

Environmental History in Romania: The Travail of a Scientific Field

To write about environmental history as an independent epistemological field in Romania could be a task accomplished within minutes. This statement is rigorously true only if we consider environmental history as a field of scientific inquiry without taking into account works from related disciplines such as geography or anthropology. However, even enlarging the range to encompass other disciplines, works attempting to study the intersections between the environment and society are not tremendously numerous. In the following pages I explore some of these works in an effort to build a framework on which the study of environmental history in Romania could raise its scaffold. In order to accomplish this task, I posit the existence of three periods in the historiography of environmental historical studies: presocialist period (roughly end of 1800 up to 1945), socialist period (1945 to 1989) and the postsocialist period.

Presocialist period

There are several big figures who conducted research at the intersection between nature, society and history such as Grigore Antipa (1867–1944), Simion Mehedinti (1868–1962) and Vintilă M. Mihăilescu (1890–1978) but for the lack of space I only focus on the first. Antipa was an ichthyologist who extensively studied the Danube Delta and the Lower Danube and was the promoter of the first modern fishing law (1896) in Romania. His studies included riparian populations, their fishing practices, their way of life and the political economy of the Lower Danube and Delta – in an approach that would be appreciated by an environmental historian or political ecologist.¹ He drew plans based on a historical approach for what we would now call sustainable fishing. For instance, he mentioned the richness of fishing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in one of the largest lakes in Romania (Lake Greaca, Southern Romania) that communicated constantly with the Danube, while linking the rising scarcity of Danube fish to the unsustainable fishing practices of riparian peoples. He interviewed old fishermen regarding fishing practices and fishing ecology and pointed out that the scarcity of sturgeons was likely due to the

1. Grigore Antipa, ‘Câteva probleme științifice și economice privitoare la Delta Dunărei’ [Several Scientific and Economic Problems Concerning the Danube Delta], *Analele Academiei Române* 36 (1914); Idem, *Studii asupra pescariilor din Romania* [Studies on Fisheries of Romania] (Bucuresti: Imprimeria Statului, 1895).

newly emerging, chaotic capitalist fishing practices in Romania.² Yet, the primary interest of Antipa was to find sustainable ways to exploit the countless wetlands along the Danube and the Delta and all his research was directed toward this end.³ Nevertheless, in drawing up economic plans for organising fisheries, Antipa engaged deeply with history of fishing practices. That makes him a key person in evaluation of any field that focuses on the intersections between history, society and nature.

The socialist period

Technically, the socialist period promoted several laws and policy measures to protect nature and environment. In fact, many laws meant to protect nature remained unapplied or poorly implemented on the ground whereas the regime promoted an aggressive policy of industrialisation and intensive agriculture.⁴ For this period one can count only a few books and several small articles which fit a wider definition of environmental history. One of them analyses the importance of forests in Romanian history, starting with prehistory.⁵ Constantin C. Giurescu explored forestry works and related tools, the importance of old trees as markers of different land properties since medieval times until the collectivisation of land (1946–1962), and different usages of different trees (from construction to firewood). He pointed out that late nineteenth-century industrialisation required a huge quantity of wood, which led to drastic deforestation throughout Romania. The same author wrote a history of fishing in Romania in which he describes the economic importance of fish for communities living on the current territory of Romania – a country with one of the richest river networks in Europe.⁶ He examines the fishing trade in Romanian history, the main species of fish living in Romanian waters as well as fishing tools and practices. This was conceived as the first volume, which ends with the modern period. A second volume, never published, was meant to cover the end of the nineteenth century until the socialist period.

