

President's Message Board

For most of us the grand highlights in the schedule of the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) are the biennial conferences. They attract scholars from every corner of Europe and from other continents as well, and they bring our ever-growing community more and more closely together – each time in another European location. These biennial conferences are, as one colleague suggested, “the only meetings at which we do not need to explain what environmental history is all about”.

During the “white nights”, when it never gets completely dark in northern Europe, the sixth ESEH conference was held in Turku, Finland. The official program started with a welcome session and a keynote speech by Sverker Sörlin (Royal Institute of Technology Stockholm) in the morning of June 28, and it ended with a marvellous banquet, music performances and dance, and a presentation by Susan Flader (University of Missouri) on the evening of July 1. A local organizing committee, with Timo Myllyntaus as chair and 14 members from Turku University and Åbo Akademi University, had made preparations for hundreds of visitors from every continent. 324 participants (with 40 from Finland) had registered for the conference, 257 papers and 5 keynote addresses were given, and 15 posters were presented in Turku. Participation was three times higher than at the first meeting of the ESEH in St. Andrews in 2001, and altogether higher than ever before. The location of the city of Turku which stretches along the Aura River, hugs the Baltic Sea, and features the largest archipelago in the world (in terms of the number of islands) provided an ideal setting for the conference topic: “Encounters of Land and Sea”. Turku offered opportunities to observe aquatic culture and the amphibious relationship between land and sea. Also it served as an ideal site for exciting excursions by bus, boat, and bicycle to such diverse locations as landfills and national parks, and to a Finnish sauna. The ESEH conference in Turku was extremely well organized, with a lot of attention to detail. The long and sunny days from June 28 to July 2 and the great academic program will be lasting memories for those ESEH members who were fortunate enough to come to Finland.

In Turku the four-year tenure of Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud as president of ESEH, and of Petra van Dam as vice-president of the society came to an end. During the four years the society's membership grew from 287 in 2007 to 425 in 2011. ESEH members now come from 37 different countries, 81 percent from Europe, 19 percent from overseas. Both Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud and Petra van Dam had been active in the society not just for a couple of years but ever since ESEH was founded more than 10 years ago. One of the main goals

of Professor Massard-Guilbaud was what she called the “democratisation” of the society: Geneviève worked hard and successfully towards involving a higher number of ESEH members in working groups and committees, and she helped to increase the number of regional representatives around the globe. At the General Meeting in Turku alone representatives for six new regions were elected: Tom Brooking for Australasia, Jelena Mrgić for Serbia, Hrvoj Petric for Croatia, Tomasz Samojlik for Poland, Sandra Swart for South Africa, and Vaso Seirinidou for Greece. The Council of Regional Representatives has now 17 members and it is still growing. If Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud worked towards expansion and diversity in regional terms, Petra van Dam was very much concerned with the inclusion of younger ESEH members. Thus, Petra served as a lecturer at the 2011 ESEH Summer School for doctoral students in Venice, Italy, and she helped to establish a travel grant for younger scholars; the new program gave more graduates than ever before the opportunity to attend the biannual conference in Turku.

In its first meeting on July 2, the new board of the ESEH – with its freshly elected vice-presidents Stefania Barca from Portugal and Julia Lajus from Russia – turned to a new set of objectives and goals. In the very first place, the board and the website committee, now chaired by Wilko von Hardenberg, will work on a new website with the aim to improve its structure and usability, and thereby to increase the visibility of the society. Also the society is already initiating preparations for the 2013 ESEH conference which will be held in Munich, Germany, in collaboration with the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at LMU Munich and the Deutsches Museum. The program committee for 2013 will be chaired by Peter Coates (Bristol, UK) and it will bring together ESEH members from 7 different European countries.

Finally, and on a more personal note, I am very grateful for the confidence that ESEH members have expressed in me with their vote. I will do my very best to serve this society over the next two years, both as president and as one of the local organizers of the conference in Munich. I am very optimistic that the society will grow and thrive in the future as it did in the past, because of its excellent officers – special thanks go to Ulrich Koppitz, our treasurer, and to our tireless secretary Phia Steyn – and because of the engagement of its members. Only about a decade ago, many historians would have prophesised that a society for environmental history will have a hard time to survive in Europe. Today the future looks quite bright – both for our discipline and for our professional networks. Thus, a couple of months ago, a Chinese journal asked the ESEH to present itself to its readers. We were selected from among associations around the globe, the editors stated, because they saw our society as a “successful and influential academic organization”.

As deserts spread and glaciers melt, and the population on our planet is permanently on the rise, no other history is more important, I think, than environmental history. Our discipline helps us understand the relationship between

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nature and culture over time and makes us ask new questions. It teaches us that human alternations of the earth have brought destruction but also conservation. In trying to understand our own role as historians in society and in looking into the future, it helps to remember the wisdom of a Danish philosopher who once stated that life is lived forward, but it is understood backward.

Christof Mauch
ESEH President

European Society for Environmental History

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ESEH aims to promote environmental history in Europe, by encouraging and supporting research, teaching and publications in the field. The ESEH maintains its website at <www.eseh.org>.

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Items for the next Notepad should be sent by 15 December 2011 to the address shown below.

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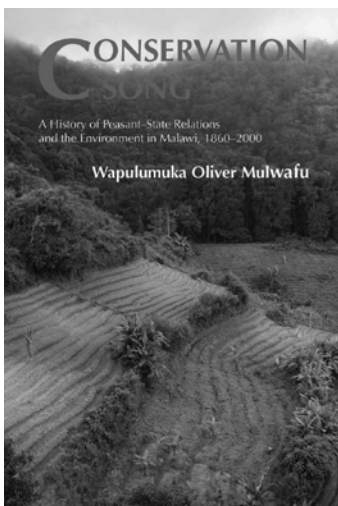
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The author is Associate Professor of Environmental History and SADC-WaterNet Professorial Chair of Integrated Water Resources Management at Chancellor College, University of Malawi.

Publication date, 31st July 2011

ISBN 978-1-874267-63-8 (HB) £65 / \$90 / €75

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