

**European Society for Environmental History  
Fourth International Conference**

**“Environmental Connections: Europe and the wider world”**

**Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 4-9 June 2007**

**Report by the Scientific Committee**

The fourth international gathering of ESEH was organised by the Local Organising Committee (chaired by Petra van Dam) and was hosted by the Vrije Universiteit (VU University) in Amsterdam. Some two hundred and fifty-four delegates drawn from over twenty-five countries attended on this occasion. There was a strongly Western and Central European representation at the conference, with significant numbers of delegates also from Eastern Europe, Northern and Central America, South Asia, Australasia and Africa. Together, this truly international assembly resulted in a conference that was vibrant in its diversity of research, methodologies and interdisciplinary relationships, emphasising the dynamism of this expanding field of endeavour.

Nearly two years of planning went into making this event the success it was, and just one of the many complex processes that underpinned that success was the selection of the papers for delivery in June from the many hundreds of proposals submitted. The overall quality of submissions was very high and the Scientific Committee (Gabiella Corona (chair), Timo Myllyntaus, Richard Oram, Peter Szabo and Eric Thoen) were faced with the difficult task of whittling them down and fitting them into a coherent programme. With one hundred and eighty papers selected for delivery, plus a further fourteen posters for viewing, the conference was organised for nine blocks of seven themed sessions to be held in parallel over the four days, plus discussion groups, publishing workshops, and poster sessions. Although there were a number of unfortunate last-minute withdrawals of papers which affected some sessions, this remained probably the fullest general conference programme of ESEH to date. In addition, there was a keynote address by Jane Carruthers of the University of South Africa, one of the leading environmental historians of Southern Africa, on ‘Environmental History: Revitalising Connection, Context and Coherence in Environmental Studies’ and a plenary session by the award winning panel on ‘New environments and strange specimens: Botanical encounters and exchanges between Europe and the Asian tropics, c.1620-1890s’. With a wide range of receptions and field trips in addition to the paper sessions, the conference provided an excellent environment and opportunity for intellectual debate, networking and socialising.

With a very inclusive general theme, ‘Environmental Connections: Europe and the Wider World’, and no prescriptive time-period, speakers were able to address a very wide chronological and geographical range. The following is a far from exhaustive report, but it focuses on number of the principal themes which emerged. Given the location of the conference, it was perhaps inevitable that issues surrounding water management and the activities of the various water boards of the late medieval and earlier modern period in the Netherlands should have emerged as a strand in the sessions, but the control, supply and exploitation of water resources generally was one

of the central issues explored in many of the papers. Recent extremes of drought and rainfall experienced across Europe from England to Czechia underscored the topicality of many of the themes explored in this context.

Many of the strands that emerged as key themes in the conference came together clearly in one session, 'Soils, Woods, Waters: Ecological connections maintaining productivity and creating traditional European agroecosystems', with papers by Verena Winiwarter, T. Keyser and Richard C. Hoffmann. This session dealt with the management of natural resources such as woodlands, aquatic systems and soils in late medieval and early modern societies, themes which have a resonance with a number of other sessions which are outlined below. Their three closely-related papers focused on the connections created between agricultural soils, artificial fish culture and woodlands by particular management practises. Fish ponds were e.g. a source of nutrients for agricultural soils; their construction depended also on local wood for dams or sluices. The presentations revealed the traditional concepts and environmental knowledge necessary for the maintenance of the resources as recorded in didactic manuals and regulations. They showed how, especially, the fertility of agricultural soils depended on a complex system of nutrient input from on-farm and off-farm sources. Keyser's exploration of the development of woodlands in the French Champagne between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century also demonstrated that changes in natural resource management was aimed at maintaining the long term productivity of the ecosystems. Together, these three papers presented some very important findings that challenge traditional perceptions of the essentially destructive and unregulated nature of pre-Modern resource exploitation.

