

### Interview with Poul Holm

Interview organised by ESEH History Committee members Katja Bruisch, Daniele Valisena, Chloé Vlassopoulos and Alexey Sobisevich. Lightly edited for publication by Sandra Swart, Marianna Dudley and Jonatan Palmblad.

In the last Notepad we published excerpts from an interview with Verena Winiwater, founder member of ESEH. Many of you let us know that you enjoyed reading about the early years of the Society. We also received research inquiries about the oral histories the ESEH is compiling. Our institutional history is one element in understanding the growth of environmental history in Europe and worldwide, and we thought it worthwhile to continue with the next stage of the story. In this issue, we share an edited interview with Poul Holm, that identifies some opportunities and challenges that came with growing membership and a rising international scholarly presence.

Poul Holm is professor in Environmental Humanities and Director of the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities at Trinity College, Ireland. He served as ESEH vice president between 2003 and 2005 and as ESEH president between 2005 and 2007.

**Chloé Vlassopoulos [CV]: What events were organised during your mandate?**

Poul Holm [PH]: The ESEH conference in Amsterdam, 2007, and the Executive Board meetings in Neuburg (Germany) on 19 May 2005, and in Amsterdam, on 29 June 2006. During 2005–2008, I was heavily involved with the planning of the First World Environmental History Congress in 2009. During that time I was based at Roskilde University, Denmark, and I chaired the Local Organising Committee that won the bid to host the WCEH. (When I moved to Dublin in October 2008, Bo Poulsen took on the role as chairman of the LOC.)

**CV: Which were, in your opinion, the greatest successes of this period?**

PH: The main success was probably that we kept the ESEH together. There was considerable tension building up in 2004–2005 with some colleagues taking issue with the regional imbalance. The Board negotiated these tensions without precipitating a split and we came out as a stronger society thanks to this.

This was a time when environmental history was just breaking into the mainstream of history. The International Congress of Historical Disciplines in Sydney, 2005, had environmental history as one of its three lead themes.

This was also a time when more colleagues were developing the applied dimension of environmental history. We were able to say with confidence to European agencies that they needed to tap into historical evidence to establish baselines and understand the dynamics of environmental change. Back then, we were frustrated that they did not pay much attention [to us], but I know from later engagement with the European Science Foundation and the EU Directorate General that we were getting noticed – although we were not funded.

**CV: And which were the greatest challenges?**

PH: Fifteen years ago, environmental history was considered a niche discipline by fellow historians, and many had no clue what we were talking about. Because of the conservatism of history as a discipline in Europe, it still took another ten years before departments announced positions in environmental history. Today, when I introduce myself as an environmental historian, I always get a positive response.

Environmental history was probably more immediately recognised as an important field by colleagues in other disciplines such as environmental science, geography and social and political science. Interdisciplinarity and the fact that we addressed pressing real-life issues, which were becoming important, was our strength but also an obstacle in our relations with mainstream history.

**CV: Can you identify any key issues and debates in the field of environmental history at the time?**

PH: This was a fertile time for new themes and approaches of gender, urban and marine studies. It was also a time of increasing divergence between analytical and narrative approaches, quantitative and qualitative approaches. Tensions between American and European approaches to narrative versus analytical history were becoming obvious. The tensions were and remain to some extent linked to career patterns and institutional preferences. There is a huge difference between a scholarly practice that focuses on the single-author monograph and that which gives priority to collaborative, multi-authored journal articles. Both have merit to me, but I do think that the collaborative model generally provides more robust results that lend themselves to multi-disciplinary knowledge exchange.

**CV: And were there any important issues or debates involving the ESEH at the time when you were serving on the board of directors?**

PH: The key issue in 2004–2005 was the invitation by the mayor of the city of Neuburg to establish an environmental education centre ('Auenzentrum') in Neuburg with financial support from the AUDI company. The invitation involved an opportunity to use the facility as a permanent venue for European environmental history workshops. Verena Winiwarter negotiated the invitation and, as past president of ESEH, kept a close line of communication with

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me and the Board. A meeting was held in May 2005. The intention was to have European funders participate, as well to identify funding potential for environmental history. As it turned out, only the European Science Foundation participated. The Board was divided as some, including myself, Christian Pfister and Verena, saw this as a huge opportunity, whereas others saw a danger that we would become too dependent on the city. The fear was that, if this collaboration was established, we would subscribe to a particular agenda and lose our freedom and be dependent on outside interests. The research officer of the European Science Foundation later wrote to express his disappointment that ESEH was not in a position to accept the offer.

Thinking back, I still think this was a missed opportunity. ESEH has since developed through conferences with the support of the host-city and we would have had access to a permanent venue for seminars and workshops. Luckily, we now have a number of well-established and well-funded centres around Europe that to some extent provide meeting opportunities and collaborative spaces for ESEH members.

**CV: How was ESEH linked to environmental history/humanities networks or societies outside of Europe?**

PH: Back then, the main collaboration was with the Forest History Association around their bibliography of environmental history publications. The work was supported by funds by the Breuninger Foundation. [The Breuninger Foundation was established in 1968 to facilitate interaction between the public and politicians on social issues.] International collaboration outside Europe was still very much in its infancy and formal links with Asia, Africa and Latin America were still to be established.

**CV: Do you have a story to tell us that you think should be remembered by the Society?**

PH: We should remember the lead that ESEH took in establishing ICEHO and the World Congress of Environmental History in those years. I am proud to have played a small role but the driving force was Verena Winiwarter. She must be recognised for the incredible role she has played not just in Europe but globally. I am convinced that, without her hard work, ICEHO would not exist. On a personal note, I want to thank her as well for selecting Roskilde and Malmö as the venue for the founding World Conference of Environmental History in 2008. And I want to single out Bo Poulsen for his tremendous work in making the congress such a success as he took on the role of head of the local organising committee.