

## **Introduction by the President of ESEH**

This issue of the notepad focuses on the academic and institutional development of environmental history in Estonia. Until recently environmental historians in the Baltics had few, if any, connections with the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH). This was due to the fact that most of them worked in the field of archaeology and paleoecology, not medieval or modern history. However, over the last few years, the situation changed dramatically. Members of the environmental humanities community, especially in Tallinn and Tartu, started a number of multidisciplinary programs and initiatives that culminated in the establishment of a research library and a centre for environmental history in Estonia's capital Tallinn.

ESEH member Dr. Ulrike Plath of the Estonian Academy of Sciences provides a short account of the establishment of the new centre – the first one of its kind in the Baltics.

CHRISTOF MAUCH

## **Environmental History in Estonia**

On October 31, 2012, KAJAK (i.e. Keskkonnaajaloo Keskus), the first centre for environmental history in the Baltic States, was established at the Institute of History in Tallinn University. The centre is a structural unit of the Institute of History and is led by the archaeologist Gurly Vedru. According to the general assembly on January 19, 2012, the centre has 25 members from over 10 institutes and museums all over Estonia, and brings together researchers from history, archaeology, literature, art history, geography, semiotics, ethnology and (paleo)ecology. As a part of the university, KAJAK aims 1) to advance environmental history as a new way to teach and write about history in Estonia, 2) to establish an interdisciplinary cooperation network on man-nature-relationships with the neighbouring countries and the international community of researchers of environmental humanities, and 3) to distribute knowledge within and outside the university through conferences, workshops, public lectures, exhibitions, film-events, etc. In monthly seminars, the members of KAJAK discuss their ongoing research projects and welcome renowned researchers from outside Estonia to give an overview of the latest trends and developments in environmental history worldwide.

The need for an institutionalized centre arose after a first interdisciplinary and international summer school on environmental history, which took place

in May 2011 on Muhu Island – an event initiated by Christof Mauch and supported by numerous researchers all over the world, who responded to Verena Winiwarter's appeal to donate books for the summer school. On this occasion, twelve doctoral students from Estonia and Finland came to discuss their theses with four Estonian researchers (Kalevi Kull, Kati Lindström, Tiina Peil, Ulrike Plath) and four researchers from abroad (Bernhard Gissibl, Alf Hornborg, Diana Mincyte, Grégory Quenet). In early autumn the Institute of History, which also includes a strong division of (palaeo)archaeology, showed interest in creating a Centre for Environmental History analogous to the already existing Centre for Medieval Studies founded in 2005. With this step, the institute wished to strengthen the links between archaeology and history studies within the institute, and to renew the Estonian traditions of environmental history.

Environmental history had played an important role in the development of archaeology in the transition years of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The most outstanding researcher during these years was the exiled Estonian geologist and palaeontologist Urve Miller (1930), professor at Stockholm University and the first Estonian active in European cultural policy. In 1986 she worked as a coordinator for paleoecology in the *European Network for Protection of the Cultural Heritage*; one year later she was elected to the Board of the PACT (*Physical, Chemical and Biological Techniques for Protection of Ancient Monuments and European Heritage*) and continued as its president in the early 1990s. Financed at the beginning by the Council of Europe and in the second part of the 1990s by the EU-project "Environmental History of the Baltic Region", she established a broad interdisciplinary research programme on the environmental and cultural history of the Baltic region, based in the beginning on Estonia,<sup>1</sup> but also including soon afterwards Latvia and Lithuania.<sup>2</sup> Environmental history was introduced in these years into Estonian archaeology as a new way of doing interdisciplinary and international research, and had an immense influence on a new generation of Estonian archaeologists (Valter Lang, Heiki Valk, Gurly Vedru) and paleoecologists (Lembi Lõugas, Kersti Kiho, Tiiu Koff), who are now in leading academic positions.

While in the 1990s the main aim of environmental history in Estonia was the implementation of new scientific methods in archaeological research, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium this understanding about

1. Tony Hackens, Valter Lang and Urve Miller (eds.), *Estonia. Nature, Man and Cultural Heritage: Proceedings of a Round Table held at Tallinn, April 1991 at the Estonian Academy of Sciences*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1992 (PACT 37); Tony Hackens, Sheila Hicks, Valter Lang, Urve Miller, Leili Saarse (eds.), *Coastal Estonia: Recent Advances in Environment and Cultural History*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1996 (PACT 51).
2. Meilutė Kabailienė, Dagfinn Moe, Urve Miller, Tony Hackens (eds.), *Environmental History and Quaternary Stratigraphy of Lithuania*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1998 (Pact 54); Urve Miller, Tony Hackens, Valter Lang, Anto Raukas and Sheila Hicks (eds.), *Environmental and Cultural History of the Eastern Baltic Region*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1999 (PACT 57).