Perceptions another kind, of the relationship between medieval religion, landscape and attitudes towards nature, formed the basis for an excellent session on 'Connecting religion and landscape in pre-modern Europe'. Rob Babcock's paper on 'Monastic exploitation of nature in the early Middle Ages' was a particularly powerful critique of the intrusion of modern perceptions and 'wish-fulfilment' exercises into analysis of past societies. Focussing especially on the Romantic, nationalist and environmentalist historiography that has attempted to recast early Celtic monasticism as fundamentally 'green', he deconstructed their argument and returned the principal focus to the early medieval view of nature as reflected in early monastic writing. From this basis, he demonstrated convincingly that the Celtic clergy were strongly interventionist in their remodelling of the landscapes in which they lived, and showed that this 'taming' of nature was driven by a perception of wilderness as the abode of the satanic. D. Tys maintained a focus on the 'taming' or reclaiming of land, giving as a case study the monastic reclamation of parts of the coastal wetlands for Flanders between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Here, however, he was challenging the primarily monastic-directed aspect of the process and the traditional model which presented the landscape as 'solitary wastelands to be transformed into spiritual landscapes by the labour of the monks'. Another nail was powerfully driven into the presentation of the monks – Cistercians especially – as pioneers toiling to make the wilderness blossom, with the role of the secular authorities in the region emerging as far more significant than recognised previously. These two themes were drawn together in E Arnold's paper on 'Woodlands, miracles and monastic identity', which reviewed the medieval monastic concept of 'desert' and its redefinition as 'empty wasteland'. Progressing from this starting-point to a wider consideration of monastic perceptions of the environment and the influence of those perceptions on the shaping of monastic identity, the paper

examined closely the attitudes of two monasteries as woodland owning lords, their management of the woodland resources and use of their woodland location to define their own self-identity and to differentiate themselves from their agricultural tenant communities and from local secular powers.

Ideas of culturally-differentiated resource management also ran strongly through the session on ‘Sustainability and Forest Management’ in the papers by Timo Myllyntaus, C. Canavas and Robert Perez. In the first of these, ‘Searching for exemplary environments from history – commissions of forest restoration’, Myllyntaus explored the tensions within forest-management in Finland, where 66% of the land area is afforested but where pressures for the industrial exploitation of the timber resource means that less than 2% of the forest is conserved. He highlighted how this situation contrasts strongly with Finnish popular perception which mistakenly believes that in excess of 10% of total forest cover is old-growth and that the public expect that percentage to increase (as does the EC which has set ambitious conservation goals). The next part of the paper dealt with a problem being confronted by forest managers and ecologists around the world: how to restore old-growth forest and is ‘primeval forest’ necessarily the only and most desirable base-line for conservation? The discussion emphasised the multi-layered nature of forest history as records of the cultural environment, the need to preserve this record, and presented a number of strategies being tested by forestry managers in Finland. The cultural record of forest as a timber resource was also explored in depth by C. Canavas in respect of the island of Crete. Significant changes in woodland management and extent of woodland cover was linked closely to the shifts in political control of the island – Byzantine, Venetian, Turkish – and their ship-building needs. This paper highlighted how regime-directed management of a resource could lead to rapid development and equally rapid degeneration as regimes and their requirements changed. The final paper introduced the idea of a conflict between indigenous and imported ideas of management and the consequences of that. Taking the case study of the mountains of southern California, Robert Perez in his paper ‘From Indian forest to American tinder-box: Environmental change and the failure of fire-management policies in Southern California’, explored how the ending of long-established management strategies had resulted in the creation of a potentially catastrophic fire-risk. Controlled burning by indigenous populations had prevented the development of a dense underbrush, but the ending of these practices – often curtailed by federal, state and local governments – had seen the creation of a highly flammable undergrowth layer. This had not only created a veritable tinderbox with the potential for wildfires covering far greater areas than had been affected by the controlled fires of the past, but had also adversely affected the game population through decreased opportunities for forest-floor grazing etc. There was, too, a wider cultural issue, as the fires used by the native American peoples had also a ritual aspect to them. Together, these papers formed a very tightly related group which emphasised the complexities of forest management and the wider cultural issues relating to matters of identity and perception.

One particularly valuable group of sessions focussed on the surviving sources of climate data for medieval and early modern Europe, which can provide detailed information on long-term variations across broad geographical ranges. One jointly-authored paper, presented by M. Sghedoni (co-authors: Silvia Enzi, D. Camuffo) reviewed the documentary evidence available for the Po valley in northern Italy in a study of the character of winters during the last millennium. In each century, they

have identified what appear from the narrative accounts to have been the most extremely cold and warm winters. This subjective observational data has then been checked against the surviving instrumental data which exists from the 18th century onwards, which has revealed a strong correlation between the observational- and instrumental-based evidence. This has permitted them to project their findings back into the pre-instrumental period and to reconstruct a climate sequence for their region with a high degree of confidence. A more purely document-based approach was presented by a Swiss team working on medieval climate data for south-eastern England. K. Pribyl (co-author: Christian Pfister, C. Camenisch) concentrated on the reconstruction of the English climate during the 13th-15th centuries using observational data from chronicles in conjunction with data from estate management records, like the series of accounts of grain yields on the properties of the Bishop of Winchester. A third body of data was identified by L. Leijonhufvud, who has used records of the sailing season in Stockholm harbour as a proxy for reconstruction of winter temperatures since AD 1533. All three papers stressed the importance of careful critical handling of the documentary data, but emphasised its great potential for climate reconstructions in the pre-instrumental period. The use of such proxy data, used in conjunction with other forms of evidence (such as ice-core analysis), is opening up an important area of research that will aid better understanding of past climate trends, the current climate and possible future changes.

