

## **11th Biennial European Society For Environmental History (ESEH) Conference Report**

*A brief note from the co-chairs of the Local Organising Committee, Andy Flack and Marianna Dudley:*

The eleventh ESEH conference took place in Bristol, 5–9 July 2022, delayed from 2021 due to the global COVID-19 Pandemic. Over 370 people attended in person, and, for the first time in its history, 220 people also attended the conference online. We were delighted to welcome you to Bristol, our fantastic home city, and to re-convene our environmental history community in old and new ways. At the core of what we wanted to do was to generate an ethos of inclusivity and wellbeing. Our ‘Guidelines for Inclusive Conferencing’ [Appendix] very much capture the ethos we wanted to inject into this – and future ESEH conferences. We were asked, along with Marco Armiero and Sandra Swart, to provide a report for the Notepad. But when Sandra’s essay, below, arrived in our inboxes we all agreed that it captured everything we had hoped to say, and more.

### **‘Same planet, different worlds: environmental histories imagining anew’. Bristol, United Kingdom, 5–9 July 2022**

When Marco Armiero asked me to be programme chair, I thought it meant I just write the CFP! I had a lot of fun inventing the ideal conference for these strange times in my head. Oh sweet summer child that I was. Once I had done that, I had no idea what lay ahead.

But I was not alone. And being ‘not alone’ turned out to be the most important thing in imagining the conference. It was an incredible gang – Marco, Andy Flack and Marianna Dudley, in particular, but there were many others too – were models of academic citizenship: generous, industrious, capable and creative. Working together was a joy because we shared the goal of making the conference experience more meaningful. Because, we reasoned, the only way to justify the in-person conference’s visa stresses, the expense, health risk and harm travelling does to the planet was to make the conference itself transformed – a useful, significant experience; an experience that really connects us all.

From the very beginning we wanted it to be different. Hosting a conference during a global plague presented a range of challenges, but it also allowed us

a strange new kind of latitude: a freedom to rethink things. After all, our old ways of living have been interrupted, disrupted and ruptured by the COVID-19 outbreak. No less, we felt the devastating impact of Russia's imperialist war against Ukraine – we missed and feared for our friends caught up in this tragedy. We all felt the cold winds of the attack on Higher Education, particularly in the United Kingdom, our host country, where many academics have been forced into strike action. Moreover, as environmental historians we are all too aware of our own complicity in climate change in travelling long distances.<sup>1</sup>

Connection was the key theme: we knew that this devastating global pandemic reinforces our own awareness of our entanglement across continents, species, societies and bodies. Yet the virus hits us differently. We are all on the same planet but experiencing radically and divergently altered worlds. We thus drew inspiration for our conference theme – *Same planet, different worlds: environmental histories imagining anew* – from Arundhati Roy's observation:

But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and *imagine their world anew*. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

The conference was intended to provoke questions and conversations that could help us through the gateway.

Each time we hold a conference, there is a slight shift in our Society's shared culture. Each conference is remembered for something different. Our hope for ESEH Bristol was a renewed openness, a warmer, even more inclusive, diverse and more egalitarian coming together. The ESEH is already a strikingly welcoming organisation. But we all understand the danger for any conference of being experienced as exclusionary. There lurks the popping up (or a propping up!) of patriarchy, hierarchy and turf wars. We made it clear such things were anathema and provided contact details to report them. Equally a list was created of strategies on chairing. We tackled this head on, as we were determined to make full use of the conference space to connect rather than divide, to bring together rather than to alienate. For us the point of the conference was not only the dissemination of knowledge (after all, there are many ways to do that, not least in the wonderful journal *Environment and History*). We refused any academic insularity, being open to all historical periods, all geographical areas – and consciously mixed them as much as we could. We encouraged panels with presenters coming from different regions, or generations, genders, different institutions. We endeavoured to self-critique and learn, by hosting a session on holding 'Happier Conferences', which was

