

Our Common Past: When it All Started...

CHLOÉ VLASSOPOULOS INTERVIEWS VERENA WINIWARTER ON
THE HISTORY OF ESEH

*Text edited by Roberta Biasillo, Jonatan Palmblad and Wilko Graf von
Hardenberg*

In 2019–2021, ESEH president Marco Armiero launched a new initiative: a history society should have its own archives and should reflect retrospectively on its achievements, plans, critical moments and best practices. To do so, during his term in office, an ESEH History Committee was appointed. Katja Bruisch, Daniele Valisena, Chloé Vlassopoulos (chair), and Alexey Sobisevich conducted a series of interviews with former presidents of the Society. These contributed to the establishment of an ESEH archive. We have decided to make parts of the transcripts of these interviews publicly available to the environmental history community in Europe and beyond. This notepad will be the first of a series of three interventions whose goals are sharing representative moments and enhancing our collective memories.

The first interview was conducted by Chloé Vlassopoulos with Verena Winiwarter. Verena is Professor of Environmental History at the Institute for Social Ecology of the University of Vienna. She was a member of the founding board of ESEH and president from 2001 to 2005. She also served as ICEHO president from 2011 to 2016.

Chloé Vlassopoulos [CV]: Since you were there from the very beginning, can you tell us how the history of ESEH began?

Verena Winiwarter [VW]: The early history of the ESEH begins, of course, with saying that at the beginning there was no society. A European Association for Environmental History existed, which had been founded in the United Kingdom by people like Peter Brimblecombe, who was not a historian but a chemistry professor, and who, by the way, authored the great book *The Big Smoke* on the history of air pollution in London. He and other scholars had created a network of environmental historians, completely informal, and a historian of technology in Mannheim, at the Museum für Arbeit und Technik, got involved. Jörn Sieglerschmidt took up the job of issuing a newsletter of the European Association for Environmental History and a couple of issues came out. Eventually, a network of regional representatives emerged ... There was not a central association with regional arms, there were just the regional arms – regional arms with no head ...

I heard of the fact that we had an Austrian representation when I met Jörn Sieglerschmidt because of our independent attempts to write environmental history in Austria, based at the ‘Niederösterreichische Landesakademie’ under the direction of the medievalist Karl Brunner. We held two workshops ... This way I got to know of Christian Pfister. Ulrich Koppitz had approached Christian to revive the European Association. I cannot really remember the exact chain of events, but Christian Pfister then approached a colleague, Rolf Peter Sieferle, who sadly died a few years ago ... He had connections to a private foundation in Germany, who was willing to pay for a workshop, where, apart from Christian, Jörn and Peter Sieferle, a few other people were present, such as Eva Jakobsson, Ulrich Koppitz, Bernd Herrmann and Robert A. Lambert, who would eventually agree to organise the first ESEH conference. The workshop was financed by the Breuninger Foundation, whose director Helga Breuninger was a great sponsor of environmental history for a long time.

... I was determined to do my best so that we would get something concrete out of this workshop. And I pushed this whole thing in the direction of agreeing that we needed a conference. I found this important, because I had been to an American environmental history conference in Baltimore. This had been one of the best moments of my life, because, for four days, I did not have to explain that environmental history was not environmental determinism, that it was something you could actually do and that it was a valuable scholarly pursuit. It was so relaxing to meet people agreeing on all that. I always said, I had finally found my own tribe, I had finally found the people with whom I had most in common. And I wanted to create the same feeling of community in Europe.

CV: How did you get to organise the first conference in Scotland?

VW: The group elected Robert Andrew Lambert as the president of the ESEH, because he promised he would hold a conference in St Andrews. Actually, Fiona Watson, Robert’s colleague in Stirling, would organise the conference [in 2001] ... Fiona was the Director of the grant-based Centre for Environmental History between the University of Stirling and St Andrews. I became good friends with Fiona, who is no longer working at Stirling. She set up the conference and Christopher Smout organised [to get the] the money. I am not sure if he was particularly excited about the whole thing, but, as his assistant had promised, he moved forward with it. Christopher Smout had been part of the EAEH, of which the UK branch was very active. They had their small workshops in the UK organised by the local association for environmental history every year. They kept that association; it might still exist. All the other regional representatives of the older association joined ESEH, but the UK kept their own, while at the same time being very active members of ESEH, which was great. So, the plan for a conference was born at this workshop ...

