

ESEH ROUND-UP OF RECENT INITIATIVES

While we all eagerly await the next ESEH conference in Bristol, July 2022, the Society has been busy bringing the environmental history community together in virtual space. Here, some of the organisers of these initiatives describe and reflect upon them.

ESEH Postcards

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Berlin)

On the occasion of Environmental History Week – organised by the ASEH around Earth Day 2021 – the ESEH has launched its brand-new Instagram account: [@eseh_postcards](https://www.instagram.com/eseh_postcards/) (https://www.instagram.com/eseh_postcards/). The idea behind the project, titled ‘Postcards for Unstable Times’, is to play around with postcards as media that mix public and personal messaging and use them to explore how we can combine words and images to effectively describe past, present and future crises and transformations. We think of the postcards as portals into another world, contributing to a sense of the incommensurable scale of the environmental changes we are facing.

In a lively launch event, the authors of our nine inaugural postcards presented their works, highlighting the connection between the text and the image. The postcards allow you to travel from the rusting greenhouses of the former Pirita Exemplary Flower Growing Sovkhoz in Estonia to the embers of forest fires in British Columbia, respectively telling tales of re-wilding human infrastructures and drawing parallels between past and present crises. Dams, among the most imposing human infrastructures, show up twice: once as vectors of disasters – telling the story of the 1963 Vajont disaster in Italy – and once as providers of fresh water in a warming and drying world – looking at Sydney’s Warragamba Dam. Further postcards touch upon the difficulty of drawing boundaries between native and alien plants, also in view of their cultural relevance – presenting the cases of *Carum carvi* L. along the coast of the Baltic Sea and of *Acacia indica farnesiana* in Egypt. Another postcard showcases the steep decline of the *Saiga tatarica* in the steppes of central Asia to the brink of extinction, in response to the ever-increasing impact of agriculture and mass husbandry. Finally, coal connects our last two postcards, as well as Svalbard with Great Britain, acting as *trait-d’union* in a complex tale of extraction, pollution and propaganda.

We hope to expand our collection of postcards. Details on how to do so – as well as a link to the recording of the launch event – are available on the Society’s website: <http://eseh.org/resources/postcards-for-unstable-times/>

Environmental History Today! ESEH Online Seminar Series

Tim Soens, UAntwerpen (Antwerp)

Spring 2021 saw most environmental historians around the globe still working at home. For more than a year, the global health crisis has been disrupting livelihoods and routines. While conferences were postponed, archives were closed and fieldwork was complicated, ESEH explored new ways of staying connected and communicating research, in ways more open, inclusive and global than ever before. So, between March and July, ESEH hosted ten online seminars open to everyone, giving environmental historians an opportunity to present part of their ongoing research to the wider research community without limitation as to topics, chronology or geography. On the programme were book presentations, which brought us from the American Steppes (David Moon) through Białowieża Primeval Forest (Tomasz Samojlik and Anastasia Fedotova) to Kolkata (Jenia Mukherjee) and the Alps (Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Žiga Zwitter and Leonid Rasran). Ph.D. students also presented the results of their work: Melania Buns on Nordic environmental cooperation; Erik Wallenberg on nature and race in American Theater; and Stéphanie Denève on the natural environment in popular songs. The results of ongoing research projects were presented by Ellen Arnold (river monsters in the medieval imagination), Mathew Plishka (Banana Blight in Jamaica) and Sam Grinsell (the colonial Nile). A special on Portuguese environmental history, featuring Ana Isabel Lopes, José Rafael Soares, Luís Pedro Silva and Manuel Miranda Fernandes; and a final roundtable on the ecologies of colonialism, convened by Vera-Simone Schulz, completed the series. By early June more than 350 environmental historians had registered to follow one or more of the seminars, either live or via the dedicated Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdOhwCylHMMgoNfXy2RypSw>

Critical Environmental History: Power, Resistance and Justice

Katie Holmes, La Trobe University (Melbourne)

In March this year the ESEH Diversity Committee held the first of its seminars in the new online series: Critical Environmental History: Power, Resistance and Justice. The seminar comprised a panel talking about Intersections in Environment and Disability, featuring Sara J. Grossman (Bryn Mawr College), David M. Turner (Swansea University) and Andy Flack (University of Bristol). They each spoke to the ways in which their research addressed disability in the wider context of environmental history: David about ‘Disability in the

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Industrial Revolution’, Sara about ‘Landscape with Prosthetics: environmental histories of physical disabilities’, and Andy about ‘More-than-human (Dis)abilities’. The discussion then turned to a more activist conversation about the place and status of disability as a protected but vastly under-represented characteristic within our discipline and scholarly community.

The theme of activism within the academy was picked up in the second seminar in the series, held in May, ‘Call yourself a Feminist?: Gender, Allyship and Environmental History’. Featuring Sara Gregg (University of Kansas/WEHN), Safaa Naffaa (Utrecht University), Arielle Helmick and Katie Ritson (Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich) and Brinda Sarathy (Pitzer College/WEHN). Speakers and participants explored their experiences of different forms of discrimination within in the workplace, the discipline and the wider community, and strategies for addressing it. Despite decades of activism, it became clear that there are many challenges that continue to impede women in the field of environmental history and within their institutions.

Both these seminars have been very well attended and, in the absence of the ESEH Conference this year, played an important role in keeping critical issues at the forefront of the Society. Both have been recorded and will be accessible through the ESEH website. The seminar series is ongoing so please keep an eye out for specific dates and times via the ESEH webpage, emails and social media. If you would like to propose a topic for us to consider, please get in touch. We are very keen to continue to explore the ways the ESEH can work to combat sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination in the workplace, the discipline and the wider community.

NEXTGATe writing group

Andrea Gaynor, The University of Western Australia (Perth)

This initiative emerged from a seed of an idea at the ESEH conference in Tallinn, reinforced by the agenda set by the Next Generation Action Team in a 2020 Notepad. Roberta Biasillo, Noémi Ujházy, Simone Schleper, Elena Kochetkova and Andrea Gaynor worked together to develop a format and call for expressions of interest in joining the group, then compiled and circulated a programme. The sessions, held via zoom, commenced in February 2021 and ran monthly through to June, attended by around fourteen early career researchers and three senior scholars. Two group members pre-circulated work for discussion in each session. After a brief introduction by one author, group members provided their feedback on the work for around 45 minutes, before moving on to a similar discussion of the other author’s paper. Contributions included thesis chapters, book chapters, conference papers and journal articles, as well as a series of online stories. The conversations were always lively and collegial, providing encouragement, support and good humour, as well as suggesting potential literatures with which to engage, and improvements in

framing, structure and style. While the principal beneficiaries were the authors, the entire group enjoyed learning about the wide range of topics discussed – from the British South Africa Company administration’s responses to drought, to lost stories of yoghurt – while honing our skills in preparing research for publication. The group, which encompassed members from across Europe as well as Australia and South Africa, looks forward to seeing the fruits of our labours in print. This initiative has proven so valuable – and indeed fun – that it will be continued in some form: watch this space!