A second session on climate-change data reinforced the views offered in the first: that environmental data are as important for the scientific research of past regional or global climate changes as for the present and future; and that data relating to past climate events can be invaluable in creating models for future trends. In his paper, Kees Klein Goldewijk focussed mainly on statistical data in a discussion of a wide array of archaeological, historical and ecological evidence for human influence on the global environment. His impressive results, based on extended research, will soon be presented via Internet in the *History of the Global Environment* (HYDE) database. The group discussion of his paper revealed great interest in the potential for fuller collaboration of climatologists and environmental historians. A case study which underscored the historical socio-economic impact of a regional climatic change was presented by Stefan Norrgård. He presented evidence for the correlation between climatic changes triggered by El Niño and La Niña, famines in West Africa and their (possible) impacts on the transatlantic slave trade in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Still in the early stages of his doctoral project, he recognises the need to establish more clearly the link between possible climate change and its effects or impacts on the intercontinental slave trade in the decades before 1800.

Thorkild Kjaergaard presented a timely reminder that warnings about climate change were not a recent development and that Al Gore was not the first to present ‘an inconvenient truth’. His paper, ‘August Krogh and climate change or how to forget an inconvenient truth’, set out how in an article published in 1904 the later Nobel Prize winner, August Krogh, had clear ideas about the climatic consequences of a rising CO<sub>2</sub> level, and how he had proposed the regular monitoring of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>. Because Krogh published his article in an obscure journal it was completely ignored (a warning to us all!). Moreover, as Thorkild Kjaergaard explained, global warming was thought of almost solely in terms of mean temperature gain and so to be mainly beneficial, particularly from the point of view of Scandinavians and other northern

peoples. The climate-change debate, we are reminded, is hardly new and faces the same entrenched opinions.

A second major strand to be explored at this conference was the interlinked issue of resource exploitation, trade, sustainable development and environmental impacts. In a session on 'Resources, Trade and Industry', Siger Zeischka dealt with the international timber trade and the domestic timber demand in Dutch water management (1650-1800). Local water boards responded to supply-driven price increases by technological innovations, such as the use of bricks, or by passing the risk to their employed carpenters, who were made contractually responsible for obtaining materials. His paper stimulated discussion of the role of distances between wood supplies, markets and consumers, and prices in other countries which were affected by variable pressures of supply and demand. Markus Gradwohl, developed on the theme of long-distance trade and its environmental impact at point of source. He focussed on the development of trade and biomass extraction from New Zealand since 1860, on the equivalents for biomass or energy and made reference to another research project on marine exploitation. Simone Gingrich, used annual statistical publications from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the United Kingdom (1800-2000) to assess differential developments of physical foreign trade relative to internal trade. The UK had a more rapid and stronger net physical export in comparison to the AHE, which was explained in terms of different economic structures and mental frameworks. Culture and mentality was seen here to be as significant as environmental factors.

One of the most stimulating sessions on the impacts of development was 'The environmental impact of post-war reconstruction: France, Hungary and Italy after 1945'. Despite the fact that the immediate post-war period played a crucial role in the environmental history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only this panel was devoted to it. The need to repair war-damage, the migration of millions of people, a long period of economic recovery which was intensively connected with a secular change in the energy supply (switching from coal to oil) and the spectacular and increasing impact of individual motorization, caused an unprecedented change in the environmental situation, not only in the industrialised countries of the northern hemisphere, but also globally. Organized by Wilko, Graf von Hardenberg the idea of this session was to compare the situation in France, Italy and Hungary. All three case studies have had another methodological access and highlighted other aspects of the environmental impact of post-war reconstruction.

In his paper, "Reconstructing the forest, reconstructing the nation. Restoring the environment in post-1945 France", Chris Pearson described how in France the restoration of the forest became, on the one hand, a symbol of national unification and national recovery, while on the other it was a clear example of the "increased post-war state control over natural resources", through the establishment of state agencies like the "Fonds Forestier National" (FFN). In the following discussion similar processes in other countries were identified and compared.

