

# Environment and History

Special Virtual Edition:

**Natures in  
Between**



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Cover: Goethe facing a grave monument, cut paper, 1780 ([de.wikipedia.org](http://de.wikipedia.org)).  
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# Environment and History

## Special Virtual Edition: 'Natures in Between'

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## A Scholarly Slice of ‘Natures in Between’: Samples from the Vault of Environment and History

This ‘virtual issue’ represents an inaugural foray for *Environment and History* and a somewhat unnerving one for an environmental historian used to tackling the material world at some part of the editorial process. Our theme here – rather appropriately – is ‘Natures in Between’, a salient tagline that pays heed to the cybernetic stylings of a ‘virtual’ issue and also invokes various forms of borderland terrain: political, ecological, cultural and technological. Significantly, this foray into the ‘electronic frontier’ of *Environment and History* provides us with a opportunity to delve into an archival record 22 years in the making, locating old favourites and digging out forgotten papers in a process of historiographical metal-detecting.

The theme of this issue – of course – reflects the organising banner of the forthcoming ESEH conference (Zagreb, June–July 2017) and its intention to think about how humans have modified the planet in various ways to create ‘contact or conflict zones’ that involve cultural communications, the exchange of materials and practices, ideological collisions or military clashes, along with a complex array of human–environmental relationships. In scanning the archives to find suitable papers to include here, the main editorial difficulty I faced was one of selection. As it turns out, the idea of ‘Natures in Between’ has been a rich and sustained vein of scholarship throughout our print run, from the earliest issue to the most recent volume. Here, then, are assembled fifteen papers that collectively speak to the ‘multiple uses’ of environmental spaces by *homo sapiens* as well as a multitude of approaches, contexts and conclusions that inform the central concept of ‘Natures in Between’.

Our first paper, ‘In Our Own Image: The Environment and Society as Global Discourse’ by Michael Redclift, dates back to 1995 and the first issue of *Environment and History*. Here Redclift convincingly demonstrates how the environment is a mental as well as material fixture. By uncovering the ways in which Science (in particular) has manufactured the environment as ‘intellectual capital’, the paper argues for the importance of recognising multiple understandings of global environmental change. Read in the terms of the thematic wrapper of this virtual issue, Planet Earth is perhaps the ultimate ‘contact zone’. Our second entry, from Donald Worster, entitled ‘The Two Cultures Revisited: Environmental History and the Environmental Sciences,’ dates back to Volume 2. Notable for its investigations of the ‘new’ field of environmental history, Worster’s paper points to the importance of a subject that provides a space for scientists and humanities scholars to congregate. The third paper, from Melissa Leach and Cathy Green, places focus firmly on the ways in which gender analysis can usefully inform studies of power, property and labour relations. As such, ‘Gender and Environmental History: From Representation of Women and Nature to Gender Analysis of Ecology

and Politics,' elaborates on a developing scholarly discourse that seeks to explore processes of disenfranchisement and marginalisation, in other words, the 'voices in between'. 'Environmental History and the Challenges of Interdisciplinarity: An Antipodean Perspective', a paper from Volume 9, completes the first section of our offerings by pointing to the challenges as well as the boons of a scholarship 'in between'. Fortunately, authors Eric Pawson and Stephen Dovers present a working solution based around 'intersections' (they identify four themes – mutual understanding; spatial scale and locale; time and change; and the environment and agency – and our readers will no doubt come up with more) that offer useful points of cross-subject convergence.

