

Mountains and Plains. Past, Present and Future Environmental and Climatic Entanglements. 12th ESEH Conference in Bern, 22–26 August 2023

In a venue in the foothills of the Alps with a spectacular view to the peaks of the Bernese Alps, which boast several mountains higher than 4,000 metres, the 12th ESEH conference focused on mountain and plain metabolisms to show the relevance of environmental history approaches (in a wider sense) for present-day and future societies. Topics discussed as part of the conference's thematic focus on 'Mountains and Plains' were diverse, ranging from the history of environmental knowledge related to mountains and plains and the commons in mountain environments and their associated plains, to the place of underwater and island mountains in oceanic environments, and the influence of weather and climate on mountain and plain regions in the past, present, and future.

When the organisers, the Institute of History and the Oeschger Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of Bern, applied to host this conference in January 2021, the whole world was struck by the COVID pandemic, and it was not clear at all whether a large ESEH Conference of pre-COVID dimensions would be possible. In the end, circumstances allowed a hybrid format with a large majority of participants on site. In total, 643 registrations (567 on site, including 51 people involved in the Local Organising Committee and volunteers; and 76 online) showed the still-growing importance of this sub-discipline of history and environmental studies in general.

The conference from 22 to 26 August 2023¹ included 138 panels with three or four single presentations each, roundtables, alternative formats and special mini workshops (e.g., in collaboration with the Alpine Museum of Switzerland) as well as fifteen poster presentations. The ESEH Programme Committee chaired by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg is owed a special honourable mention, because they compiled a high-quality programme covering all aspects of the conference topic and beyond within a short time.

The first keynote lecture was given by Jon Mathieu, the doyen of historical research on the Alps and on mountains in general in Switzerland, and dealt with 'Sacred Mountains: Environmental History and Religion', following the topic of his latest monograph.² The second keynote speaker, Claudia M. Leal (Bogotá), spoke about 'Tenacious: An Alternative History of Dogs from Across the Ocean', showing the global scope ESEH has attained today. A keynote panel on environmental history and public policy (followed by two

1. For detailed information on the conference and the full programme see <https://www.eseh2023.unibe.ch> (last accessed 3 Dec. 2023).
2. Jon Mathieu, *Mount Sacred. A Brief Global History of Holy Mountains Since 1500* (Winwick: The White Horse Press, 2023).

mini workshops) tried to connect local and global, as well as past, present and future. Participants were Raphael Bucher (Head of Climate Policy Section, Swiss Federal Office for the Environment, Ittigen), Frances Colon (Centre for American Progress and the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, Washington), Pedro Conceição (Director of the Human Development Report Office, United Nations Development Programme, New York), Chloe Hill (Policy Manager, European Geosciences Union, Munich) and Karin Ingold (Chair of Policy Analysis and Environmental Governance and Vice-President of the Oeschger Centre for Climate Change Research, University of Bern).

Many of the papers showed that mountain research from an environmental history perspective, with its manifold, interdisciplinary approaches, is relevant both as a historical research topic and for discussing present-day and future challenges. The Alps have been seen as a barrier to protect and to be surmounted since Roman times; they are the 'water castle' of large parts of Europe; they play an important role for weather and climate; and they have been one of the most important places for transit and tourism in Europe. They were also the first transnational mountain range to be examined by scholars in more detail. But 'the Alps' and their entanglements with the plains are everywhere in the world: 'alpine' has become a synonym for 'mountainous' in general, and mountainous ridges as well as smaller elevations have been named after the Alps and Switzerland. Contributions on other mountainous areas all over the world and their interconnections with the plains and the sea enriched insights into the overall topic.

Various papers focused on the numerous environmental challenges of the present and future that are closely connected with mountains: the melting of glaciers, changes in resource security, a possible increase in natural disasters, traffic and tourism. In addition, topics such as the loss of cultural landscape ecosystems due to outmigration, structural economic problems of low-earning agriculture and forestry, maladaptation through state subsidies and related problems of biodiversity loss, environmental consequences of (human) infrastructure as well as loss of territorial stability (avalanches, landslides, etc.) and loss of cultural and natural heritage were highlighted.