Victor Pál continued with a case study from beyond the Iron Curtain. In his paper, "The politicisation of water in central-east Europe during the cold war," he focussed on another natural resource through two case studies from within Hungary, the Miskolc industrial area of the river Sajó and the long planning history of the dam

project of Gabčíkovo. In the latter case he set out the very impressive story of a real long-lasting planning history which was more a symbol for economic recovery and strength than of real value. In the discussion it became quite clear that the environmental situation in Cold War Europe was more similar on both sides of the Iron Curtain than ideologists preached. The function of major construction works, like dams, was also discussed in a broader international perspective, with particular focus on the so called “Stalin-Plan”.

A more general survey of environmental policy in post-war Italy was offered by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, in his paper “Environmental policies in post-war Italy between reconstruction and economic boom”. He argued that Italy was in a certain sense a latecomer in developing environmental policies. Economic recovery, industrialisation and increasing consumption were the most important factors which prevented the implementation of effective environmental protection policies. The following discussion focussed mainly on the issue of whether Italy was really a latecomer, and on the role of the “Vajont catastrophe” in 1963 as a symbol of environmental destruction.

Directly related to the above group of papers was the theme explored in the two Regional Sessions: Eat or to be eaten. Modification of Plants and Animals for Human Consumption. Indeed, it was quite striking that what can be classed as ‘animal history’ and especially the history of meat production for human consumption emerged as a new and very distinct trend at this conference. There were at least five papers presented which dealt with aspects of the history of pig-breeding and pork production alone (e.g. Sam White, The Chinese Pig in Europe; N. Mink, The Internationalisation of Domestic Swine; Peter Koolmees. Adapting Pigs to Mass production; Dorothee Brantz, Canned Pigs and Delirious Cows on the Move: Transnational Livestock Diseases as an International Problem), and several more had been submitted for consideration by the Scientific Committee. Timo Myllyntaus has noted that this same theme of meat production – especially of pork – was prominent at the 2006 conference of ASEH, and it seems likely that this will be a growing field of research as climate change affects the production and supply of food in future. There will probably be a great deal of attention paid to this theme at the next Global Environmental History Congress.

Peter Scholliers from Brussels presented a very stimulating paper on ‘Food and fraud in Brussels in the 19th century’. His research focussed on the documentation of the chemical laboratory of the city of Brussels, founded in 1856 mainly to regain popular trust in governmental food safety policy. This paper stimulated many questions, chiefly relating to more recent food safety scares. The paper was followed by two films, *Charcuterie mécanique* (1895) and *Pork Plaza* (2000). The very short film about the Charcuterie mécanique was shown three times, to better show its extremely ironic content. The other, more spectacular and longer film (c.15 minutes) about the pig’s high-rise project, caused amazement and disbelief at how such ideas could be developed. Both films were explained by Peter Koolmees from Utrecht. The theme of large-scale pig-farming highlighted by the films continued in the second session. Peter Koolmees addressed the problems of adapting pigs to mass production in the 20th century. He stressed the pressures in a growing market with an ever more demanding public that wants less lard and more meat in pigs, as compared with past periods where the fat was as valued. Similar issues in relation to large-scale plant-species

production were explored by Ronald Hutten, who spoke about the ‘Past, present and future of the potato’. His focus was on another hugely topical and controversial issue, genetic management, which arise from the necessity of making such a staple food-source resistant to late blight disease and other illnesses by cross breeding programs. New techniques connected with genomics and biotechnology are being developed, that can be transgenic (from organisms foreign to the potato) or cisgenic (from the potato itself). It was stressed that these two kinds of modification should not be confused, as is mostly the case in popular discussions, a point which underscored the need for better and wider public understanding of both the techniques and implications of genetic modification.

Another area of food-production and its environmental impacts which was explored by a number of speakers was fresh- and salt-water fisheries. While most of the sessions on this topic focussed on exploitation of fish species, one stimulating session also explored shell-fish management. In ‘Historicizing forgotten and marginalized fisheries: People and oysters from Brittany to San Francisco Bay’ dealt with the evolution of oyster fishing and pelagic fishing in various parts of the world, and the mutual influences between these regions, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, admirably underscoring the conference’s central theme of ‘Environmental Connections’. Papers were presented by Olivier Levasseur on the spread of marine aquaculture from France, by Matthew Booker on the rise and fall of immigrant oysters in San Francisco bay and by Liv Jacobsen on state efforts to stimulate the fishing industry in New South Wales; the organizer of the session, Darin Kinsey, who would have presented a paper of the eel in the North Atlantic basin, was unfortunately unable to come. The lively general discussion which followed these presentations focussed on comparisons between the role of scientists, private entrepreneurs and the state in the transmission of knowledge and the organization of the fisheries as well as on the factors that determined the growth and decline of consumer markets for *fruits de mer*.

