

### ESEH Zagreb 2017 conference: some reflections

The ninth ESEH biennial conference was held in Zagreb, Croatia from 28 June–2 July 2017, being one of the best attended ESEH conferences to date. The meeting hosted 444 participants from 42 countries around the world. Among the most represented countries were USA (76 participants), Germany (64) and UK (35), with at least ten participants each from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Finland, France, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Spain and Sweden.

To host one of the few and especially significant conferences and gatherings of environmental historians in the world was very important for Croatia, as well as for strengthening the position of Southeast Europe within the European research network. The conference location in Croatia also gave special emphasis to the theme of ‘contact environments’. In relation to historical changes of the environment, contact (or conflict) zones of different states, peoples, languages, religions and economies have always been of special interest to researchers. Because of the unusual shape of Croatia’s territory and because of its historical development as an area of contact (and sometimes conflict) such as between Christianity and Islam, maritime and continental traditions – to name but two – Croatia is a kind of laboratory for studying contact environments.

Such environments were approached through a great variety of original conceptualisations presented and discussed at a total of 105 regular sessions, roundtables and plenary sessions during these few but intense conference days. Among the many topics, the most prevalent were frontier zones, borders and borderlands, contact zones, edges, boundaries, landscapes of conflict, tensions between global and local, transnationalities (and crossing borders) and many other ‘betweens’. The contact theme was also discussed from rather different perspectives: from *across disciplines*, pointing to the importance and necessity of interdisciplinarity in environmental history research. The topic of migrations and displacements also represents crossing borders, multiple contacts, possible conflicts and many other issues. Causes for mass migrations are several, including such environmental factors as climate change. Climate-mediated migration is currently an increasingly important field of research and scientific interest, especially from the view of environmental history.

At the intriguing plenary keynote lecture: *From determinism to complexity: historical disaffiliation in climate change and migration*, Professor Andrew Baldwin from Durham University challenged prevailing stereotypes about the relation between the climate change and human movements. The lecture was based on new insights from his recently published edited volume, *Life*

*Adrift*, reconceptualising migration and environmental (climate) change. The plenary round table was also dedicated to the issue of migration: *Trespassing: Environmental history and the challenge of migrations*, chaired by Marco Armiero (KTH-Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden) with the participation of Peter Coates (University of Bristol), Shen Hou (Renmin University of China) and Eunice Nodari (Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil). Book launches during the conference also addressed migration, including *The Environmental History of Modern Migrations*, edited by Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker, published within the Routledge Environmental Humanities Series.

The main conference theme was also emphasised through another new book that was presented and discussed at a roundtable. The book *The Nature State: Rethinking the History of Conservation* edited by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Matthew Kelly and Claudia Leal was the topic of the panel discussion chaired by Lisa Brady. The ‘nature state’ was presented side by side with other ‘state concepts’ such as ‘welfare state’, ‘patrimonial state’ etc. By bringing various state concepts into contact and conflict, the book reflects the main ideas of the conference.

Apart from the book exhibition (representing Berghahn Books, Oxford University Press, Rachel Carson Centre, The White Horse Press and Yale University Press), there were novel exhibitions of labs and projects such as the presentation of H2020 CLISEL (Climate Security with Local Authorities) being a coordination action of Horizon 2020. Additionally, the KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory presented work within the highly innovative approach and paradigm of ‘post disciplinary space for undisciplined experimentations within and beyond university’.

The *Green Movie soirée* was a kind of novelty at the conference and a very refreshing event in every sense. Two movies were displayed in the evening hours, after very busy and warm summer conference days: *The Land Beneath Our Feet* (2016), directed by Gregg Mitman and Sarita Siegel and *Disobedience: The Rise of the Global Fossil Fuel Resistance* (2016) directed by Kelly Nyks. Both movies were followed by panel discussions. Gregg Mitman and Jane Caruthers were discussants at the first movie soirée, and Stefania Barca, Frank Zelko and William Cronon at the second.

The French branch of the ESEH organised a *Francophone Environmental Historians’ Breakfast*. They gathered quite a number of francophone environmental historians to get to know each other better and to initiate (or strengthen) mutual connections, while providing good French coffee and fresh organic croissants. A number of other well-attended receptions fostered a warm and lively atmosphere at the conference. The White Horse Press organised and sponsored the reception and Best Poster Prize in the Botanical Garden’s picturesque historical pavilion. This reception was especially exciting because it successfully took place between two heavy summer storms. The American

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Society for Environmental History (ASEH) sponsored the WEHN (Women's Environmental History Network) reception with the aim of gathering scholars and promoting the WEHN. One specialty of the Zagreb conference was the very successful ICEHO silent auction, to raise funds for travel scholarships for the 2019 World conference in Brazil, organised by the president of ICEHO, Verena Winiwarter. The response, by both donors and buyers, was far beyond expectations.

All 105 sessions, held parallel in eleven rooms, together with numerous other events during these five conference days took place in historical buildings at Marulić Square in the very city centre of Zagreb. All these historical buildings and venues are situated around a beautiful rose-garden square, contributing to the vibrant, lively and friendly working environment, with people moving from session to session, to exhibitions, book launches, coffee, receptions or movie soirées.

Some participants also benefited from the pre-conference tours in Kornati National Park Archipelago and the traditional rural Dalmatian hinterland, led by colleagues from Zadar University, together with the post-conference tour in the Zagreb periurban post-socialist environment, led by the Zagreb team.

An ESEH Summer school organised in Zadar immediately after the conference brought together a small group of young researchers and postgraduate/Ph.D. students under a topic related to the conference: 'Natural and cultural heritage under different governments'. The School convened international lecturers covering various aspects of the topic (Simone Gingrich, Vienna-Klagenfurt; Grit Martinez, Berlin; Borna Fuerst-Bjeliš, Zagreb; Josip Faričić, Zadar; Zoran Šikić, Zadar; Ante Blaće, Zadar). During the practical and field work, students came to the conclusion that ultimately two approaches – historical and geographical – came together in the daily work of an environmental historian, thereby reconfirming the necessity of collaboration and interdisciplinarity.

The ESEH Zagreb 2017 conference surely contributed further to strengthening and networking environmental history and pointing once more to the necessity of bringing together various approaches while building contacts and emphasising that the interdisciplinarity of environmental history is its strength and its richness.

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