Five thematic full-day excursions on 26 August illustrated a wide range of topics discussed during the four days in Bern. The first leading to the Piora valley (Canton of Ticino) dealt with a traditional Alpine society between 'old' and 'new' commons. A second one looked at rural life in the Swiss mountains and plains by visiting the rural open-air exhibition at Ballenberg in the Bernese Alps. The third sought out hot spots of Alpine tourism of the Belle Époque in the Bernese Oberland, namely the Schynige Platte cog railway and the Giessbach falls with its Grandhotel. The fourth visited some sites of the Jura lakes melioration project northwest of Bern and, in the same region, a

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fifth excursion explored how the Swiss military tried to defend the country in a marshland.

Emphasis was also placed on a high level of sustainability in the running of the conference. The organisers avoided larger amounts of paper (writing paper and ballpoints only on request at the conference desk, printed programme only if explicitly ordered). The conference bag was made of recycled cotton and contained a re-usable coffee mug made of sugar cane (which has become very popular in the aftermath of the conference, both in Bern and abroad). The participants used this personal present for their coffee and tea consumption, because single-use coffee cups mugs were completely absent from the coffee and lunch breaks. The food served for the lunch buffets and the evening receptions throughout was organic and mostly regional, with daily vegetarian and vegan options only (including special dietetic or allergic requirements). Most of the excursion programme was undertaken by using public transport. All participants were explicitly encouraged to travel to Bern by ecologically-friendly means (train, long-distance coaches), if at all possible. Finally, the conference tried to be as parent-inclusive as possible by offering a childcare service on site (for 8–10 children aged 2–12) with professional supervision.

The ESEH Travel Grant Committee chaired by Onur İnal chose 21 travel grantees based on two major criteria: a) evaluation of the proposal as excellent by the ESEH Programme Committee, and b) lack of other available funding, which affected mostly young scholars (i.e., Ph.D. candidates and early postdocs) as well as scholars from low-income countries. Several additional scholars in need were supported by conference fee vouchers. Together with the participants in the two ESEH Summer Schools that preceded the conference, of whom most also attended the main conference, nearly eighty scholars could be supported.

The ESEH Conference in Bern was able to serve as a global ‘marketplace’. Various networking talks about possible new projects were launched at the book exhibition, in the specific marketplace area to present specific research and charity initiatives, and at the opening and final receptions. Finally, the participants were able to discover the city of Bern, a UNESCO World heritage site and the capital of Switzerland. Several thematic city trips were offered. Due to the high temperatures throughout the whole conference, many participants joined the Bernese for their favourite summer sport: swimming in the Aare River.

Two Preceding ESEH Summer Schools

In the week before the main ESEH Conference, two ESEH Summer Schools took place in the Swiss Alps (16/17–20 August 2023). Both calls for participation, launched in autumn 2022, attracted much attention, and for the summer

school on ‘Climate’, 73 applications were submitted. Twenty participants each were selected by the ESEH Summer School Committee.

The Summer School on ‘Climate’ in Aeschi bei Spiez in the Bernese Oberland was organised by Heli Huhtamaa (Bern). It consisted of lectures, presentations and hands on-exercises. The participants learned about climate variability of the historical past and the basics of climate reconstruction, modelling and early instrumental observation materials. All Summer School participants gave a short presentation of their own research, which was followed by in-depth discussion with other participants and lecturers. In addition, they conducted together a small climate history research project over the duration of the summer school, working with historical sources of the seventeenth century on a climate crisis during the so-called Late Maunder Minimum.

The second ESEH Summer School on ‘Commons’ was organised by Martin Stuber and Rahel Wunderli (Bern) in the small village of Grimentz in the Val d’Anniviers (Canton of Valais). Its focus was the history of Common Pool Resources (CPR), which have been discussed under the umbrella of sustainability since Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize winning book *Governing the Commons*.³ The classic collective resources of alpine pastures, forests and waters have undergone an extraordinarily dynamic development during the twentieth century. The Summer School focused on this transformation and consisted of lectures, students’ presentations and excursions to venues in the Val d’Anniviers where local resources are still used as common goods. The participants worked with historical photos of collective management of alpine pastures, forests and waters mostly from this region. Methodical questions on how to analyse and interpret these sources in the wake of the ‘visual turn’ in environmental history were a main topic of the workshop. The Summer School participants gave a short presentation of visual historical material from their own region of research in order to get a comparative view on the phenomena of commons. In addition, the participants created some image-based presentations, which will be published via the participatory platform ‘Swiss Commons in a European Context’ (under development).⁴

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3. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Elinor Ostrom was the first woman to receive the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, in 2009.

4. https://www.wbkolleg.unibe.ch/research/research_forum/swiss_commons/index_eng.html (last accessed 3 Dec.2023).