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1. A. Bonnett, 'The need for sustainable conferences', *Area* 38 (2006): 229–30; Edward Hall, 'Alternative futures for academic conferences: A response to Bonnett', *Area* 39 (1) 2007): 125–29.

useful.<sup>2</sup> We tried some new ways to share knowledge, including ‘book lounges’ which were long lunches with readings from recent monographs; some people experimented with new formats like ‘flipping the panels’<sup>3</sup> (which worked brilliantly) and a learn-to-draw session (one of the best things that happened) – but panels remained most popular. For us, the point of a conference was connection: the fostering of collaboration, building support networks and establishing friendships.<sup>4</sup>

The key thing we emphasised was that there *would be errors*. We totally understood that people are burnt out and we understood when they did not reply to us or let us know or simply did not turn up. We went in knowing that the perfect was the enemy of the good. That there would be failures, there would be many last-minute changes because of COVID or complexities of visas in an unfair world. But we urged participants to accept a new flexibility and resilience. If so, they would enjoy every second of this conference and in its small way it would effect real change in our community ...

After all, to quote Leonard Cohen:

Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in  
That’s how the light gets in  
That’s how the light gets in

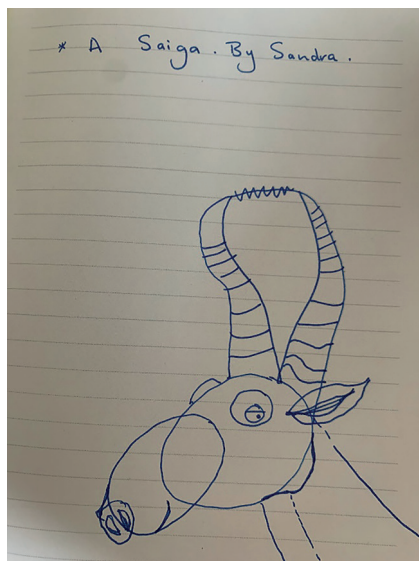
(‘Anthem’, 1992)

Some new things were not bugs but features. Of course, we knew from the start that it had to be hybrid – and, in fact, this was key to inclusivity and diversity and should remain a part of any international conference even post-COVID or in a utopian post-conflict world. Our comrades have made us think about doing ‘sustainable history’ and take mitigation efforts seriously.<sup>5</sup> Virtual sessions are infinitely kinder to our environment. They are more affordable and more accessible regardless of geographical location, stage of career, state of health and

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2. In fact, Sofie Pfannerer-Mittas has already shared *Ideas for Parent-Inclusive Conferences*, including 1. At registration desk, one person with visible logo denoting ‘childcare’, available as knowledge broker for all issues at all times; 2. A basic supply of diapers and other childcare necessities in one diaper-changing restroom (gender-inclusive, not a female restroom!); 3. pre-conference online possibility for networking to co-ordinate childcare.
  3. Papers were made available in advance or even as short video presentations. Rather than just summarise their paper, presenters come to the panel with questions they needed answered to improve their research. Instead of just listening to presentations, audience members come with their own questions/suggestions. The panels become conversations between presenters and the audience in collaborative research efforts.
  4. Catherine Oliver and Amelia Morris, ‘(Dis-)Belonging bodies: negotiating outsider-ness at academic conferences’, *Gender, Place & Culture* 27 (6) (2020): 765–87.
  5. C. Pascoe Leahy, A. Gaynor, S. Sleight, R. Morgan, Y. Rees, ‘Sustainable academia: The responsibilities of academic historians in a climate-impacted world’, *Environment and History* 28(4):545–570.

our commitments outside academia.<sup>6</sup> This obviously helps increase the range of who can attend and facilitates the presence of previously underrepresented groups – although we were keenly aware of the digital divide and the problems of time zones.<sup>7</sup> We had to stay light on our feet, with some last minute pivoting of sessions to virtual, using Zoom, as members became ill while travelling and had to self-isolate. We made sure the digital presenters were not ‘second class citizens’, arranging virtual keynote livestreams, and a poster competition open to all, with virtual posters included.

