

Dynamism in the European Environmental History Community

Europe is both an exciting and challenging place to work on environmental history. The region has thousands of years of human presence, leading to a deep and intricate interplay between humans and the non-human world all around us. That makes for a wealth of intriguing relationships to study. At the same time, that long continual human habitation has created challenges for modern historians through the construction of linguistic and political borders that can be difficult to cross. ESEH as an organization is dedicated to crossing those boundaries and bringing scholars who both work on and work in Europe together. ESEH wants to promote conversations about environmental history and how it can contribute meaningfully to our contemporary knowledge of human societies and the non-human world.

For the last two years, ESEH has used the Notepad to promote scholarly connections in Europe by sharing the historiographical trends that have shaped the field in various regions within the organization. During the next two years, we want to shift focus from past scholarship to the dynamic environmental history conversations that are happening right now at regional-level workshops and conferences throughout Europe.

As our first foray into this endeavour, two ESEH members from France share with us the discussions held at the 2013 conference of the French environmental history network RUCHE (Réseau d'histoire environnementale). We hope such sharing will strengthen the ties between scholars in different parts of the globe as they discover similarities and differences with other researchers' findings. We are looking forward to seeing these border-crossing dynamic conversations flourish at the upcoming World Congress for Environmental History in July 2014 in Portugal and the ESEH next bi-annual conference in 2015, as well as in the many smaller European regional meetings in between.

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RUCHE 2013: Environmental and Social Impacts of Planning

RUCHE, the Francophone Network of Researchers in Environmental History, which was founded by Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud (former ESEH President) and several other French scholars in 2008 and currently has about 60 members, gathered on 5-6 September 2013 for its fourth conference at the École des

hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. The theme chosen was the environmental and social impacts of territorial planning in history.

While a survey of the benefits has historically been undertaken before building new infrastructure, considering the environmental consequences is a recent demand, strengthening since the 1970s in Europe. If we consider that planning is a condition of economic growth and institutional stability, treating the question of its environmental impacts implies investigating the social and environmental costs of our welfare. To take up this challenge, the conference focused on three main issues: the planning forms that lead to environmental modification, the social actors of the planning process, and the consequences of this planning on the populations and their environment.

Communications dedicated to the first issue highlighted the environmental consequences of different kinds of planning, since both small scale and large scale planning can both have deep impacts. The exploitation of the Lebanese forest, studied by Romana Harfouche and Pierre Poupet, revealed long-term consistent agricultural practices able to manage the different uses of the environment, especially water sharing. The development of irrigation networks in the French Alps during the Middle Age was analysed in the same way by Brien Meilleur, Fabrice Mouthon, and Julia Villette. The feudal framework and the work of rural communities were the most important factors in the mobilization of water resources. A common point for both cases was the brutal disruption that occurred during the second half of the 20th century. In France, the decline of agriculture and the rise of the tourism industry weakened irrigation networks, whereas in Lebanon the fragile balance between the peasants and the environment was wrecked by the Lebanese civil war.

Large-scale planning is motivated by a desire to build great works in a short time in order to give a solution to social, economical or political questions. River management is a classical field for such big schemes, as transformation of rivers has been a general practice in the West. Studying the Vilaine, the river between Rennes and the Atlantic Ocean, Katherine Dana clearly showed that the need to ease and develop inland navigation during the second half of the 16th century contributed to modifying the watercourse as well as the riparian vegetation. In the Swiss part of its course, the Rhône was corseted to prevent dramatic floods, as explained by Dominique Baud-Sadier. Achieved in two steps in the 19th and the 20th centuries, the canalization completely modified the valley landscape. Facing the limits of this planning, Swiss authorities are now trying to give back a part of the valley to the water. In many cases, the wish to control a watercourse led to the complete disappearance of the river, such as the Los Angeles River, which was discussed by H el ene Schmutz. Victims as well as witnesses of different kind of planning, rivers offer a remarkable viewpoint to observe and analyse environmental change. The political and social will to harness water for economic development has been successful for a large part, but now creates new problems that are very difficult to resolve. The

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comparison between planning in the early modern era and in modern times highlights to what extent recent planning tended to be more harsh and brutal, weakening the resilience capabilities of the environment.