A number of sessions focused on different aspects of what were labeled broadly as ‘land problems’. One offered a series of papers from the perspective of historical geography focusing on a range of issues encountered in the region from southern Germany to Czechia. The first contribution was given by Andreas Dix, who discussed landslides as a natural risk in history, taking as its case study the mountainous region of the Swabian “Alb”. Using archival sources, he showed how the perception formed a “culture of risk”. The discussion stressed the role of local knowledge, the influence of scientific knowledge and administrative intervention, as well as popular efforts at mitigation and prevention. Leos Jelecek followed this with a paper on differential land rent and its geographical/environmental impacts on land use changes in Czechia between 1845 and 2005. His contribution demonstrated the importance of economic concepts in a broader perspective, and was complemented by Robert Rasin and his co-author Pavel Chromy’s paper on land use changes in border regions with Czech and Austrian cadastral units in a period of 160 years. They demonstrated how three regions can be distinguished by different land use patterns: the western section dominated by grassland and forests, the middle section characterized by forests and arable land and the eastern part with arable land. The authors identified three main processes changing the landscape structure: the industrialization in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning 19<sup>th</sup> century, then the centrally planned economy during the communist period (1948–1989) and finally the period of economic transformation in 1990s.

While many might regard the paper sessions and posters as the principal business of the conference, one of the most significant elements at ESEH 4 was the **ESEH-Posthumus Publishing Workshop** chaired by Marjolein 't Hart. The following report was provided by Ben Gale.

The aim was to give scholars, in particular PhDs and young scholars, an opportunity to meet the editors of scientific journals and address issues which seem relevant to entrants in the field of 'publish or perish'. Mauro Agnoletti of Global Environment, Edmund Russell, Environmental History, Georgina Endfield representing Environment and History and Peer Vries founding editor of the Journal of Global History addressed issues like their readership, 'traditional' publishing versus internet access etc. The editors represented an interesting spread: from established to still to establish journals and journals backed by a strong, commercial publisher to journals backed by scientific societies. Marjolein 't Hart chaired the workshop, but also shared her experiences with the world of academic publishing. Present were not only participants of the conference, but also PhDs of the Posthumus Instituut, doing research in a fields not linked with the conference. Personally I would have liked that more of our PhDs would have shown up for what was an informative session. It, however, should be noted too that those present were quite active both during the session and the time devoted to having an informal link with the editors.

A lot of issues were raised. From the perspective of the journals it is important that authors do read the instructions carefully and follow the rules in particular about size. Furthermore, authors should carefully position themselves in an academic debate. Often manuscripts of young scholars contain many 'trees' after fine research, but the 'forest' is not to be seen. Copyright and the publishing strategy clearly worry young scholars. The editors stressed that the journals/publishers get the copyright, but have a liberal stance if authors want to reuse material for a book or another publication. It clearly is impossible to avoid all frictions. For journals usually prefer or require original work: you can go from an article to a book, but the other way round is more difficult and PhDs planning to take articles out of their PhD should be aware of that. Furthermore, authors writing collectively might have different interests. The message was that while problems do exist and are to some extent unavoidable, it is important to communicate with the editor. The relation between author and journal is one of give and take. Editors eager to avoid that authors send their manuscripts to more journals at the same time should work at a rather quick, e.g. 6 months, process of first acceptance and refereeing. Journals differ also in outlook and possibilities: some have the means to have articles translated or checked by a native speaker in a late stage of processing, others do not. This can have financial consequences for the authors. There is also no general rule whether single authored or multi-authored articles are to prefer. The cultures of scientific fields are different; the outlook of journals reflects whether they position themselves in between the disciplines or not. Furthermore, a personal career perspective might lead to another decision than one solely taking the journals into account.



The message of the workshop was that communication does not start with publication. Prospective authors should look at the preceding phase also as a period of communication, in which they can take an active part, provided that they take their partner seriously and do their homework.

It was not, however, all papers, business sessions and plenary addresses. In the now established tradition of ESEH, the conference provided a superb venue for meeting with old friends and fellow scholars in a largely informal and very genial atmosphere. Discussions at the end of paper sessions could be continued over coffee, fruit and biscuits in the main concourse, or round a table at the superb lunches provided by the catering service of the Vrije Universitet. The Global Reception at the Royal Tropical Institute, preceded by the memorable boat trip along the canals courtesy of the Nederlandse Waterschapsbank, was a highlight, coupling a viewing of the Institute's wonderful collection with an informal drinks reception in splendid surroundings. Equally impressive was the Welcome Reception provided by the City Council of Amsterdam at the City Hall. The highlight, despite the spectacular thunderstorm, was the ESEH awards dinner at Artis, where grand surroundings, magnificent food and drink, and splendid company brought the conference to a memorable climax.

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