The next group of papers ranges widely over matter and space to highlight both the gaps and the translations between environmental and cultural worlds. In 'Weeds, People and Contested Places', by Neil Clayton (also in Volume 9) the (literally) thorny categorisation of 'good' and 'bad' plants is explored with a view to illuminating how particular horticultural wrangles created New Zealand as a place of biotic contest. Kim McQuaid, meanwhile, looks at the way environmental issues were framed (and forgotten) in the age of the space race. 'Selling the Space Age: NASA and Earth's Environment, 1958–1990', which first appeared in Volume 12, demonstrates how an elite cadre of NASA scientists effectively ignored 'earthly concerns' in their unyielding desire to create a 'human spaceflight culture'. Cross-fertilisation is the subject of the next paper – 'Out of the Woods and into the Lab: Exploring the Strange Marriage of American Woodcraft and Soviet Ecology in Czech Environmentalism' – from Petr Jehlicka and Joe Smith. Published in Volume 13, this piece explores the variegated roots of environmental awareness in the Czech Republic, finding grassroots and romantic concerns for nature conservation sitting alongside official scientific discourses and coded references to the frontier mythology of the trans-Mississippi United States. From Volume 14, Heather Goodall's 'Riding the Tide: Indigenous Knowledge, History and Water in a Changing Australia' points to further complexities in the assembling of environmental knowledge by highlighting the value of indigenous perspectives (or Traditional Environmental Knowledge [TEK] as it is labelled in modern environmental analysis) as well as the problematic consequences of reading that knowledge in an ahistorical way. Evidence from the upper Darling River region in Australia, she argues, suggests the value in charting an evolving indigenous viewpoint, especially as to how traditional strategies for conservation might alleviate modern hydrological crises.

Our next group of papers conjure with 'Natures in Between' in terms of hybridity, causality and conservation doctrine, finding new possibilities for understanding such issues as urban-rural networks, disaster resilience and biodiversity management in exploring the eco-cultural entanglements of the past. 'Landscape and Ambience on the Urban Fringe: From Agricultural to Imagined Countryside' by Joseph Goddard (Volume 15) elaborates on the

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idea of ‘penurbia’, a space somewhere between city and country that sports a degree of rural aesthetic but ‘thinks’ in urban terms. For Uwe Luebken and Christof Mauch, editors of a Special Issue on Risk and Disasters (Volume 17), the subject of natural catastrophe presents a useful way of exploring how social, scientific, economic and cultural processes impact on the vulnerability of human systems (see their ‘Uncertain Environments: Natural Hazards, Risk and Insurance in Historical Perspective’). For Drew A. Swanson, meanwhile, the pressing issue is one of wildlands management and the problems of conflating ‘biodiversity’ with endangered species and habitat protection. Published in Volume 18, ‘Endangered Species and Threatened Landscapes in Appalachia: Managing the Wild and the Human in the American Mountain South’ reveals how, in one ecological community, campaigns to preserve particular species worked to the detriment of other animals (and humans) within a complex ecological system.

The last four papers included here are from our most recent volumes, and ponder questions of historical memory, landscape change and unintended consequences: all important thematic motifs in the study of ‘Natures in Between’. Karen Middleton argues for the importance of the historical record (and, in particular, for the importance of reminiscence, fuzzy narrative and memory) in understanding environmental worlds. ‘Renarrating a Biological Invasion: Historical Memory, Local Communities and Ecologists’ documents how a biological control programme against ‘Malagasy cactus’ in 1920s Madagascar was powerfully remembered and recast during in the 1980s and 1990s as part of a controversy surrounding another exotic and extremely invasive species of prickly pear. In ‘The Aesthetics of the Volga and National Narratives in Russia’, Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted examines the historical development of an iconic river to show how visions of romanticism, nationalism and modernity played out along its course. The penultimate paper here, ‘Borderland, No-Man’s Land, Nature’s Wonderland: Troubled Humanity and Untroubled Earth’ finds ‘other-than-human nature’ in unusual places. As author Peter Coates argues, whereas humanity has often been seen as the source of environmental malaise (our second article from Donald Worster concludes thus), at various sites of military-industrial strife – his ‘borderlands, militarised landscapes, shatter zones, forbidden zones and other sites of upheaval and trauma’ – other species have flourished in the absence of *homo sapiens*: civilian, leaving a complicated eco-cultural footprint alongside unresolved separatist narratives of ‘history’ and ‘nature’. The last paper here is a most recent offering from Volume 23: ‘Engineering Edens on this “Rivered Earth”? A Review Article on Water Management and Hydro-resilience in the British Empire, 1860s–1940s’. Here, James Beattie and Ruth Morgan explore various regimes of fresh water management in the British Empire, finding diverse ecologies, a disconnect between colonial aspirations and abilities in ‘controlling’ water, and an overarching theme of ‘hydro-resilience’.