Henri H. Stahl, a sociologist, focused on the commons (villages, lands and forests) in Romanian history. In his impressive work he illustrates the

2. Grigore Antipa, *Regiunea inundabila a Dunarii. Starea ei actuala si mijloacele de a o pune in valoare* [The Danube Floodplain. Its Status and the Means to Exploit It] (Bucuresti: Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1910).
3. See for details, Stefan Dorondel and Vera Mitroi, 'Nature, State and Conservation in the Danube Delta: Turning Fishermen into Outlaws', in W. Graf von Hardenberg, M. Kelly, C. Leal and Emily Wakild (eds), *The Nature State. Rethinking the History of Conservation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 194–212.
4. Ibid.
5. Constantin C. Giurescu, *Istoria pădurii românești din cele mai vechi timpuri până astăzi* [The History of Romanian Forest from the Most Ancient Times Until Today] (București: Ceres, 1975).
6. Constantin C. Giurescu, *Pescuitul și piscicultura în România* [Fishing and Fisheries in Romania], vol. 1 (București: Ed. Academiei Române, 1964).

transformation of property rights over land and forests from the Middle Ages to the modern period. He shows not only how the commons were organised and the techniques of exploitation of land and forests but also the physical consequences for natural resources (deforestation, land fragmentation, land exhaustion).⁷

The socialist period in Romania, due to the rigid political regime (that ranked with Albania as the toughest socialist regime in Europe), had poor links with Western academia especially after 1971. This is the reason that the main developments in the global evolution of environmental history had no echo in Romania. For instance, the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which contributed substantially to boosting environmental movements in the West, was virtually unknown and un-echoed in Romania – and remains so today.

Postsocialist period

The closest book to environmental history was written by Paul Cernovodeanu and Paul Binder. The two authors are clearly influenced by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and by the French School of Annales.⁸ They explore catastrophic events such as locust invasions, floods, droughts or earthquakes in the Romanian Middle Ages, including Transylvania which was then part of the Hungarian Kingdom. Despite the dearth of documents, especially for the medieval period – a challenge all scholars of social and economic history of Romania face – the authors succeed in extracting enough information from the documents to offer conclusions about droughts or intensive rain in certain years. For instance, they track the production of grapes – a Mediterranean fruit loving sun and drought – to show that Transylvanian medieval chroniclers mentioned excellent wine quantity and quality in years following a drought whereas much poorer wine qualities followed rainy periods.⁹ This book might have served as a foundation for future Romanian research in environmental history, being the most thoroughly researched and richly insightful book of environment history published in postsocialist Romania. Yet, appearing in the first years of postsocialist transformations, surrounded by political unrest, economic changes and institutional restructuring, the book did not reset Romanian historiography as one would have expected.

Constantin Ardeleanu, a young and very active international historian published extensively on the Danube European Commission as well as on Danube navigation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. He shows

7. Henri H. Stahl, *Contribuții la studiul satelor devălmașe românești* [Contributions for the Study of the Romanian Commons], 3 vols (București: Cartea Românească, 1998 [1958]).
8. Paul Cernovodeanu and Paul Binder, *Cavalerii Apocalipsului. Calamitățile naturale din trecutul României (până la 1800)* [The Knights of Apocalypse. Natural Disasters in Romanian History (until 1800)] (București: Silex, 1993).
9. *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

the importance of steamboat voyages from Vienna to Constantinople and the corresponding transformation of the Danube river to make it more easily and safely navigable.¹⁰ He also focuses on the contribution of infrastructure, such as bridges and railways, to the modernisation of Romania at the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ His work includes a strong environmental component, since the lower Danube is an important actor in modern Romania, but his emphasis is always on economic aspects. Ardeleanu's work could be considered economic or environmental history. Yet his international affiliations, as a member of the International Maritime Economic History Association, Economic History Association, Economic History Society (London) – though not of the ESEH – speak for his preference to identify his work on the Danube as economic history.

