

Integrating the body in environmental history

There has been a growing interest within our scholarly community to broaden understandings of where environment history takes place. Instead of seeing only changes to and in the non-human world as environmental history, research has incorporated the human body as a locus of environmental change. Works such as Linda Nash's *Inescapable Ecologies* (2006), Brent Walker's *Toxic Archipelago* (2010), and Joy Parr's *Sensing Changes* (2010) centre the body as the way humans know and experience the environment, for both good and bad. The environment is embodied in many ways, from the ingested food that sustains the body to toxins that cripple it.

The European Society for Environmental History was pleased to co-sponsor an event, held in September 2014 in Estonia, that highlighted the connections between bodies and environments. The highlights of this event described below show how engagement with the body opens up environmental histories of both physical changes and ideological positions. Human nature cannot be separated from the human body, so environmental historians would be wise to keep the body central in their analysis as well.

DOLLY JØRGENSEN
ESEH President, 2013-2015
Umeå University, Sweden

Bodies between catastrophes and control

In the last decades, bodies have found their way to environmental history as the most radical links between nature and humans.¹ 'Bellies, Bodies, "Policey": Embodied Environments Between Catastrophes and Control', a joint conference held 12–14 September 12-14 by the Estonian Centre for Environmental History (KAJAK) at Tallinn University and the Institute of History at Tartu University, in cooperation with the Rachel Carson Center, aimed at a transdisciplinary discussion on bodies as a measure of catastrophes, objects of control and regulation and sources of metaphors, ideologies and desires.

The conference was opened with a compelling keynote by Verena Winiwarter who underlined the importance of bodies in environmental history,

1. Christopher Sellers. 'Thoreau's Body. Towards an Embodied Environmental History', *Environmental History* 4 (1999): 486–514; Nicolaas Mink, 'It Begins in the Belly', *Environmental History* 14 (April 2009): 312–322.

stressing that the interactions between humans and nature are essentially non-linear: they are characterised by thresholds, reciprocal feedback loops, time lags, resilience, vulnerability and heterogeneity. In the case of bodies, the impact of toxins can often be seen well beyond the life span of the initial cause. Such is the case with many toxic or radioactive substances that have been poisoning human bodies throughout history.

Bodies of animals and humans get involved in national or ethnic discourses. The fear of a slow and uncontrollable influence on bodies has not always been a known biological reality but quite often a cultural construct, as exemplified by Ulrike Plath in her presentation on breastfeeding among Baltic German women in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Opposing the Rousseauian turn in the conception of motherhood, they held on to the old systems of wet nurses throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, colonial fears concerning the bodily and social influence of the Estonian and Latvian nurses on the German offspring through their milk were widespread. Kadri Tüür analysed the incorporation of the Atlantic herring, a faraway marine resource, into the Estonian national discourse and recounted the descriptions of the sensual pleasure of the first encounter of the Estonians with the Atlantic herring in the 1930s. Based on extended field-work, Cindy Ott explained how forgetting certain traditional foodstuffs has gone hand in hand with the marginalisation of the Crow Indians and how their recovery has been an empowering tool in identity construction. Kati Lindström discussed how needs of public health may sometimes be subordinated to the discursive ideals of national forest and biodiversity in Japanese nature policies, disregarding the corporeality of the history and forgetting that nature is not always harmless and benevolent.

The conference theme asked participants to consider the control of bodies. This was taken up in three papers explicitly on crime: Marianna Muravyeva gave an overview of gender and crime in early modern Russia; Mattias Müller concentrated on eighteenth century theatres as places of social control and the manifestations of freedom in masquerades; and Ken Ird spoke about bestiality and sodomy in eighteenth century Estonia as a social and criminal problem.

The central question of the conference, however, was the question of food scarcity and famines. Peter Hess described food-related discourses in early modern German printed sources, arguing that greediness and improper behaviour were seen as the primary causes of food scarcity. Already in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we can find a critique of global economy, condemning people who imported foreign spices and foods, thus sending their finances abroad instead of supporting local German farmers. Frederike Felcht's presentation on Thomas Malthus' works demonstrated how this idea of food scarcity had changed profoundly by the eighteenth century, when 'the power of population' was seen to exceed the productive 'power in the earth'. This later turned into an argument on overpopulation and the abandonment of restrictive solutions in famine management.

SOCIETY PAGES

Cultural irrationality surrounding food becomes especially evident during famines, which was well exemplified by Timo Myllyntaus' account on the attempts to introduce substitute foods to Finnish peasants. Rye bread was a staple food for the peasants, but Finland was not capable of producing such amounts of cereals, even in good years, making its society extremely vulnerable. Nevertheless, attempts to introduce mushrooms and lichen bread as a substitute met a strong resistance from the population, who would not utilise these alternatives even during the Great Finnish Famine of 1866 to 1868. Resistance against certain cultural or social aid systems in times of hunger manifests also in the absence of solidarity between different social groups or even between the peasants themselves. Speaking about the Estonian famines, Kersti Lust explained the influence of constant hunger on the society in late nineteenth century: although communal granaries existed, feeding the animals was considered more important than feeding the family members of the poor. Ülle Tarkiainen explained that taking care of the old had been an obligation of their families in Estonia until the abolition of serfdom in 1816–19, whereas afterwards the system shifted towards legal agreements within families.

How much the Russian Imperial authorities cared about famine and health in their Baltic and Finnish provinces brought heated debates among the audience. On one hand, we could see that, on local level, not much was done to improve the situation of the peasants but, on the other, the central authorities were increasingly interested in managing food scarcity. Marten Seppel's presentation analysed the contents of placards and found that, from the eighteenth century onwards, there was a rising number of regulations on food and that establishing a state granary system was seen as a solution. Mati Laur argued that the intervention of authorities was crucial for preventing the arrival of typhus in Estonia, Livonia and Prussia in the late eighteenth century, since police ordinances established a thorough control of movement on the southern border of Livonia and the border between Estonia and Russia.

The age-old debate on social versus climatic causes of famine surged during this conference as well. In the severe conditions of northern latitudes, where environmental stress is already relatively high under normal conditions, the correlation between extreme weather events and mortality cannot be denied. Heli Huhtamaa performed a correlation analysis between paleoclimatological data based on tree-rings, existing temperature measurements and recorded grain prices and reconfirmed the intuition that, the further north, the higher the correlation between the extreme weather events and crop failure. Priit Raudkivi's calculations showed that, even if the exact reasons for mortality are not completely known, discrete exceptional events such as the eruption of Laki volcano in 1783 caused extraordinarily high mortality rates in Estonia, as elsewhere in Europe. Raili Allmäe's presentation made it clear that further natural science information on famine could be provided by the study of bones with the methods of physical anthropology that enable us to reconstruct population

structure and the most impacted-on population groups, but also changes in type of diet through the deceased's life, or malnutrition. Liise Lehtsalu's material on Bologna exemplified the unequal environmental burden on the residents of early modern Bologna. While environmental injustice is well documented in modern urban environments, it was interesting to see disease, food scarcity and 'otherness' concentrating in very limited space in an early modern city.

All in all, many different ways of approaching the problem of bodies in history, including environmental, social and cultural history, were discussed during the three conference days. The conference was framed by thematic excursions emphasising the importance of archaeology, art and food history. In spring 2015, KAJAK will continue the discussion in a Graduate School concentrating on animal bodies in a transdisciplinary perspective (<http://eseh.org/summer-school-animals-in-transdisciplinary-environmental-history/>)

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KATI LINDSTRÖM

KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden / University of Tartu, Estonia

ULRIKE PLATH

Tallinn University, Estonia