Words matter. We were focused on an authentically egalitarian experience. So speakers from outside our discipline were billed as ‘keynotes’, while speakers coming from within the discipline were billed as ‘plenaries’, which permitted coming together on shared issues of concern without exacerbating hierarchy in the discipline. We also focused on a demographic and geographic range of keynotes.<sup>8</sup> We even had a beautiful online session where all hierarchies fell away as we revealed that none of us could draw the mysterious saiga antelope!



We also experimented with breaking down barriers through what the more high-brow among us would call ‘affective, embodied engagement’, and we would call ‘a long, slow walk to the pub’. Doing something active together

6. G. Roos, J. Oláh, R. Ingle, R. Kobayashi and M. Feldt, ‘Online conferences – towards a new (virtual) reality’. *Computational and Theoretical Chemistry* **1189** (2020): 1–6.
7. S. van Ewijk and P. Hoekman, ‘Emission reduction potentials for academic conference travel’. *Journal of Industrial Ecology* **25** (3) (2021): 778–88.
8. Martin Thomas Falk and Eva Hagsten, ‘Gender diversity of keynote speakers at virtual academic conferences’, *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* (April 2022).

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creates new ways of relating: I would love future conferences to have a session where Verena Winiwarter teaches us all to knit! We have long had polar bears swimming and cheetahs running together, but now something for people like me who meander, roam, wander– the Sloth Walk! It drew many participants and the acts of walking, talking, taking in the views cemented new friendships and made unusual conversations happen.<sup>9</sup> We hope the Sloth Walk will become an institution!

Academic conferences engender and support authentic global friendships that are a bulwark in harrowing times of war and pestilence. Such camaraderie is a buttress against the erosion of academic solidarity – whether deliberately or as collateral damage during ill-advised university austerity measures, with a narrowing job market, mass redundancies and exacerbated precarity.<sup>10</sup> After all, as the key philosopher of our strange times, George R.R. Martin, reminds us: ‘When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives.’

The ESEH is our pack and the conference is our den.

SANDRA SWART

*History Department, Stellenbosch University, South Africa*

## APPENDIX

### *Strategies for creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere at ESEH2022*

1. Encourage postgraduate students to ask the first question in presentation panels.
2. Provide the audience with 2 minutes ‘thinking time’ to allow everybody to digest what they’ve heard and develop their questions for presenters.
3. Please consider and foster diversity when collecting questions from the audience (you do not need to follow the order in which people have asked to speak).
4. Ask whether those who do not feel comfortable in English (because it is their 2nd, 3rd or 4th languages) can speak first or, if asking questions, write them down for chair to read.
5. Please be constructive and encouraging when asking questions – and in

9. Be grateful. In other conferences they made people sing! See Jude Parks, Kathryn Cassidy et al., ‘Transforming embodied experiences of academic conferences through creative practice: Participating in an instant choir at the nordic geographers’ meeting in 2019’, *Cultural Geographies in Practice*, **29** (2) (2022): 317–24.

10. Catherine Oliver and Amelia Morris ‘Resisting the “academic circle jerk”: Precarity and friendship at academic conferences in UK higher education’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* **43** (4) (2022): 603–22

your broader interactions with colleagues at the conference. No punching down!

6. Ensure that all panel members have opportunities to answer questions/offer comments. This is the most important job of a session chair!!
7. Encourage participants for whom this is their first ESEH conference to make themselves known to organisers/hosts – make them feel welcome!
8. Perhaps give the audience the opportunity to write their questions down if they feel more comfortable doing so.
9. Don't neglect the online presenter (who is often from the global south because of travel cost/visa restrictions). If hybrid panel, be attentive to the person presenting online unmuting themselves or otherwise signalling they want to contribute.