

The 2025 Bristol-Bern Prize in Public Environmental History

At the last ESEH conference, the Bristol-Bern Prize in Public Environmental History was assigned *ex aequo* to two projects out of the eight excellent submissions received by the prize committee. The winning projects were briefly presented on the society website.¹ This Notepad is dedicated to offering a more in-depth introduction to the reasons behind these outstanding projects in the words of their authors, Chanelle Adams and Dagomar Degroot.

Living with the Ghosts of the World

Chanelle Adams

Ten years ago, while conducting history of science research in colonial herbaria and zoological collections in Marseille, I began asking a question that has continued to stick with me: how do we live with the ghosts of the world, and what does it mean to keep telling their stories? In these collections of taxidermied animals, dried plants and displaced bones, death is conscripted into knowledge. Yet what if, within these archives, there are quiet refusals that insist that stories of life do not simply end when they are given a museum label?

There are an estimated 2 to 4 billion specimens in museums of natural history collections worldwide, although only a small fraction is accessible to the public. These collections of non-human and human² life overflow with representations of loss, yet offer almost no outlet for expressions of grief. This grief is personal, political, ecological, spiritual and cosmological. In the wake and continuity of multiple, and related, ecocides and genocides, we are living through a crisis of relation. The work of relating requires spaces where loss can be acknowledged, witnessed and processed in ways that traditional academic research and museological formats rarely allow.

My Ghost Tour practice emerged from both a personal and scholarly need to sit with these encounters, and from an insistence that public inquiry and collective witnessing are necessary to metabolise loss and allow new relations to take shape. Each performance, of which so far there have been six, takes place in a natural history museum, botanical garden or public space. They trace how ecological loss has been shaped by imperial, colonial and capitalist forms of violence,³ along with the enduring legacies and ongoing consequences that

1. <http://eseh.org/2025-bristol-bern-prize/>

2. There are also innumerable human remains and ancestors as part of many anthropological, medical and natural history collections.

3. Sadiyah Qureshi identifies this as a strategic and deliberate blurring of extermination and extinction in *Vanished: An Unnatural History of Extinction* (New York: Random House, 2025).

follow from them. At the same time, they attend to histories of survival, resurgence and resilience.

The empty cages of Marseille's *parc zoologique*, for example, gesture towards the animals once kept there. Many of these animals were brought from elsewhere and died at the zoo, and now remain as taxidermied specimens in the museum reserves.⁴ The towering camphor trees in Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden in Cape Town, planted in honour of Cecil John Rhodes, stand as one of the only non-native plants allowed in the garden. Participants are invited to consider the trees as witnesses to settler-colonialism and apartheid, and what ecosystems and forms of life have taken shape beneath the canopy's shade.⁵

In Hamburg, the tour focuses on Baakenhafen harbour on the Elbe river (Figure 1), which holds invasive species carried unintentionally on the bottom of ships.⁶ Those same river banks sent off and welcomed back the soldiers who sailed to Namibia to carry out the Nama and Herero genocides. In Lausanne, the tour brings participants into the extinction hall of the natural history museum in the Palais de Rumine, where the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923, a treaty notorious for refusing redress for Armenians.

Taken together, these tours show how ruptures in relation to life are inseparable from fraught relations to death, a connection that becomes perceptible through walking and witnessing together. Each guided walk invites participants into spatial and temporal relationships with human, non-human and no-longer-human presences, and most critically with the ghostly histories that persist at each site. Participants, plants, animals and ghosts all become witnesses of the intertwined nature of ecological and historical violence and the futures that unfold from these entanglements.

Rather than taking the authoritative posture usually expected in academic work, I share research findings as starting points for collective questioning. The process is deliberately inconclusive. Research and ritual merge. The audience's bodies become instruments of inquiry. What do you notice? Where does it register, inside you or outside? Each walk is designed to return participants to their own bodies, challenging dominant understandings of history, or the past, as something distant or detached from lived experience. The intention is to foster direct and critical relationships with histories that unfold through embodied inquiry and with our non-human kin.

The method of performance is slow and attentive. It relies on lingering, witnessing and waiting. Knowledge emerges through process, and historical

4. Chanelle Adams, 'Der gar nicht lustige Zoo: Die koloniale Geschichte des Parc Longchamp in Marseille', in K. Lee Chichester, Priska Gisler and Kunstmuseum Bern (eds), *Koloniale Tiere? Tierbilder im Kontext des Kolonialismus*, pp. 269–78. (Marseille: Neofelis, 2024).

5. Georgia Munnik, 'For the haunt: Chanelle Adams' Ghost Tour of Camphor Avenue', *ArtThrob*, 21 April 2022: <https://arthrob.co.za/2022/04/21/for-the-haunt-chanelle-adams-ghost-tour-of-camphor-avenue/>

6. 'River Ghost Tour', Kampnagel: <https://kampnagel.de/en/productions/sf-23-chanelle-adams-river-ghost-tour/> (Accessed 19 Nov. 2025).

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facts find their own way of landing in the body. Importantly, the format interrupts the post-2020 rush to ‘deal with’ the past, a moment when the politics of admission often stand in for more meaningful action. Ghost Tours unsettle this tendency. They ask participants to stay with attention and discomfort rather than seek closure. In this work, ghosts are not metaphors or negative forces to be driven out or ignored. They are figures that call for an ethical response to unfinished histories.

Whenever I am asked if ghosts are real, I turn the question back. Are we capacious enough to listen and find out? If ghosts carry unfinished conversations, they may also offer indications of how we might move, collectively, into our shared futures.⁷



Figure 1. ‘River Ghost Tour’ at Baakenhafen harbour (Hamburg, Germany) during the International Summer Festival 2023 at Kampnagel.

