanities, yet this is not the sole focus of research at the RCC. "The environmental humanities is quite a broad field, we are also interested in other issues beyond climate change and the different ways that the environment is changing. For example, over the last 150 years we've lost more than 50 percent of the top soil on the globe, which is having an impact on crop yields," says Professor Mauch. "Climate change is one topic that we study, but we are also interested in other issues that cannot necessarily be explained in terms of the impact of human activities and global warming."

### Reasons for optimism

The public debate on these topics can be quite negative in tone, with many people daunted by the scale of the environmental issues that we all face. While giving a broad picture of environmental issues, Professor Mauch says they also encourage students to be hopeful and try to find solutions, in part by reflecting on the progress that has been made. "It's important to collect stories about where we were in the past, to find reasons for hope," he outlines. For example, as recently as the '70s the idea of generating energy from wind was widely dismissed as unrealistic, and now it

supplies a significant proportion of our power, demonstrating that change is possible. "Looking back over longer timespans shows us that we've achieved something. These are small stories rather than one big story," continues Mauch. "We want our students to be aware of environmental problems, and to be alert and open to what a better world might look like. In order to do that students need to have a broad understanding of some very different disciplines."

There are regular events, lectures, conferences, workshops, film discussions and seminars on environmental topics at the RCC. The RCC has organized a couple of international conferences and environmental humanities summits that brought environmental leaders from Europe and beyond to Munich as part of the VW grant scheme. "We try to learn from each other and we hope to cooperate across institutional and national borders," says Mauch. It's not only academics who have taken part in events at the RCC but also practitioners, including politicians, city planners, and heads of NGOs, which Professor Mauch says is mutually beneficial. "We learn a lot from the experts that we invite to the RCC. It's a mutual learning process," he stresses. Most of the events and seminars are also open to the public, part of an effort to reach people beyond the University. "The VW grant is not just about developing the Masters programme. As part of the grant we are creating outreach educational platforms," continues Professor Mauch. "The grant was awarded under the University of the Future Funding line, which involves the university putting environmental and social topics at the core of its overall agenda."



The Rachel Carson Center library (the best in the field of the Environmental Humanities in Europe).

## STRENGTHENING THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

### Project Objectives

The aim of this project is to institutionalize the Environmental Humanities (EH) at Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU) Munich. Funding from the VolkswagenStiftung will be used to establish a state-of-the-art MA program in Environment and Society, to establish a Chair in EH, to design and use innovative teaching tools, field seminars, digital multimedia presentations and exhibitions, and to share knowledge with other EH initiatives from around the globe.

### Project Funding

Funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

### Contact Details

Prof. Dr. Christof Mauch  
Director  
Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München  
Leopoldstrasse 11A  
80802 München  
Germany  
T: +089-2180-72352 (Office Manager)  
E: mauch@lmu.de  
W: [https://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/outreach/third-party-projects/strengthening\\_envhum/index.html](https://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/outreach/third-party-projects/strengthening_envhum/index.html)

Prof. Dr. Christof Mauch Dr. Anna S. Antonova



**Prof. Dr. Christof Mauch** is Director of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society and Chair in American Cultural History at LMU Munich. He is an Honorary Professor at the Center for Ecological History of Renmin University in China and a past President of the European Society for Environmental History.

**Dr. Anna S. Antonova** is director of environmental humanities development at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. She studies social and environmental change in the contemporary European context and examines the relationship between societal transformations and environmental governance in the EU.

# Rachel Carson Center

ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

