

The 2025 ESEH Conference in Uppsala

In August, on some extraordinarily sunny and green days, we gathered in Uppsala, Sweden, for the 18th biennial conference of the European Society of Environmental History. Although we had planned for good weather, we felt some trepidation in the days before the conference, which prepared us well for the theme of ‘Climate Histories’, which highlights the importance of storytelling in environmental history. We explored how the written and material records of social adaptability and transformation could be rethought to improve our understanding of life in an era of rapid climate change. Although today’s climate crises are unprecedented, all societies have experienced the passing of the seasons, as well as long and short periods of flooding, drought and extreme cold. Droughts and floods are a testament to the undeniable effects of climate change, and remind us of our long-standing experience of living with climate variability. In what ways can we reconsider the written and material records of social adaptability and transformation in order to gain a better understanding of what it means to live through an era of rapid climate change? We wanted this conference to act as a record in itself, a 2025 ‘hunger stone’ – *If you see me cry* – a reminder of the bad years which have been and will return. How can we debate these difficult questions without falling into despair, while recovering and building a sense of agency, or as Donna Haraway proposes, a ‘responsibility’? The keynotes, many of the panels, the different world sessions, and the complementary art interventions certainly teased these sensibilities in us.

Uppsala is known as a town of learning and, in these days, the conference participants further strengthened this reputation through their contributions: 11 panels, 14 roundtables, and 13 Different World Sessions, with 74 individual papers combined into panels (a total acceptance rate of 31% of 675 submissions). There were 14 parallel academic sessions running for four days, with 650 registered participants, including 150 online. Half the panels were hybrid with an onsite and online audience. Some ‘different world’ sessions were also invited among the interventions. The ESEH-appointed Programme Committee took great care to accommodate members’ other interests and themes, and to balance the distribution of themes across the scheduled days.

Stephania Barca’s keynote on the second day of the conference, ‘Labour in the Great Acceleration era’, resonated with our ambition as organisers to evoke a sense of possibility amid today’s precarity. The talk reminds us that the abstraction and scale of ‘the earthsystem’ lure us away from the individual and day-to-day experience of living with the effects of climate change, and from the responsibility and care individuals across the world take to defend

nature and home.¹ How can this closeness of experience be translated in the study of the past? Heli Huhtamaa (University of Bern, Switzerland), in her keynote the same day, evoked in us the dire effects of the Little Ice Age in the Nordic Countries and translated this experience to the individual level, as reflected in the written records. On the fourth day of the conference, Gaia Giuliani, a researcher at the University of Coimbra, reminded us of the need to scrutinise the Anthropocene narrative and expose the biopolitics inherent in modernity. The keynotes complemented each other well, from counter-narratives of the Anthropocene to what we can learn from our archives, and then to Adam Izdebski's (Max Planck Institute Jena) fourth-day keynote on how we can translate our historical knowledge in ways which can communicate with policymakers. As demonstrated by the numerous panels on human experiences of climate and environmental change, as well as the mitigation of climate insecurity, water scarcity and environmental crises, a wealth of knowledge exists on how to develop strategies to counter risk.

The idea of Uppsala hosting the thirteenth ESEH conference originated in the Global Environmental History master's programme. The hosts at the conference were current, incoming and former students (along with Ph.D. students and alumni interested in environmental history). They found the conference contributions deeply inspiring, particularly in confirming the breadth and relevance of the field. The conference was hosted through a tripartite collaboration with the Department of History at Stockholm University, and the Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment at KTH Royal Institute of Technology. KTH hosted the Anthropocene Histories summer school, which explored the writing of Anthropocene histories. The course sought to bridge the longstanding divide between human and Earth history, encouraging critical engagement with the natural and material worlds. The course, which had 128 applicants for twenty places, took place the week after the ESEH conference at KTH premises in Stockholm and proved very popular.