The forthcoming ESEH conference promises further (and lively) debate on the topic of borderlands spaces, contact/conflict zones and the ‘multiple uses’ of environments in historical, contemporary and future contexts. This brief review of the papers in our vaults presents *Environment and History* as a special sort of ‘contact environment’, one whose nature has the study of ‘Natures in Between’ firmly at its core.

KAREN R. JONES



# Confessions of an Enthusiastic Chair

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It is a privilege to serve as the chair of the programme committee for a major international conference. This is a job which can give a proper sense of the directions the discipline is embracing. With some conceit, one might even think that it can offer the opportunity not just to understand but to contribute to shaping the field.

With more than 400 submissions, the 2017 European Society for Environmental History Conference in Zagreb is already a success. The number of submissions illuminates the good health of our field in Europe and worldwide. Hence, where is environmental history going? An obvious answer is that we are going to Zagreb and, I would argue, this is not only a geographical destination. For a long time environmental history has been an Anglo-Saxon business. Indeed, despite the precocious intuitions of the French historiography, as a self-conscious field environmental history found its home especially in the Anglo-Saxon world both at global level – its considerable success in the United States – and at continental level. However, the diffusion of a discipline does not occur only as a spontaneous spread of seeds or spores; the European Society for Environmental History has deliberately fostered an inclusive policy aiming to see all continental regions involved in its activities. The Zagreb conference goes precisely in that direction. What does it imply to expand the environmental history field beyond the Anglo-Saxon world, or, we could also say, beyond the centre-north European barycentre? The first and perhaps most obvious consideration is that Eastern Europe brings a different story of post-war continental development. An environmental history of Europe has to deal with a continent split in two by the Iron Curtain, with two different economic and political systems but also with two divergent narratives embedded in landscapes and bodies. Too often Europe has been reduced to a narrow portion of itself, erasing the multiple socioecologies which make the variegated puzzle of our common history. Indeed, this diversity will traverse the ESEH conference in Zagreb, with a significant presence of papers on Eastern Europe. Since its inception, the community of European environmental historians has had to deal with the twofold challenge of a plurality of languages – something which did not affect our North American counterpart even in its transnational effort between the US and Canada – and of national contexts, with their legacies of laws, institutions and cultures. I believe this is still a relevant issue; obviously

it forces most of us to express ourselves in a foreign, imperial language which sometimes seems to be dictating not only rhetorical constructs and mysterious sounds but also conceptual tools and scholarly hierarchies. The inclusion of a more complex geography is a remarkable result, but it can still lead to a compartmentalised pluralism; staying in the metaphor of the puzzle, the pieces do show a unified image but each of them might still be almost independent. Including panels on regions that have been long neglected is a remarkable achievement; overcoming geographical compartmentalisation is – I believe – the next step. Just as one example, rather than hosting a panel on urban environmental history in a specific region, I would like to see panels in which histories from different contexts can meet, looking for connections as well as divergences. Although with no intention to diminish the relevance of presenting a paper and discussing with peers, I would also argue that a conference does not exhaust its functions in the few days of the event. Building a panel, connecting with scholars working on similar themes, and hopefully thinking on how to collectively develop the results of that interaction are all parts of what I would call the conference infrastructure, which – I believe – expands far beyond the venue, rooms and the PowerPoint projectors. ‘Natures in Between’ means also this: exploring relationships, connections and disjunctions which can transform a potentially infinite collection of case studies into a meaningful puzzle.

