

## Report on the conference 'The uses of environmental history'

This conference, held in the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge, aimed to provide some space to reflect on the achievements, diversity, and direction of environmental history, especially in its varied national, international and continental contexts. While the field has gained wide recognition its institutional presence in the UK in particular, and even more so in history departments, remains weak. We wished to examine the progress and potential of a field that in method and inclination is inherently cross—disciplinary, and in turn examine the implications of that cross-disciplinarity for the field's development. To this end, the conference gathered together thirteen speakers from the field of history, history of science, geography, and anthropology. The papers ranged from reflective pieces from established scholars (such as Chris Bayly, Kirsten Hastrup and Bill Adams) on the potential of their work for environmental history, to presentations of major ongoing research project (such as Poul Holm on fisheries and Fiona Watson on working across the natural and social sciences), and also provided a opportunity for new researchers to showcase a range of material in short papers and posters. The conference attracted around 75 attendees, from the United Kingdom, continental Europe and North America, including some of the leading figures in the field. The conference was held as part of the ongoing commitment at the Centre for History and Economics in Cambridge to its 'Documenting Environmental Change' project, devoted to promoting and advancing the interdisciplinary study of historical environmental change. This has been running since a first meeting held at Clare hall, Cambridge, in 1999, and maintains the website [www.envdoc.org](http://www.envdoc.org). A series of meetings has been held on 'The uses of environmental history' theme in Cambridge during 2005, and the conference provided the culmination of this series. They have already led to output in a working paper delivered by project co-ordinators Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde at the Scandinavian Environmental History conference in Türku, Finland, in September 2005. This will appear in modified form in the journal *Environmental History*. A major edited volume based around the meeting series will also appear, it is hoped, in 2007.

The first session, 'Imagined Environments', began with a wide-ranging and highly stimulating paper by Professor Bill Adams of the Department of Geography in Cambridge, 'Habitat, Possession and Community: reflections on the history of conservation ideas'. He alluded especially to the development of national parks and the idea of a 'pristine' environment in the context of colonial expansion, forced removal of indigenous peoples, military management and monitoring techniques, and prospects for more inclusive and successful habitat management in the future. Its disciplinary and thematic range provided an entirely appropriate and thought-provoking opening to the events. This was followed by a paper by Sverker Sörlin (Royal Institute for Technology, Stockholm), 'Warm Weather and Cold War: On the Proto-politics of Climate Change'. Sörlin's paper examined the scientific and paradigmatic contexts of the development of 'foundation myths' of modern environmentalism, focusing on the discourse of climate change in the mid-twentieth century (with, as with Adams, some recognition of the importance of military funding for meteorology in this period). He demonstrated how the field practices and paradigms employed by glaciology in its understanding of 'global warming' loss ground to meteorological approaches, highlighting the importance of understating the role of disciplinary practice in shaping our perceptions of environmental change.

Session two was entitled 'Global environmental histories'. The first speaker was geographer Georgina Endfield from the University of Nottingham, with her paper, "The pernicious calamities that occasion...hunger": climate variability and social vulnerability in colonial Mexico'. Endfield's paper addressed the gains to be made in understanding environmental change and its impact by studying climatological data provided by the natural sciences alongside the documentary record, illustrated by her work on a large comparative project on early modern Mexico. She also dealt extensively with controversies around the idea of 'determinism' in historical change. This provoked some lively debate on the appropriateness of data interpretation and the kind of controls that are required. Endfield was followed by leading environmental historian Richard Grove, and his paper 'Imperialism and environmental change; unearthing the origins and evolution of global environmental history'. Grove provided a *tour de force* on the 'global' origins of many strands of environmental history, illustrating in particular the importance of wartime and colonial experience for developing ideas about change. The work provided a strong counter-narrative to genealogies of the field that stress the importance of the United States. The session closed with a clear and critical discussion of the development of environmental history in Latin America, by Stefania Gallini from the National University of Colombia in Bogota, emphasising the influences of environmental and political struggles on its progress.

An evening reception and headline talk were held at St. Catharine's College. Professor Kirsten Hastrup of the University of Copenhagen delivered a paper on, 'Destiny and Decision: Icelandic Lessons for Environmental History'. She provided both a theoretical account of a new 'topographical turn' in the social sciences and anthropology that placed study of human – environmental interactions at the centre of social understanding; and drew her studies of pre-modern Iceland to illustrate the role of the interaction of mentalities and ecology in determining, in this case, long-term social decline and disruption.

