

In the midst of so many serious socio-ecological problems, many environmental historians are keen that their work might ‘make a difference’ beyond academic discourse. For this Notepad, to stimulate further reflection and debate, we asked four ESEH members: ‘what does it mean for you to produce socially engaged environmental history?’

Marco Armiero

President, European Society for Environmental History
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For me, producing socially engaged environmental history has always meant considering power and inequalities as key issues for whatever research I was doing. In my scholarship, this has often involved work on subaltern communities, whether villagers in the Italian mountains or urban communities affected by toxic contamination. With this I do not imply that one must study the subalterns to be socially engaged; on the contrary, I believe that we need more research on the rich, the polluters and the gated communities (I am thinking here of work by Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Pellow). I do not think that it is a matter of the themes or subjects we study but it is, as I said at the beginning, a matter of perspectives. Looking at nature as if power and inequalities did not matter produces bad scholarship. Some scholars think that this makes them neutral, not biased, but I believe this to be an intellectual mistake. As feminist scholars, such as Sandra Harding, and radical historians, such as Howard Zinn, have demonstrated, looking at issues from a situated perspective produces better scholarship. To be clear, let me add that a socially engaged scholarship does not entail fabricating your sources to support your cause, but it does mean interrogating your sources in view of the power structures in which they were produced, and perhaps looking for other sources that can give voice to other stories. A good way to synthesise what I see as a socially engaged environmental history is to say that I see it as a collective enterprise aiming to challenge the toxic narratives which silence/naturalise injustices while recovering the multifold alternative narratives which tell diverse stories of the past and allow us to imagine diverse futures.

Liesbeth van de Grift

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From the plastic soup and natural resource scarcity to manure surpluses in agriculture: these are issues that scientists, nature conservationists and environmental activists have put on the agenda ever since the 1960s and 1970s, if not earlier. If the environmental limits to our current economic system have been apparent for so long, how can we explain the lack of decisive action in response? This is a deeply historical question that requires us to look at the role of historically embedded norms, political power relations and institutional dynamics.

It is also a question that resonates with many people that I meet. My students are puzzled with the familiarity of the debates they encounter in historical newspapers and archives of environmental organisations. People active within non-governmental organisations, whether at present or in the past, feel the need to look back at their past; to see where they came from, how their organisations have evolved over time and what their impact has been. In recent years, I have set up several smaller research projects together with NGOs and students interested in environmental history. The NGOs include environmental organisations and lesser-known environmental actors, such as river water companies. Our collaboration consists of the opening up of internal archival records and the students' and my own use of these sources to write pieces of the organisations' histories. For the organisations in question, the research provides an important basis to reflect upon their own role and to discuss their future. Topics such as the manure problem, river pollution and transnational cooperation, sustainable tourism and energy saving provide excellent opportunities for MA thesis research. Most importantly, by being involved students feel that they are contributing to a research field that is both academically and societally relevant. As for myself, these smaller projects constitute crucial building blocks that allow me to engage with the question of which historical factors shape pathways to more sustainable societies.

Antonio Ortega Santos

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From research in environmental history we are committed to producing knowledge that reinforces practices of territorial and community sustainability. This commitment that I make from my research supposes creating a citizen science, open in terms of access to its results and committed to the territories in which it works. For more than twenty years, within the framework of European and Latin American research, we have been developing projects that reinforce the

socio-environmental value of the commons as a ‘historical subject’ in which rural and urban communities have established their socio-environmental resilience. Now more than ever, in the face of the climate and civilisational crisis, turning our gaze towards ‘the common’ is a socio-environmental need. A second compromise scenario is related to the production of healthy agri-food systems. From the field of intersection between Agroecology and Environmental History, there comes an ethical commitment to study, evaluate and propose socio-environmental action scenarios in which peasant knowledge allows us to promote a new ‘glocal’ food sovereignty. Attention in research to how cultivation systems more respectful of the earth’s cycles have been maintained, designing networks of ecomarkets and community seed banks are just some of the forms of socio-territorial research underway.

This way of investigating places us before a new epistemological field. In the framework of the Anthropocene, we seek to generate a decolonial environmental history, in which traditional knowledge, ecofeminist proposals and the denunciation of environmental injustice (socio-environmental conflicts, struggles against pollution and waste deposits in the Global South, etc.) are axes along which to walk towards other new narratives of environmental history. Stories of Humans, Non-Humans, of the Seas and Oceans are just some of the new commitments of environmental history.

Andrea Gaynor

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There are many ways of doing socially engaged environmental history. One of the ones I find most satisfying is when people in the community or media come to you with a question, or want to know more about the history of a particular issue. By way of example, my Ph.D. research was on the environmental history of suburban food production in Australian cities. Some years ago now, I wrote an article in *The Conversation*, a global media outlet that brings scholarly research to wider publics via short, readily-digestible online articles. The article turned to history to explore the question of what role home food production might play in future urban food security and resilience.¹ This was read by more than 10,000 people, including Nick Rose, Director of a food systems non-government organisation called Sustain: The Australian Food Network. He got in touch with me and we have since spoken together at a major festival, run a workshop with local government, and edited a book of urban agriculture

1. Andrea Gaynor, ‘Is it time to resurrect the wartime ‘Grow Your Own’ campaign?’, *The Conversation*, 28 Oct. 2016, <https://theconversation.com/is-it-time-to-resurrect-the-wartime-grow-your-own-campaign-66337>

stories.² History tells us that self-provisioning can make a substantial contribution to urban equity and resilience. However, urban communities need to actively develop more robust local food systems, to ensure that the necessary skills, space and inputs are available, particularly for the most vulnerable. The historical story gives us a powerful means of thinking through the risks and opportunities in planning – or not – for increased urban self-provisioning. There is a significant public thirst for these kinds of historical story – a follow-up piece I wrote in 2020 providing a historical perspective on home food production during the pandemic was read by more than 20,000 people.³ History dies without an audience, and environmental historians should be using whatever platform we have for the kind of radical remembering that might help us steer a course for a more equitable and sustainable future.

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2. Nick Rose and Andrea Gaynor (eds), *Reclaiming the Urban Commons: The Past, Present and Future of Food Growing in Australian Towns and Cities* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2018).
 3. Andrea Gaynor, 'If you took to growing veggies in the coronavirus pandemic, then keep it up when lockdown ends', *The Conversation*, 25 May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/if-you-took-to-growing-veggies-in-the-coronavirus-pandemic-then-keep-it-up-when-lockdown-ends-135359>