

### Reflections: Initiatives of the Third ESEH NEXTGATE Team (2021–2023) and Plans for the Future

Almost six years ago, in the summer of 2018, the board of the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) founded its early career group, the Next Generation Action Team (NEXTGATE), coordinated by Viktor Pál, to support and connect early career environmental historians in Europe and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Our NEXTGATE cohort (2021–2023) was the third and comprised seven members: Goran Đurđević (Beijing Foreign Studies University), Elizabeth Hameeteman (Technical University Berlin), Monique Palma (NOVA University Lisbon), Tanja Riekkinen (University of Oulu), Sevgi Mutlu Sirakova (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich – Rachel Carson Center), Monica Vasile (Maastricht University) and the coordinator of the team, Noémi Ujházy (University of Nottingham). Three of us, Elizabeth, Monique and Noémi, were also part of the previous cohort (2020–2021). As early career scholars, we navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the tricky transition back to normality, each facing unique circumstances. Our diverse team, spanning various countries, collaborated online and organised in-person meetings alongside the biennial ESEH conferences.

During these last two years, we nurtured some of the previous initiatives of the NEXTGATE and started new projects to support emerging scholars in environmental history and environmental humanities. The activities of the NEXTGATE focused on three essential aspects of an early career scholar's life – writing, visibility and connectivity – as well as striving to advance an equal, inclusive, and sustainable academia.

### Sustainable Academia

How should historical practice change in light of sustainability crises? How can we walk the talk of sustainability on a daily basis in our working environments? How can we interpret the concept of sustainability within the academic sphere and widen its scope? How can we build more sustainable careers for environmental historians and environmental humanities scholars in these turbulent times? In short, how can we practise sustainable history?

In the last few years, scholars have tried to grapple with these questions in light of COVID-19 and the wider climate crisis, displacement and biodiversity-loss.<sup>2</sup> But such debates are not necessarily new: the importance of international

1. Viktor Pál, Roberta Biasillo, Elena Kochetkova, Tayler Meredith, Simone Schleper and Erin Spinney, 'Emerging scholars in the age of uncertainty: Goals and plans of ESEH Next Generation Action Team in 2018–19', *Environment and History* 24 (4) (2018): 579–81.
2. The previous NEXTGATE Notepad already raised some questions about sustainable academia: see Roberta Biasillo, Elizabeth Hameeteman, Elena Kochetkova, Noémi Ujházy, Monique Palma, Simone Schleper and Adam Wickberg, 'Early-career environmental historians for a sustainable academia', *Environment and History* 26 (4) (2020): 617–21.

networking has always favoured scholars working at wealthy institutions in the Global North; funding for digital humanities scholarship has often reinscribed these existing inequalities, while failing to embrace the radical potential of new technologies to undermine power structures. Even within wealthy institutions, postgraduate and early career researchers are rarely given the chance to influence the shaping of the discipline at large. If anything, the pandemic brought to the fore structural weaknesses that many have long been working to change. But can historians seize this chance to develop our discipline in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and what should they be aiming for in doing so?

In August 2021, we launched an ongoing blog series on the theme of ‘Sustainable Academia’ in cooperation with Historians for Future.<sup>3</sup> We invited contributions that reflect on the conditions of historians in Europe and beyond (especially those in early career stages), introduce visions for the field, and suggest concrete action in order to build more sustainable, inclusive and supportive academic environments. In addition, we organised roundtables on this topic at the ESEH conferences in Bristol in 2022 and Bern in 2023, in which emerging scholars shared their take on Sustainable Academia in bold, honest, and thought-provoking ways. More than anything, their contributions just underlined the call to action inherent in talking about an academia with more solidarity, inclusivity and kindness.