In the last ten years, a new direction has developed in Romania to emphasise political ecology and environmental anthropology. Liviu Măntescu and Monica Vasile have carried out anthropological fieldwork in several provinces of Romania focused on communal forest restitution. They engage ethnography and political economy to show the winners and losers of postsocialist forest restitution.¹² Măntescu explores the intersections between postsocialist agrarian questions and ecological crises. He traces the eighteenth century penetration of capitalist relations in the Vrancea region (Eastern Romania) and their ecological impact.¹³ Vasile has published widely on political corruption as a driver of deforestation in the postsocialist period, as well as the rules of property revival and local practices concerning common forests.¹⁴ More recently

-
10. Constantin Ardeleanu, 'From Vienna to Constantinople on Board the Vessels of the Austrian Danube Steam-Navigation Company', *Historical Yearbook VI* (2009): 187–202; idem, 'Accidente de navigație la Dunărea de Jos (1856-1914)[Navigation Accidents on the Lower Danube (1856-1914)]', in Andreea Atanasiu-Croitoru and Florin Stan (eds), *Dunărea și Marea Neagră în spațiul euro-asiatic. Istorie, relații politice și diplomatie* [Danube and the Black Sea within Euro-Asian Space. History, Political Relations and Diplomacy] (Lucrările celei de-a XVII-a ediții a Sesiunii Naționale de Comunicări Științifice a Muzeului Marinei Române, 2014), pp. 83–90.
 11. Constantin Ardeleanu, 'Efectele construirii căii ferate Cernavodă-Constanța asupra navigației dunărene (1859–1860)' [The Effects of Building the Railway Cernavodă-Constanța on the Danube Navigation (1859–1860)], *Analele Universității Ovidius – Seria Istorie 3* (2006): 41–54; idem, 'Comisia Europeană a Dunării și modernizarea infrastructurii de transport a României: Calea navigabilă a Dunării (1856–1914)' [The European Commission of the Danube and the Transport Infrastructure of Romania: Danube as Roadway], in Daniela Bușă și Ileana Căzan (eds), *Curențe ideologice și instituțiile statului român modern – secolele XVIII – XX. Modelul european și spațiul românesc* [Ideological Theories and the Modern Romanian Institutions] (București: Oscar Print, 2007), pp. 169–188.
 12. Monica Vasile and Liviu Măntescu, 'Property Reforms in Rural Romania and Community-based Forests', *Sociologie Românească 2* (2009): 95–113.
 13. Liviu Măntescu, 'The Ecology of an Agrarian Question. Ecological Crises and the Coming of Age of Capitalism in Vrancea,' in S. Dorondel, S. Serban (eds), *At the Margins of History. The Agrarian Question in Southeast Europe*. A special issue of *Martor 19* (2004): 97–113.
 14. Monica Vasile, 'Règles de propriété et pratiques locales dans les forêts communes villageoises de Vrancea : l'Obșteau d'aujourd'hui (Roumanie)', *Options Méditerranéennes A*

she has engaged in new research regarding animal–human relations and their impact on Romanian forests and wildlife, rewilding and villagers’ attitudes toward reintroducing bison.¹⁵

Liviu Chelcea, Călin Cotoi, Stefan Dorondel and Stelu Șerban have also focused on current sociopolitical developments, post-socialist transformations and their impacts on urban and rural ecologies, growing interests to establish national parks in Romania, and reactions of villagers who resent newly protected areas as top-down impositions.¹⁶

Finally, in the last couple of years instead of being surrounded solely by geography, social anthropology and political ecology, an independent environmental history has made steps toward being more visible in Romania. One of the seeds for developing Romanian environmental history has been its involvement with the Rachel Carson Center of the Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich. Stefan Dorondel and Monica Vasile were both fellows at the RCC and both benefited from its assistance at various times in promoting the discipline in Romania. Dorondel, Ursula Münster and Daniel Münster co-edited a special issue of RCC’s *Perspectives* that explores the interstices of forest and agriculture, as well as of conservation, state and agriculture.¹⁷ In a monograph of the RCC’s book series, Dorondel explores the transformations of a socialist landscape into a postsocialist one. This work shows that land reform had consequences not only for humans but also for the natural world. Decollectivisation and forest restitution affected land tenure, local economy and local social relations as well as types of crops, quality of pastures, forests and wildlife.¹⁸ The book was considered ‘one of the first monographs ... that looks

