

ESEH NOTEPAD

Environmental historians' source material is all around us, but conventional archives also play an important role in our work. How do we creatively use archives to answer environmental historical questions? What challenges and opportunities do different archives present? This edition of the Notepad provides two perspectives on using archives for environmental history.

The environment in medical archives

Medical science is a powerful narrative instrument. Medical science synthesises complicated physical and biological mechanisms, and provides a system for coding complex relationships between living beings, non-human actants and the various environments where humans dwell, move through and work in. Furthermore, science at large plays a key role in that it provides the grammar and the ensemble of procedures through which scientists are able to read its coded language. Yet, these codes are not as inaccessible to non-specialists as they might appear.

While working on my doctoral dissertation on the environmental history of migrant coal workers in Southern Belgium, I spent a few months getting my head around medical records produced by various public, private and international institutions which all revolved around coal worker pneumoconiosis – or black lungs. Most of those records were produced between the 1940s and the 1960s by Institut d'Hygiène des Mines (the Belgian Coal Mines' Health and Safety Public Institute).

One of the obstacles I had to face pertained to the fact that it is not easy to find any direct reference to the environment in those medical and technical records. This is often the case in public archival records and is why environmental historians need to adopt a broad understanding of 'the environment'. Seemingly very technical folders addressing technological developments and working tools might reveal precious insights into workers' bodies and workers' conditions (such as the statistical impact of arthritis or dermatitis on pitmen). On the other hand, very promising folders, such as radiographic evidence, might prove almost useless if not provided with a description or a legend. Even former miners' testimonies might be deceiving since they tend to reproduce hegemonic narratives about workers' heroism and macho disregard for their own health conditions.

Probably the most interesting data I found were conserved in the so-called *divers* (unsorted documents). In these messy folders made of unsorted letters, documents, leaflets and pictures, the persevering (and lucky) scholar might find confidential correspondences between medical scientists, politicians, unions and important economic actors. These archival golden nuggets can reveal the arbitrariness of seemingly objective medical procedures or the deliberate

decision to move threshold limit values defining black lungs, as well as the unavoidable entanglement between economic, environmental and occupational health considerations.

Environmental historians working on medical records should always remember that they are looking for facts, but also for stories and narratives glimpsed through what Bruno Latour defined as black-boxing processes. Such stories and narratives are made of a mesh of medical research files and publications, but also of private correspondences and workers' bodies and testimonies. To look behind-the-scenes of these scientific procedures might constitute a good starting point for any research interested in studying the entanglement between health, work and the environment from a bottom-up perspective.

Daniele Valisena, Post-doctoral researcher in Environmental Humanities at the Spiral Research Center, University of Liège, Belgium

Environment in the OECD archive

<https://www.oecd.org/general/oecdarchives.htm>

The OECD has its origins in the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which was established in April 1948 in order to organise the implementation of the Marshall Plan and to bolster European cooperation against the Soviet Bloc. Its members at the time were Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and West Germany. Canada and the USA were associate members. With European recovery, the creation of NATO and the Treaty of Rome, the OEEC lost its original purpose and was re-created in 1961 as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Its purpose was to coordinate economic planning and policy within its member countries and with the outside world, and the change of name articulated the shift of scope towards longer-term development and beyond Europe. Only three more countries joined during the next twenty years: Japan (1964), Australia (1971) and New Zealand (1973). Additional countries followed in the 1990s

The OEEC first addressed environmental topics through its Committee for Applied Research, established in 1957. Designed to address various technical issues that were challenging for member states, the Committee initiated several small studies on industrial water and air pollution. In 1970, the OECD created an Environment Committee, making it the first international organisation to establish a permanent committee specifically dedicated to environmental issues. The organisation has since been a forum in which the major environmental topics of concern to member countries have been discussed.

Consequently, the archive holds sources on a broad range of topics, including pollution, chemical hazards, radioactivity and agriculture. The holdings are well worth consulting since the OECD repeatedly hosted debates that resulted in developments for which, subsequently, other entities have become better

known. The holdings on 1970s meetings and discussions of how to reconcile environmental and economic concerns tell an important part of the pre-history of the concept of sustainable development, for which the Brundtland Commission became known (Jim MacNeill gave up his job at the OECD to join the Commission as Secretary). The Polluter-Pays Principle, often tied to the European Union, emerged at the OECD, and its emergence can be reconstructed in the documents. I was most surprised to find how much of the Millennium Development Goals had actually been prepared within the OECD. I also found a lot of material on the early international debates on Endocrine Disruptors in the archive, part of the much larger holdings on chemicals and their potential threats.

Governments of member states were often keenly interested in such discussion because they faced pressure from environmental groups in their countries but feared that stringent environmental regulations would place their economies at a competitive disadvantage compared to others. So, the OECD offered a forum where state representatives could discuss environmental concerns with a view to policy harmonisation. For this purpose, they often seemed sincerely interested in understanding the questions at hand and commissioning thoughtful scientific and academic studies, though the political decisions often fell short of these aspirations.

The material consists overwhelmingly of official reports, meeting reports and studies. There are only very few internal sources such as letters or informal communications, which is a little disappointing. However, the fact that many internal and preliminary reports are also kept makes up for it to some extent. These often allow the historian to reconstruct how some decisions came about. The permanent staff at the OECD consists largely of economists, but for many topics studies were commissioned from outside experts, so that the OECD acted as a cross between a think-tank and a forum for regular meetings of high-level officials of member countries' environmental authorities. One gets an impression of discussions between researchers, policymakers, technocrats and officials of national and international bureaucracies.

There are no finding aids (at least there were not when I was last there in 2017 or so), making the search for relevant records a little difficult at first. One strategy is to begin looking at high-level sources, i.e. Council meetings, which give information about lower-level bodies and activities, and work your way down from there. There are a few paper sources but they are the exception. Older sources are made available on microfiches or microfilm. Researchers are given workplaces with machines that allow creation of unlimited digital copies for free. A growing quantity of sources exist already in digitised form, especially more recent material. So, one might well be lucky and receive a large number of documents with just a mouse click.

Iris Borowy, Center for the History of Global Development, College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University