

Singing on the Submarine: Conference Review for ESEH 2019, 'Boundaries In/Of Environmental History', Tallinn

The Estonian Center for Environmental History (KAJAK) had the honour of hosting the 10th biennial ESEH conference on 21–25 August 2019, at Tallinn University, Estonia. More than 500 participants from 43 countries gathered in Tallinn under the theme 'Boundaries in/of Environmental History' in order to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Society and the continuing rise of our discipline.

2019 was not an easy year for an environmental historian: in addition to the ESEH in August, the yearly ASEH conference in April and the East Asian Environmental History conference taking place in October, the ICEHO World Congress of Environmental History in Florianopolis, Brazil, happened in July – barely a month before ESEH folks were summoned to Tallinn. It seems that environmental history has grown to a point where absorbing such a line-up of remarkable events in one year is not an issue. Although there was a clear drop in the numbers of Latin American participants (only seven) at the ESEH in Tallinn, the total number of delegates remained at a remarkably high level.

Doing statistics in the age of extensive scientific mobility is not an easy thing, but we can nevertheless say that the largest delegation at the ESEH conference came from Germany (55), followed by the USA (47). Quite naturally, the organising country, Estonia, witnessed a surge in the numbers participating, matching those of United Kingdom (27) and France (24). The Scandinavian countries, Russia and Poland, Austria and Switzerland all had sizable delegations. Although Latvian and Lithuanian delegates remained few, the number of new members and faces from the nearby countries and Eastern Europe at large proves that the conference still worked as a catalyst for regional environmental history.

Reaching twenty years old, ESEH has become an adult. The academic rebels that founded the society back in 1999 have become respected professors, and we have established core topics and authoritative centres that are present at each of our conferences. It is more important than ever to nurture the innovativeness, curiosity and youthfulness that has characterised our research up to present but one must also ask where the boundaries of environmental history lie? Who are we and who do we let in? To this end, the ESEH2019 Local Organisation Committee envisioned an ambitious diversity policy that was rigorously put in practice by the ESEH Programme Committee.

We encouraged submissions that strived for geographical, generational, disciplinary and gender diversity and rejoiced in the line-up of amazing proposals

that then underwent blind peer-review by the Programme Committee. Along with established topics such as climate history, famines and food, animal history and war, there were new and fascinating takes, such as environmental history of soap, human-plant relations, soil or the cold. Nature conservation and environmentalism loomed large in the programme, which included long overdue attention to the 1980s Green revolutions of Eastern Europe as well as transnational environmental governance. Nuclear energy, Ottoman history, and economical systems all formed intellectual communities of their own. Fermented camel milk offered by David Moon became legend even before it was finished and the ESEH Polar Bear Swimming Club recruited many new members who are now eagerly awaiting the traditional swimming tour to become an official side event in Bristol in 2021.

Part of the diversity policy was also to link the conference as much as possible with teaching and the younger generation of environmental historians from undergraduates to Ph.D.s and post-docs. NEXTGATE, the Next Generation Action Team coordinated by Victor Pál, was initiated by 2017–2019 ESEH President Péter Szabó. ESEH 2019 was the first public demonstration of how this network contributes to the engagement of the younger generation in the life of the society. As a remarkable success, NEXTGATE organised the first ESEH Twitter conference and held its first open pub night in Tallinn. For the first time in ESEH history, special attention was paid to teaching at the Education Fair, where participants gathered to share and compare different experiences in teaching environmental history.

At KAJAK we believe that the next generation of academics does not start with Ph.D. students. Even B.A. and M.A. students found a place in making the conference a success. Students from different schools and institutes at Tallinn University helped to prepare the conference in interdisciplinary seminars for project-based learning. They made a pop-up exhibition on the Estonian oil-shale industry for the Estonian History Museum, our venue for the final ceremony, and they spent a whole year experimenting with and brewing the conference beer. Making the students feel part of the local organising team was the key to having engaged volunteers.

Rome was not built in a day and a conference of this size was not organised overnight. The conference would not have been possible without the help of the Tallinn Conference Center and local volunteers, as well as generous support from Enterprise Estonia, one of Estonia's largest funders of financial assistance, counselling, cooperative opportunities and training for entrepreneurs and research institutions in public and non-profit sectors. This support made possible several conference highlights including fascinating keynotes by Kate Brown and Alf Hornborg; an ambitious plenary panel discussion with Andrea Gaynor, Franz Mauelshagen, Kalevi Kull, Stefania Barca and Dolly Jørgensen; and free-of-charge opening and closing ceremonies. The local organisers had carefully chosen the venues for public events so as to create memorable vibes: the

Tartu University Chamber Choir celebrating Estonian song festival traditions on top of the submarine at the Estonian Seaplane Harbour; making music with birds at the final reception in Lenin's garden of Maarjamäe Palace (Estonian History Museum); or tasting ESEH2019's special brew 'Kuuse Willem' along with other local foods in the atrium of the university. Those not present could (and still can) listen to the keynote speeches through the Internet at <https://vimeo.com/search?q=ESEH+2019>.

ESEH 2019 in Tallinn also displayed a clear vision for 'greening' the conference. Local organisers offered free public transportation on the days of the conference, reduced the number of printed materials (programmes, abstracts) and abstained from conference goodies such as conference bags, mugs or pens. Instead, we introduced an ESEH conference app and explored alternative (digital) ways for asking questions during and after the keynotes. Digital innovation and practical solutions were constantly reinforced with the help of student volunteers so that even those who normally shy away from blinking screens could get a full conference experience.

Combining an outstanding scientific programme with the best of local culture, entertainment, professional organisation and personal commitment, while showcasing distinctive Estonian research, teaching and administration was the credo of the Local Organisation Team. Although it is hard to measure the impact of ESEH 2019 in Tallinn, the meeting definitely made a strong impression on the student volunteers who are still speaking about 'our' conference. It was also a boost for environmental history at Tallinn University. Positive feedback from within and beyond Estonia shows that major conferences can also give a personal touch, that professional quality can be combined with emotional depth, that global issues and small countries fit perfectly well together, and that students can and should be involved in international events in meaningful ways.

ULRIKE PLATH AND KATI LINDSTRÖM