

The Springtime of Environmental History (France, June 2022): A Concluding Experiment

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The Academic Network of Researchers in Environmental History/*Réseau Universitaire de Chercheurs en Histoire Environnementale* (RUCHE, an acronym that means ‘hive’) is a multidisciplinary network created in September 2008 and incorporated as a non-profit association in spring 2009. It is made up of members of various universities and other institutions of higher or secondary education, as well as individuals interested in environmental history. Historians are the most numerous in this association because one of its first objectives was to make room, within the French-speaking history faculties, for environmental approaches. The aim was and still is to promote the richness of a historical approach that reintegrates into the evolution of societies everything that interacts with humans or results from their activities: bacteria, viruses, living organisms, climate, water, soil morphology, risks, waste and various discharges – in short, the ‘environment’, if we mean by this term what humans are intrinsically dependent on and co-producers of.

In French-speaking countries, other disciplines, such as geography, had been developing diachronic environmental approaches since the 1970s. In history, this remained the work of a few historians, relatively isolated until the late 2000s. The *Ruche* was initially founded as a regional section of the ESEH, in particular on the initiative of Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, who was the first president of the *Ruche* and played an animating role during its first years of operation (from 2008). Since then, and despite the low level of financial support from academic institutions, the *Ruche* has made a significant contribution to making environmental history a dynamic field of research that contributes to the renewal of French historiography as a whole. This vitality is reflected in the multiplication of university courses, research programmes, conferences and publications. The *Ruche* also creates a space for intellectual exchange between people concerned with environmental history, through seminars, workshops, scientific events, colloquia and collective publications, but also by sharing information. In particular, the *Ruche* organises a biennial conference, which is open to international contributions, reflecting a desire to maintain a close

link with the ESEH.¹ The *Ruche* has a scientific interest in promoting this renewed understanding of history, from ancient times to contemporary era, and a civic concern because this history, which shows how non-humans are deeply involved in the life of societies and in politics, responds to a demand for intelligibility of current environmental problems.

From 1–16 June 2022, the *Ruche* undertook to reach out more widely to the non-academic public by organising a festival entitled ‘The Hive of History. Springtime of Environmental History’ (*La Ruche de l’histoire. Printemps de l’histoire environnementale*). The initiative aimed to coordinate a programme of events promoting this stream of research, from a public history perspective. Twenty-nine events were organised, in a decentralised manner, all over France. The initiatives ranged from symposia on international environmental negotiations, animals, construction techniques, literature, war and pollution, to walks and hikes in sites that have been affected by human activities (large cities, seaside, mountains), as well as exhibitions, book presentations and screenings.²

The occasion was the fiftieth anniversary of the Stockholm Summit (5–16 June 1972) and the publication of *The Limits to Growth*. Our aim was to encourage the public and the media to move beyond a focus on the short term and on major figures taken out of context, in order to shed light on longer-term processes, some of them starting in Antiquity, and to make room for ordinary actors in order to reconstruct the historicity and the intricacy of ecosystems and territories. The use of comparative and connected history was explicitly promoted in the call.

Several other objectives motivated this event. First, to strengthen the links between historians, archaeologists, geographers, anthropologists and all those working in the environmental sciences, the mediators of history (associations, archives, cultural and educational institutions), managers, activists from environmental associations and the general public, and thus to highlight the wealth of possible mediations of historical work. Second, to create crossroads of exchange, to put scientific knowledge and citizens’ questions into dialogue. Third, to promote a wide dissemination of environmental history and, more generally, of multidisciplinary and diachronic approaches, by promoting quality events and making the results of research accessible to the widest possible audience. Fourth, to promote the appropriation of climate and ecological issues

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1. These conferences have been published: Patrick Fournier and Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud (dir.), *Aménagement et environnement. Perspectives historiques* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes (PUR), 2016); Laurent Coumel, Raphaël Morera and Alexis Vrignon (dir.), *Pouvoirs et environnement. Entre confiance et défiance, XVIe-XXIe siècle* (Rennes: PUR, 2018); Charles-François Mathis and Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud (dir.), *Sous le soleil. Systèmes et transitions énergétiques du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2019); Stéphane Frioux and Renaud Bécot (dir.), *Écrire l’histoire environnementale au XXI^e siècle: sources, méthodes, pratiques* (Rennes: PUR, 2022).
 2. <https://leruche.hypotheses.org/5539>. See also the report in the ninth *Ruche* newsletter, <https://leruche.hypotheses.org/6310>.