The conference resumed on Saturday 14 January with four brief papers in a new researchers session. Peter Alagona (UCLA) spoke on 'Environmental history and ecological science: where do we stand?'; Tim Cooper (St. Andrews) outlined progress in a major AHRC-funded research project on 'Waste and the urban environment'; Dorothee Brantz (German Historical Institute, Washington DC), in her paper 'Where are the animals in environmental history?' lamented that they were rarely present, though this drew contrary opinions from some members of the audience; and finally Wilko Graf von Hardenberg (Cambridge) spoke on his doctoral project, 'Modifications of rights to resources in fascist Italy'.

The third main speaker session saw two papers from North America-based presenters. Under the rubric of 'Space, Polity and Environment', first of all Marc Cioc (Santa Cruz) delivered a talk entitled 'A River Runs through It: What Environmental History Has Meant to the History of Rivers, and Vice Versa'. He gave a stimulating and clear overview of the history of rivers and especially river modification with its environmental and economic consequences in central Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Cross-border themes were also pursued by Graeme Wynn & Matthew Evenden (University of British Columbia) in their paper, 'Fifty-four, Forty, or Fight? Writing within and across boundaries in North American Environmental History', examining the development of Canadian environmental history in part in relation to the relative prominence in its larger neighbour. The report was promising, but cautious as to the development of a discipline that had developed rather later than south of the 49<sup>th</sup>

parallel, and more often in geography departments; but now showed more vigour and an expanding range of themes.

After lunch came the fourth session, 'New histories, new methods: taking stock of the environment'. On the basis of an on-running AHRC research project at the University of Stirling, Fiona Watson (Stirling), in 'Crossing the Two Cultures barrier: Environmental History and the Natural Sciences in the 21st century', weighed the practicalities and possibilities of the often difficult interaction of the human and natural sciences. She argued strongly for a cross- rather than inter-disciplinary approach to research, where the specific qualities of each discipline were not eroded or obscured, and the approaches of each did not undermine the methodological rigour of practitioners in other field. Watson argued that projects needed to be systematically planned with experts from each relevant field who nevertheless did not compare results during the process of data gathering and interpretation, to prevent unintentional biases creeping into analyses. This was followed by Professor Robert Dodgshon (Aberystwyth), speaking on 'Does the environmental history of mountain areas have its own agenda?' His answer was affirmative, and he sought to provide a model of the peculiar problems facing rural mountain communities, and the impact of management strategies on local ecologies. Finally, Poul Holm (University of Southern Denmark) spoke on 'The uses of models and narrative in (marine) environmental history', providing insights into, and an overview of, the major and highly original global research project on the 'History of marine animal Populations'. He was able to display a large and hugely impressive developing dataset indicating fisheries history over several centuries in different parts of the globe, offering substantive research material and raising rich methodological possibilities for further research.

The final session opened with a reflective paper by Professor Chris Bayly (Cambridge), drawing on his extensive work on South Asian and global history to situate environmental history within newly developing narratives of world historical change; and making the point that history should always, perhaps, be environmental history in the same way that all history must situate itself within world history. A final discussion was led by Alan Baker, who highlighted geography's continuing interdisciplinary preoccupations.

The conference provided lively and engaging papers that prompted a great deal of enthusiasm and interest among the audience; indeed the audience displayed a consistent interest and engagement across the entire one and a half days of the meeting. One theme that became apparent was the relative commonality of interest, despite people working in widely varying field and far-flung corners of the globe; and indeed, a commonality of interest that emerged despite a reluctance of some participants to label themselves as environmental historians. The meeting was particularly instructive in bringing to this international audience perspectives from Latin America, South Asia, Europe – and indeed on the Earth's seas and oceans, in a field that has largely been viewed through a prism and set of canonical works derived from scholars in the United States. Nevertheless, despite much more concerted efforts by scholars to work across disciplines and widely variant types of source material, it is also clear that some questions that were raised – about the defining concepts of environmental history, its prospects in different national contexts, and how scholars can productively collaborate in the future – are only being raised, and are very far from even an open-ended resolution.

The conference packed in a significant amount of papers, and provided an excellent showcase for environmental history as it currently stands. There was some regret that

there was not more time available for discussion, but we certainly anticipate further discussions as a consequence of the meeting and related publications.

Paul Warde, Pembroke College, 2006.