

Reflecting on *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental History*: A conversation with the editors

Since the first steps of the discipline in 1970s, environmental history has developed in many theoretical, geographical, methodological and thematic directions. Previous attempts to compile concise introductions to and more articulated overviews of environmental history have paid attention to methods, trajectory and most representative themes. More recently, the ever-growing diversity has challenged any attempt to map the discipline and called for reflections on its essential and peculiar features.

This notepad explores *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental History*¹ featuring many ESEH members among its contributors and editors. The volume addresses recent transformations in the field and responses to shifting scholarly, political and environmental landscapes, charting potential new directions for study. Besides being an important resource for researchers and students in environmental history, it stresses the field's interaction with other historiographies and with the related fields of political ecology, environmental studies, natural resources management and environmental planning.

This Notepad hosts a conversation with editors William San Martín, Mark Carey, Sandra Swart, and Emily O'Gorman on their behind-the-scenes work and decisions.

1. How did the idea for your handbook on environmental history come about? What gaps does your handbook aim to address, both past and present?

The Routledge Handbook of Environmental History emerged from the need for a wide-ranging volume that critically engages with the field's transformations, situates them within long-term historiographical shifts and charts new directions for environmental historians from a global perspective. A key motivation for this *Handbook* was to move beyond regionally focused narratives and create a more inclusive, international approach that balances diverse yet interconnected histories across world regions.

This *Handbook* was conceived amidst social and ecological crises of the COVID-19 pandemic – a moment that not only underscored the urgency of our research but also reshaped the conditions under which we work. Challenges such as job market instability and increased budgetary constraints in the humanities were transforming the field and continue to do so. In response, we saw this *Handbook* as both a necessity and an opportunity to push boundaries and explore new ways to address these crises.

1. Published December 6, 2023 by Routledge. ISBN 9781032003597, 478 Pages £230.

To achieve this, we went beyond engaging with emerging themes and methodologies to rethink fundamentally how historians collaborate. Solo authorship remains dominant in the field, often limiting scopes and approaches. To challenge these constraints, the *Handbook* is structured around co-authored chapters designed to enhance demographic and geographic diversity, collaboration between established and emerging scholars, and transdisciplinary dialogue. The impetus was both intellectual and political: by prioritising diverse co-authorship teams, we aimed to address inequalities in academic labour and start new temporal and geographic conversations while fostering theoretical and methodological experimentation. We believe that rethinking how we work is essential for responding to the challenges facing environmental history and the communities we live in and engage with today.

2. What criteria guided the design of your handbook, and what are the main innovations in the volume?

We conceptualised this *Handbook* to be as geographically broad as possible. We wanted the volume to cover many regions worldwide, to appeal to a wide array of international readers, and, crucially, to reflect the scholarship coming out of different areas across the planet. The *Handbook's* seventy plus authors come from 27 countries.

Another innovation was to offer a different model that contrasts with the traditional single author approach in environmental history. As editors, we spent years together planning, thinking, talking, reading, writing, helping, debating, compromising and enjoying working together – and we believe strongly that the *Handbook* is better thanks to our teamwork and partnership. Embracing this model of collaboration, we asked that every chapter also be coauthored, and that each team of authors should ideally come from different institutions, career stages and backgrounds, and focus on different temporalities and even world regions, because we see collaboration as invigorating, interesting and ultimately good for scholarship.

The *Handbook* has other innovations, too. Methodologically, it highlights different approaches, sources and evidence, such as from oral history, Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and more ethics-based approaches. Chapters also grapple with many current trends animating the field, like planetary crises (the Anthropocene), questions of agency and scale, deep time, history as activism and overt linkages to other fields such as environmental humanities and environmental justice. The *Handbook* chapters cover several centuries, but they also connect explicitly – and we hope productively for policymaking – with current issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, health and socio-economic inequalities, and the growth of nationalisms, among other present-day matters. A goal is to place environmental history and

environmental historians right into today's world while simultaneously showcasing rigorous historical scholarship.

3. Reflecting on both the past and the future, can you share something – such as a theme, perspective, or direction – that didn't make it into your handbook but is likely to become important for future environmental historians?

The evolving politics of archives, the role of public and community engagement in historical research, environmental justice and the imbalances of competing knowledge systems stand out as critical issues that emerged across multiple chapters in this volume – and that can be explored more moving forward. Unsurprisingly, these dimensions were also identified and thoughtfully analysed as pressing concerns by six early-career scholars and practitioners who wrote the *Handbook's* afterword, 'Future Directions of Environmental History', which we highly recommend everyone to read.

Rather than viewing the *Handbook* as a collection of distinct themes that were either included or omitted, we see it as an experiment in collective thinking – one that helps frame lenses through which to analyse both historical and contemporary processes across themes and regions. So, the fact that issues about the archive, public and community engagement, justice and knowledge systems emerged organically across *Handbook* chapters suggests that they are not only pressing concerns today but also will likely shape the future of environmental history and its practice.

WILLIAM SAN MARTÍN, MARK CAREY, SANDRA SWART, AND
EMILY O'GORMAN