CV: Do you recall the first ESEH Conference in St Andrews? Could you tell us more about it?

VW: So let us move on to St Andrews, the first conference and general assembly site. We had a fantastic conference programme. If I recall that correctly, 164 participants took part and it was a huge success. Fiona Watson and her colleagues set up a fantastic social programme ... This was the formation of a lasting bond between people. Poul Holm was there, John McNeill was there, Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud and Dieter Schott were there and so many others. Don Hughes and Peter Brimblecombe gave keynote addresses, if I remember correctly. But, more importantly, there were also many people from countries whose work we had never noticed or who were doing environmental history under the guise of historical geography.

... The basic decision on the organisational structure had been made, in that there would be regional representatives. But in contrast to the former European Association for Environmental History, ESEH would also have a central backbone, an executive with president, vice president, treasurer etc. We had prepared everything – Ulrich [Koppitz] had come to Vienna, to sign before a notary that we served as treasurer and President (I was rotational provisional President), necessary work so that we could have a bank account. There had been an intensive discussion about the country in which to legally register ESEH. We set it up in Germany in the end, which provoked further discussions in the coming years ...

CV: What about the website? When was it created?

VW: I don't remember when the website was created. I knew we had to have a website, we somehow created it, but I was more involved with the question of secure and stable server space for no or little money. There was a fabulous colleague in the Netherlands, Miriam Daru. Miriam had edited a newsletter for environmental historians in the Netherlands, admirably as an independent scholar, giving her free time; she was also involved in these early days, and had been present at the workshop in Bavaria. Miriam was a hands-on-person: if a logo was needed, she would make one. The logo with four blocks with different colours was her design. It could be made easily on PowerPoint or Word or something like that. Later on, they modernised it, but it still resembles the old one, and I am glad about that. I think Ulrich was involved a lot in helping set up the website, though in the beginning it was not very developed. But we knew we needed to have one and to give it some purpose, we made a bibliography. At that time, it was not possible to find environmental history publications easily on the web – think of life before Google Scholar. Think of life before any of those search engines. It was really difficult to find references. So the idea was to put up a bibliography there. I was happy that it existed, but it was not the task that I put the greatest emphasis on. For me, the conferences were the most important activity, but also the recruitment of officers for the executive board

and amendments to the constitution and writing the Notepad, and keeping in touch with a lot of people all the time ...

CV: What about the rest of the world? When were other environmental history societies established?

VW: ESEH's creation set something in motion. Immediately after Europeans decided there would be ESEH, SOLCHA, La Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental was founded, and, almost in parallel, the Australian network for environmental history with Libby Robin as founder emerged. Then a Southeast Asian society was founded. It was so great to see that these various continental communities felt that they could do it. I think ESEH had shown the world that it was possible to create Environmental History Societies outside the US. Conferences were held in Spanish and Portuguese. Conferences in Australia with Australian topics, workshops, networks. The great thing was, while regionalisation happened, community also emerged worldwide ...

CV: How did the institutional landscape evolve through the years from the time when ESEH was established?

VW: The entire institutional landscape of environmental history in Europe at the time when I was in charge of ESEH wasn't much developed. There were next to no chairs in environmental history. I had the only chair in environmental history in Austria. It was the only professorship. But then things changed, eventually also because of the society, because of the books that were coming out, and because of Christof Mauch, who used the German Historical Institute as a springboard to create a big environmental history hub in Europe, founding the Rachel Carson Center in Munich. The Rachel Carson Center is probably the biggest intervention into the institutional landscape of environmental history to date.

... When I started, there was very little institutionalisation. I think that the ESEH was a game changer for European environmental history. It gave people their scholarly home and identity. At the beginning, we were all pioneers, with little knowledge. We all fought for our own position. We had not yet had the experience that being together and sharing knowledge could be beneficial for everybody. I think we all grew together, as we realised that we are different but that we are where we are for the same cause, in fact, and that cause is that the environment matters for history, and its health matters for the future. We have learned to work together rather than against each other.