-
- 82** (2009): 94–105 ; idem, ‘Corruption in Romanian Forestry – Morality and Local Practice in the Context of Privatization’, *Revista Română de Sociologie XX* (1–2), (2009) : 105–120.
15. Nicole Bauer, Monica Vasile and Maria Mondini, ‘Attitudes Towards Nature, Wilderness and Protected Areas: A Way to Sustainable Stewardship in the South-Western Carpathians’, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* **61** (5–6), (2018): 857–877; Monica Vasile, ‘The Vulnerable Bison: Practices and Meanings of Rewilding in the Romanian Carpathians’, *Conservation and Society* **16** (3) (2018): 217–231.
 16. Liviu Chelcea, ‘Postindustrial Ecologies: Industrial Rubble, Nature and the Limits of Representation’, *Parcours anthropologiques* **10** (2015): 186–201; Stefan Dorondel, ‘Environmental Disasters, Climate Change and Other Big Problems of Our Times. A View from Southeast Europe’, *Ethnologia Balkanica* **19** (2016): 11–32. Stefan Dorondel and Stelu Șerban, ‘Dissuading the State: Food Security, Peasant Resistance and Environmental Concerns in Rural Bulgaria’, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2018.1498326>. Calin Cotoi, ‘The Making of a National Park: Ruins of Nature and History in Northern Dobruja’, *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* **31** (3) (2017): 596–614; Stefan Dorondel, ‘Tenure Rights, Environmental Interests and the Politics of Local Government in Romania’, in T. Sikor and J. Stahl (eds), *Forests and People. Property, Governance and Human Rights* (London and New York: Earthscan, 2011), pp. 175–186.
 17. Ursula Münster, Daniel Münster and Stefan Dorondel (eds), *Fields and Forests: Ethnographic Perspectives on Environmental Globalization*. RCC Perspectives **5** (2012).
 18. Stefan Dorondel, *Disrupted Landscapes: State, Peasants and the Politics of Land in Postsocialist Romania* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

at the intermeshing of social, political, economic and ecological relations', and a 'stepping stone in the development of a multidisciplinary field exploring ecological themes in this part of the world'.¹⁹

Recent publications in Romanian environmental history come rather from anthropologists-cum-historians than from officially enrolled historians. Engaging a post-humanist perspective, Stefan Dorondel, Stelu Șerban and Daniel Cain explore the history of two islands of the Danube and their transformation in order to show their power over human diplomacy, military actions and border establishment in modern times. The authors show how these highly volatile environments – the Danubian islands – have contributed in certain historical circumstances to human history.²⁰ Șerban surveys the rush for technological development and the establishment of a technocratic elite in Bulgaria and Romania as a way to understand the management of the Danube river and its political meanings at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.²¹ In a different paper, Șerban focuses on the context of building levees along the Lower Danube in Romania and Bulgaria in the socialist period. Engaging techno-nationalism theory he is able to show how the nation-state uses hydraulic technology to strengthen its legitimacy.²²

Conclusions

The above works suggest that there is now good ground upon which to build Romanian environmental history. The hope is that the current generation of historians will go beyond the current historiography mostly focused on politics, diplomacy and military events.

STEFAN DORONDEL

Francisc I. Rainer Institute of Anthropology Bucharest

-
19. Stefan Voicu, 'Review of *Disrupted Landscapes: State Peasants and the Politics of Land in Postsocialist Romania*', *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2018.1511118>
 20. Stefan Dorondel, Stelu Șerban and Daniel Cain, 'The Play of Islands: Emerging Borders and Danube Dynamics in Modern Southeast Europe (1830–1900)', *Environment and History* (2018). Fast Track, DOI <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734018X15254461646413>
 21. Stelu Șerban, 'State, Technology and Environment on the Lower Danube: Bulgaria and Romania before the Balkan Wars', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1506279>
 22. Stelu Șerban, 'Techno-nationalising the Levees on the Danube: Romania and Bulgaria after World War II', *Nationalities Papers*, 2019 (in press).