We asked participants to assess the conference both whilst there and two weeks after it ended. Respondents (126 in total) were asked to assess the balance of the panels, finding them to be very well (46 per cent) or excellently balanced (37 per cent). Respondents had a wide range of opinions on which panels they enjoyed most. Many commented verbally on the high quality of the panel discussions. While one person noted the careful scheduling to avoid clashes, others felt 'conflicted' about having so many sessions running simultaneously.

We planned our hosting around the park area, the food trucks and the art interventions, with movement between the two campus areas (a ten-minute

1. This topic was deepened in the public 'earth-care' event the same evening, where leaders from indigenous and forest living communities in Brazil presented in short films – followed by a discussion between Felipe Milanez, Federal University of Bahia, Salvador (BR), Aline Simoes, Instituto Chico Mendes Bio (BR), and Stefania Barca.

walk apart). The art interventions provided a commentary on the ‘Climate Histories’ theme and aimed to stimulate our senses and encourage the public of Uppsala to join our discussion (<https://eseh2025.com/art/>). Interventions were funded by the Nordic Cultural Fund and Future Earth funds, and curated by Nicole Miller, who also designed the conference material and communications. The artists Signe Johannessen and Erik Rören had worked for a year to build ‘Solastalgia Pangolin’, a safe haven for transgenerational knowledge, to travel and grow from its inauguration in Uppsala. Meanwhile, Julia Lohman invited us to the ‘Department of Seaweed’ to reflect on algae futures. These longer interventions were complimented with seven shorter ones. Of the conference participants who replied to our questionnaire, 42 per cent visited the art interventions, while others prioritised the conference panels and social interactions. However, when asked what in the conference gave participants the strongest ‘aha!’ moment, several pinpointed their specific experience of the art interventions.

When asked to summarise their total experience of the conference in a few words, people replied with phrases such as ‘convivial, dynamic and fun, and responsive’, ‘inspiring and positive with low hierarchies’, and ‘relaxed and welcoming but also confusing’. A few participants felt disoriented by our set-up, listing ‘chaos, disorientation’ and ‘chaotic, tiring’ as comments. The difficulty of navigating the campus and its old buildings, as well as the need to split the panels between two campuses, likely contributed to this effect. And yes, there was some unplanned queuing for food (which is also part of the Uppsala experience, as attendees of the annual international reggae festival will know).

The excursions at the weekend were commented on positively. Thirty participants went with Linnaeus (impersonated by Hans Odöo) to see the town garden and summer house. A similar number opted to join the Mining Heritage excursion to Dannemora and Österbybruk. The city tours in Uppsala and Stockholm, as well as the Birka excursion departing from Stockholm, were also well-attended. A few had the opportunity for a full-day excursion on the Baltic Sea aboard the three-masted ship *Briggen Tre Kronor* while discussing the history, ecology and management of the Baltic.

Memorable to us is the outdoor inauguration in Linnaeus Botanical Gardens, where both long-time past and present vice chancellors greeted us. Before this, some participants had confidently completed the walking tour of Old Uppsala, venturing off track as intended and no doubt stopping for cool drinks along the way. Those who followed the walk online experienced it through their proxies Ebba, Lauri and later Idun, who shared some of the experience of the art interventions with the online audience in the following days. Other memorable moments included chasing escapee crayfish from the Climate History Museum panel. Despite their habitat being expertly designed by an ecologist, the crayfish still took the opportunity to visit other panels. Personally, I fondly

remember seeing ESEH conference participants lounging in Carolina Park, sprawled in the grass and deeply engrossed in conversation. Some of them had made their own algae badges. Now, looking out at the park transformed by layers of snow, I think of the public evening reading on snow by Sverker Sörlin in the *Aprés Ski*, 22/8, followed by a debate and KTH mingle. Someone handed out 'watch out for falling icicles' cards – a warning which is certainly good advice in Uppsala right now. We long for those days when we all came together in the green. We enjoyed hosting you and are looking forward to seeing you again at the fourteenth ESEH conference in Salzburg.

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