The second session, devoted to the actors of planning, aimed to answer a crucial issue: who leads the planning and why? Communications underlined the importance of economic and political power. Indeed, planning is a wonderful means to assert authority. During the early modern times, as explained by Dana for the Vilaine, the affirmation of local power was decisive. But central power also played an important role, especially in France. Studying the building of the Rochefort's arsenal, Sébastien Martin emphasized the environmental consequences of the building of military infrastructures undertaken by Louis XIV's government. Nevertheless, in their analysis of the designing of a canal in Mulhouse (Alsace, France) during the 19th century, Marie Fournier and Nicolas Holleville illustrated that local dynamics could lead to bottom-up initiatives. Wishing to avoid the destruction caused by frequent floods, and to draw a frontier between the industrial and working class areas and the residential zone, the bourgeoisie of Mulhouse conceived and promoted the digging of a canal.

Focusing on the actors revealed that planning could unify or divide the population. Odile de Bruyn discussed how at the end of the 19th century, King Leopold II attempted to transform Brussels into an imperial capital and adopted the standard of modernity. Inspired by Haussmann, he recruited French landscape designers for the gardens and parks. Surprisingly, this importation excited a nationalist sentiment which was partly backed by scientific considerations regarding the natural habitat law. Opposition to the plan criticized the project for importing not only an aesthetic and urban model, but also plants which were not in their natural environment. In this case, contesting a project was a means to promote a national identity.

While most of the communications emphasized the role of institutional decisions, Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton offered an original outlook by focusing on the spiritual dimension. Studying holy woods in Benin, she showed that the fear of the spirits and the needs of the voodoo cult contributed to the forestation of the country by characterizing woods as sanctuaries. But colonization, Christianization, and more recently the post-independence Marxist regime increasingly caused the destruction of the holy woods. Juhé-Beaulaton underlined that patrimonialization and education were necessary to contain environmental consequences of changing demographics and local use.

The third theme of the colloquium was dedicated to the human and social outcomes of planning projects. This is obviously the case for the French colonization of Guyana studied by Jean-Yves Puyo. During the 19th century, despite the inhospitality of the natural environment, the French authorities never ceased to try to settle new people in this South American colony. But new colonists, rarely volunteers, were constantly confronted by illness and famine. Thus, planning provoked a human disaster for Amerindians, African

slaves and Europeans. The striking point is that the human consequences of the settlement programs were not taken into account. Along the same lines, Hervé Caltran has studied the Reyssouze's watercourse (Ain, France). During the 1950s, the State promoted a large scheme to protect the city of Bourg-en-Bresse from floods. It involved speeding up the water flow by enlarging and deepening the river's bed, including the destruction of riparian vegetation. This centralized planning became much less when a "decentralization" policy that empowered local actors began in 1983. Nevertheless, its impact is still discussed: biodiversity was strongly weakened, some traditional practices such as irrigation disappeared, and it remains difficult to avoid floods in Bourg-en-Bresse.

The 2013 meeting of RUCHE offered a fertile ground for discussion and gave an occasion to young scholars to present their research. It illustrated the vitality of environmental history in France, as also embodied by the rise of specialized publications, monographs and edited volumes,¹ and was a continuation of the 2012 conference about "Technology and environment".

In 2014, RUCHE will organize a conference devoted to the relationships between powers (political or economic) and environment. In this perspective, it will be interesting to ask what the environment "does" to the political power and how, in return, the practices of political or economic powers shape the environment. Last but not least, French environmental historians look forward to welcoming their colleagues from all over the world in 2015 to Versailles for the next ESEH conference.

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1. Some of them can be found on the RUCHE's blog <http://leruche.hypotheses.org/category/parutions>