7. Luiza Prado de O. Martins and Chanelle Adams, ‘Haunt’, Sunlight Doesn’t Need a Pipeline: <https://sunlightdoesntneedapipeline.com/projects/haunt/> (accessed 19 Nov. 2025).

The Climate Chronicles: Reaching Students Where They Are*Dagomar Degroot*

A few years ago, I organised an event with the SETI Institute, the research organisation that searches for life in the universe, including extraterrestrial intelligence. The event, one in a series we call 'Earth at the Crossroads', explored what the search for life *beyond* Earth could tell us about the history and future of life *on* Earth.

There were panels led by scientists and panels led by humanists. There were art installations and concerts. And there was a session that exclusively involved undergraduates in our Georgetown Astronomical Society.

I was in the audience. I vaguely recall asking one of our students how she came to be interested in outer space. And I vividly remember the response: she saw a video on YouTube, listened to some podcasts and decided that astronomy fascinated her. At Georgetown, she took just about every space course we offer.

It was something my students had been telling me for years. But I'd always found it hard to believe. Like most kids who grew up in the nineties, I would visit my local library when something interested me. I hauled armfuls of books to my family minivan.

But nothing aged me quite like bringing that up in class.

It's tough to accept, as someone who writes for a living, but it's the truth: when many young people want to learn, a book is now the *last* place they look. Maybe this is a tragedy. Plenty of studies show that reading is good for young (and old) people. Reading improves, for example, one's ability to concentrate, and one's capacity for imagining alternate realities.

I also believe that the ordeal of writing (and revising) a significant non-fiction book is a singular challenge, one that forces the author to develop a meaningful, original argument and to acquire a unique depth and breadth of knowledge. A quality book represents a genuine service to humanity.

But a shift away from books as a *first* source of information can also create new opportunities. By working in different media, we can reach more people, in more ways. We can learn new skills, tapping into our creative sides to express ideas with genuine emotion. We don't have to appeal to editors or publishers who might not always share our storytelling vision.

And we can tell stories more quickly, without the years-long (sometimes more than decade-long) slog of writing and reworking and marketing a book. We can even revise these stories in real time, keeping up with emerging fields of scholarship.

So, after I heard my student speak at our *Crossroads* event, I resolved to tell the story of climate's history through a YouTube and podcast series: *The Climate Chronicles*.

A number of big books, full of graphs and jargon, have recently told that story from the beginnings of time (or at least humanity) to the present. But I wanted to use audio and video to tell the story with more emotional resonance, with stronger connections to the present, with greater focus on the experiences of individual communities.

And I wanted to do it for free, so anyone, anywhere in the world could listen or watch.

The problem was that, to tell the story in ways that could really reach young people like my students, I thought I needed crystal-clear audio quality, sweeping visuals and dramatic music. In other words: a multimillion-dollar production. Pitching such a project to a major streaming platform seemed like a pipedream.

At the same time, I had, since the debut of IBM's Watson, imagined how to use improving artificial intelligence tools for historical and environmental research. Now, I followed the release of new audio and visual tools, some of them empowered by large language models (LLMs).

These LLMs, of course, have serious drawbacks. Training them, in particular, requires energy that too often comes from burning fossil fuels. LLMs also learn from reams of copyrighted material, sometimes without acquiring clear permission. They can be sources of misinformation – not to mention the 'slop' that increasingly pollutes the internet.

At the same time, they are clearly here to stay, and I believe they *can* be used for good. In fact, they're now essential to many forms of climate research, because they do a great job of identifying a signal – a change in climate, for example – in random noise, such as decades of weather events. Used responsibly, they can clearly expand what a single scholar can do.

And not just for climate research, but also for communications. Over the past year I've learned to use them in concert with other software and hardware to realise the ambitious vision I originally had for the *Chronicles*. I can now create high quality audio files at home (with screaming children in the other room), and vivid depictions of dramatic moments in climate's history.

In fact, my vision for the *Chronicles* has expanded. I've created a podcast, as planned, and use trailers on YouTube to draw more listeners to each episode. But I now *also* host everything on a website, TheClimateChronicles.com (Figure 2). There, I provide not only audio and video files but also written versions of each episode, along with infographics, maps, a glossary – even teaching aids. All of it is free, and accessible to young people wherever they look for information.

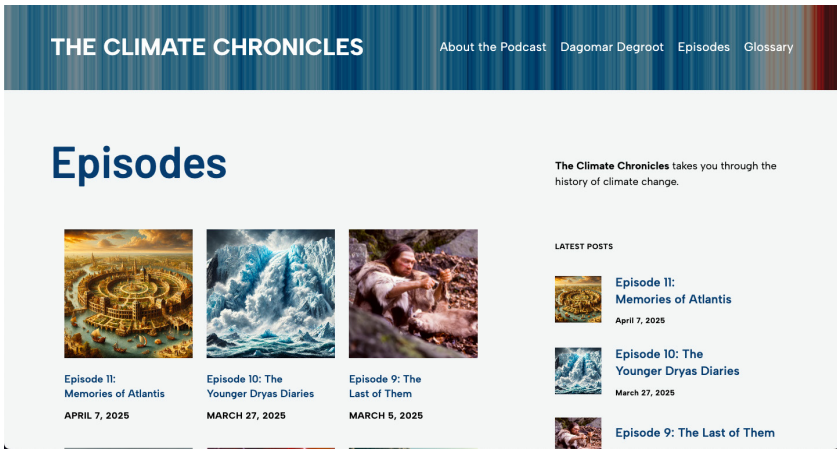


Figure 2. Screenshot of the page listing the episodes on the Climate Chronicles website.

It's not a book. But it might be a better way of narrating the history of climate change today.

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