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as well as the projection of citizens into the future, by learning from past reflections, conflicts and events, and integrating other ways of being in the world. Fifth, to participate in the development of a shared ecological culture that is not limited to climate modelling but integrates the action of societies and the diversity of their members. All of this should modestly contribute to the emergence of a community of work and interests, eager to share and understand each other's methods and problems, and striving towards an ideal of safeguarding the world's habitability.

The events were to be, as far as possible, free and open to the public; proposals of various form were welcome. Most of them were organised outside of academic spaces (libraries, municipal or community halls, museums, archive centres, bistros, open air). In terms of form, all proposals were welcome. Some were based on the use or enhancement of heritage, landscape, and other sites, through visits to industrial wastelands, museums, natural parks, through toxic tours, etc. We also called for formats mobilising artistic or sensory approaches – historical re-enactments, theatre, performances – several exciting projects of this nature could be developed in a future edition. A scientific council of about ten academics was in charge of checking the coherence of the proposals.

The festival was successful thanks to partners who were approached for their ability to spread the word, organise events and publicise the programme (both nationally and locally), as well as in recognition of their work in environmental history. The list of partners shows a wide variety, ranging from archive centres (*Archives nationales*, *Centre d'histoire du travail*, *Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine*) to health monitoring groups (Groupement d'intérêt scientifique sur les cancers d'origine professionnelle, Institut écocitoyen de Fos), including scientific journals and learned associations (Association pour l'histoire de la protection de la nature et de l'environnement, Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques) or media such as *Terrestres* ou *L'Histoire* (the leading French journal for the dissemination of historical research).

The call for participation and the programme were well publicised in the historical community and beyond. Not only did national media such as *Le Monde* and the radio station France Culture echo the call, but they also opened their columns to *Ruche* members.³ Journalists, anxious to better integrate the environment into their news coverage, have also approached us. Modestly, the objective of creating networks and strengthening a community of people willing to reincorporate humans among non-humans has made progress with this festival.

Thanks to environmental historians, it no longer seems natural to write history without taking into account everything to which humans are permanently linked. But outside the academic world, simplifying narratives, the lack of depth in the analysis of current energy and ecological issues, and approaches that encourage forgetfulness and the chimera of a recent 'awareness'

3. <https://leruche.hypotheses.org/5864>

of environmental problems, make a historical approach necessary. Through its concern for the diversity of actors and contexts of past environmental reflexivity, it teaches as much about the origins of cultural, social, political and economic blockages, the multiplicity of experiences of control over nature and socio-technical excesses, as it does about the variety of relationships with other-than-humans and the unfulfilled possibilities of the past, which could be seeding our imaginations today.

The natural and Earth system sciences now agree that our planet is an impoverished system disrupted by human activities, where fauna and flora seem to be in crisis everywhere, and where disasters are multiplying in an increasingly uncontrollable way. Many scientists explain that we are crossing thresholds of irreversibility and are experiencing a geological, climatic and ecological revolution. The world is changing, but the human arrangements inherited from the past are holding on. In order to get rid of them, it is necessary to rethink in depth the imaginaries as well as the arrangements that link us to others and to the world. History allows us to identify these attachments and imaginaries, to understand their institution in order to contribute to their overcoming.

For the *Ruche*, it is now a matter of broadening the dissemination of work in environmental history beyond academic circles. What brings us together is the critical and civic conception that we give to history. The *Printemps de l'histoire environnementale* was launched, and it will be repeated in future editions. While this festival is of course an opportunity to disseminate historical knowledge, it is also a way of linking the writing of history to the collectives who, on the ground, work to preserve a living Earth and environments, by identifying what the past offers in terms of heritages to be terminated and of emancipating potentialities.