environmental history had changed fundamentally thanks to new contributions from American environmental historians. Although Baltic environmentalism in the time of *perestroika* had fascinated historians throughout the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> only in 2009 was the first book explicitly written on Estonian environmental history published by the American estophile, Robert W. Smurr (*Perceptions of Nature, Expressions of Nation: An Environmental History of Estonia*).<sup>4</sup> Smurr reflects the Estonian connection between nature and nation, an approach that Katharina K. S. Schwarz had worked out some years earlier for the Latvian case.<sup>5</sup> Although since the late 1980s a lot of articles and books have been published in and outside Estonia on the man-nature relationship in the Baltic countries, they didn't define themselves as works on environmental history, and didn't keep abreast of current international discussions. The highly innovative Estonian school of semiotics with its subdivision of bio- and zoosemiotics developed its own methodological approach. Estonian literature scholars were the first to open themselves to international trends and adopted the methodology of ecocriticism.<sup>6</sup> In 2007, an interdisciplinary conference organized by the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences first brought together historians as well as scholars of semiotics and literature from all three Baltic countries at the conference "Environmental Philosophy and Landscape Thinking", to evaluate environmental humanities in the Baltic States and to discuss further developments.<sup>7</sup> Here the connection between nation and nature was discussed in a deep historical dimension from the Middle Ages to the 20th century with a focus on the most outstanding philosopher of Baltic environmental philosophy, Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) and his understanding of subjective *Umwelt* – a crucial concept in semiotics, which has not been conceptualized by environmental historians.<sup>8</sup> The conference pointed out not only the great potential of Baltic environmental humanities, but also communicative problems between

3. For example, Matthew R. Auer, 'Environmentalism and Estonia's Independence Movement'. *Nationalities Papers* 26 (1998): 659–676; Edmunds Valdemars Bunkse, 'God Thine Earth is Burning: Nature Attitudes and the Latvian Drive for Independence'. In Anne Buttimer and Luke Wallinn (eds.), *Nature, Culture, Identity*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1999, pp. 175–187.
4. Robert W. Smurr, *Perceptions of Nature, Expressions of Nation: An Environmental History of Estonia*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Press, 2009.
5. Katrina Z.S. Schwarz, *Nature and National Identity after Communism. Globalizing the Ethnoscape*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.
6. Between 2000 and 2003 three volumes of *Koht ja paik*. [Place and location] were published by the Estonian Literature Museum.
7. Liina Lukas, Ulrike Plath, Kadri Tüür, unter Mitwirkung von Jaan Undusk (eds.), *Umweltphilosophie und Landschaftsdenken im baltischen Kulturraum* [Environmental Philosophy and Landscape Thinking]. Tallinn: Uderi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2011 (collegium litterarum 24).
8. Bernd Herrmann, 'Umweltgeschichte wozu? Zur gesellschaftlichen Relevanz einer jungen Disziplin'. In P. Masius, O. Sparnberg and J. Sprenger (eds.), *Umweltgeschichte und Umweltzukunft. Zur gesellschaftlichen Relevanz einer jungen Disziplin*. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2009, S. 13–50.

classical historical research and ecocriticism, semiotic philosophy and cultural geography. It became clear that further development would need constant communication within national research networks, international cooperation, and hard work on methodology and sources.

KAJAK has learned from this and earlier attempts to create networks on Baltic environmental history (NNI, i.e. Nature, Nation, and Identity, 2006–2007; NSLS, i.e. Network for Science and Literature Studies, 2010–2011) that had failed because of insufficient institutional support and a lack of critical mass of researchers, coherent methodology and international cooperation. As a structural unit of the Institute of History, which supports KAJAK with rooms and infrastructure, its existence is basically independent of project money. To gain visibility and be active, the centre applies for its own funding. At the moment it is mainly financed by the research project “History of Baltic Food Cultures” (2012–2015) supported by the Estonian Science Foundation. In this project, Estonian historians, mediaevalists as well as scholars of semiotics and archaeo- and ethnobotanics cooperate with Latvian and Lithuanian colleagues to figure out the main turning points in Baltic food history from the medieval times to the present in changing environments. A series of conferences on food history and the use of resources in the Baltic region and Central and Eastern Europe will be organized in cooperation with the Herder-Institute, Marburg, and Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU) Munich. Together with the University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin, courses on the methodology of environmental history will be prepared and the first courses on a MA level will already be taught in September 2012. The main challenges for KAJAK are to communicate the possibilities environmental history offers to the Estonian research landscape, and to find innovative connections between regional and international research.

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