### Supporting Early Career Researchers

The Writing Support Programme of the ESEH NEXTGATe was launched in 2021 by the previous cohort, and started as a COVID-19 experience. The monthly online sessions, generously chaired by Prof. Andrea Gaynor, each discussing two papers, were fresh intellectual events during the time of lockdown, creating a friendly and safe space for giving and receiving hands-on feedback on pre-circulated drafts. During our term, the Programme continued, and expanded: in 2022, the Programme ran two parallel groups, and Dr Anna Pilz joined as chair of our second group. In total, we had more than forty participants, spanning diverse countries – for instance UK, Turkey, India, the Netherlands, South Africa and Australia – and numerous established scholars have offered their time as invited discussants. The Programme was very successful, we think: we received positive feedback and, as far as we have learned, some of the papers workshopped during the Programme have been already published. In addition, we organised another event meant to increase writing productivity: online three-day writing retreats, called ‘Co-Writing Days’, where we could support each other in different phases of writing and stay connected.

3. See the eleven blog posts here: <http://eseh.org/nextgate/blog/>

As one of our goals was to raise the visibility of ECRs' work, we advanced different forms of online presence. We maintained a Dissertation Database, with the aim to create a central platform for Ph.D. candidates in the field of environmental history to share their work. At the moment, 96 works are included in this database.<sup>4</sup> The NEXTGATE was active in social media too, for example, during Environmental History Week in April 2023 we ran a Twitter campaign, showcasing the work of early career scholars on social media. The ongoing activities of the NEXTGATE team – including the Sustainable Academia blog series and the Writing Support Programme – also served to draw attention to ECRs' perspectives inside the ESEH community and beyond. It is noteworthy that, as of this year, following invitations from the ESEH president Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, several early career scholars have started to serve as members on ESEH committees.

Environmental history and humanities remain rather isolated in many universities, with the institutionalisation of the field progressing slowly in some locations. Therefore, we think it is important to support and empower emerging researchers by facilitating connections and building a community. The Networking Events for early career scholars became a tradition since the ESEH Tallinn conference in 2019 – in Bristol in 2022 we had an immersive pub event while in Bern in 2023 we organised a networking event at the university, which was a good occasion to share thoughts and challenges, while also enjoying refreshments and convivial conversation afterward. These have proven to be important opportunities to discuss and connect with emerging and established scholars. The next NEXTGATE team is also planning to organise a networking event during the 4th World Congress of Environmental History at the University of Oulu, in August 2024. Still, we acknowledge that, even with the support of travel grants, participating in person at academic conferences can be challenging for many ECRs worldwide. To work towards tackling this challenge, the online sessions of the Writing Support Programme or the hybrid format of the sessions on Sustainable Academia at the ESEH conferences broadened the possibilities of connecting, and doing so beyond Europe. Having a sense of belonging and worth within a welcoming academic community is, we think, important for becoming an environmental historian, and we hope ESEH NEXTGATE has contributed to that.

### What About The Future?

Currently, many emerging scholars grapple with the harsh realities of precarity, insecurity and anxiety. Familiar academic challenges like managing the task of crafting a Ph.D., enduring critical feedback (or the absence thereof), navigating job market uncertainties, changing place and country of residence frequently, and witnessing the recent downsizing of humanities departments

4. For more, see <http://eseh.org/nextgate/dissertation-database/>

contribute to this environment. For the future, with the new team,<sup>5</sup> ESEH NEXTGATE aims to remain a platform, and perhaps more than that: a forum for discussions and for organising events to inspire and empower emerging scholars in environmental history. We are planning workshops and roundtables about steering one's own Ph.D. supervision and honing teaching skills, and we aim to continue organising the by now quite well-known networking events and writing-focused initiatives. In short, we will be here to offer a contribution – no matter how small – to the academic journeys of early career scholars in environmental history.

NOÉMI UJHÁZY, ELIZABETH HAMEETEMAN, GORAN ĐURĐEVIĆ,  
TANJA RIEKKINEN, SEVGI MUTLU SIRAKOVA, MONIQUE PALMA  
AND MONICA VASILE

---

5. The team includes new members Mona Bieling, Jabulani Shaba, Sebastian Lundsteen and Jonatan Palmblad, as well as previous members Tanja Riekkinen and Goran Đurđević, coordinated by Monica Vasile.