In terms of themes, it is a gigantic task doomed to almost certain failure to attempt an exhaustive summary of the topics of the 2017 ESEH conference. Most likely I will simplify, omitting something and misreading some proposals – after all, I am making my assumptions on the basis of short abstracts and titles. Thereby, better to dismiss immediately any claim of exhaustiveness and declare openly that what follows are only the very personal impressions and some unsolved dreams of the chair of a programme committee.

Building upon a quick reading of our programme, I would argue that there are a few themes which more clearly stick in our minds. It is interesting to notice that in several instances those themes are actually the same as those addressed in this special issue. This is the case with the ‘war and the environment’ theme, which is at the core of Peter Coates’ article as well as being one of the main threads of the 2017 conference, with at least six panels explicitly dedicated to this topic. I would not say that this is a new path for our field; from mid-1990s that Ed Russell started pointing in that direction,<sup>1</sup> while Richard Tucker’s untiring organisational effort has been instrumental in

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1. Edmund P. Russell, “‘Speaking of Annihilation’: Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914-1945”. *The Journal of American History* 82 (4) (1996): 1505-1529. A few years later Russell published his volume *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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bridging between military and environmental history.<sup>2</sup> I wish to believe that the relevance of war in our scholarship is also the result of an engaged attitude that pushes all of us to address the challenges of these worrying times. Environmental history was born with the ambition to be part of a broader societal mobilisation; since its very beginning it was haunted by the classic critique which opposes advocacy and scientific work, and, I would dare to say, political engagement and rigorous scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Personally, I have always believed that a good scholar is not a neutral one, but someone who interrogates – though not manipulates – the sources with a point of view, a thesis to test, a research question coming from her standpoint. Its finally attained academic recognition – although not everywhere, I must add – should not drive environmental history into a quiet and irrelevant academic corner.<sup>4</sup> In that same direction goes our decision as programme committee to reserve a special place in the conference for a discussion on the environment and migration nexus, dedicating the plenary roundtable to that theme. Although definitely connected with the invasive species topic as well as with the histories of colonial settlements, both present in this virtual special issue, I do believe that the environmental history of migrations is still quite absent in our field. In this respect, the 2017 conference is accomplishing a twofold aim: on one hand, we are suggesting an expansion of our research agenda towards a neglected theme; on the other, we are fostering the public – can I say political? – commitment of our discipline with the big challenges of the present. In a time when fences are erected again and the freedom of movement is insured only for goods and capitals, but not for women and men, we could not hold our conference in the Balkans without pointing at the so-called migration crisis (actually, I would argue that there is a poverty and war crisis, maybe a xenophobic and racist crisis, but no migration crisis). The plenary roundtable is dedicated to *Trespassing. Environmental History and the Challenges of Migrations*. Trespassing is proposed here as a metaphor for the liberating practices of going beyond the usual borders – disciplinary, national and even species-like – and challenging any authority. After all, every revolution, every radical change, must pass across the borders of what was not allowed to happen, or even to exist. Apart from the plenary roundtable, organised by the programme committee, migration is still a marginal topic in our conference – and the present virtual issue mirrors this situation. A simple search in the programme can confirm that impression: one can test how many

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2. Richard Tucker has been instrumental in building the Environment and War Network (<http://environmentandwar.com/>), as well as in organising events and collective publications on this theme.
  3. This issue is present in almost all the interviews with the founding figures of the field published by *Environmental History*. See <http://environmentalhistory.net/interviews/>.
  4. I have already elaborated on this matter in ‘Environmental History between Institutionalization and Revolution: A Short Commentary with Two Sites and One Experiment’, in *Environmental Humanities. Voices from the Anthropocene* eds Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

times the words ‘forest’ or ‘city’ appear in comparison with ‘migration’. One might wish that things will change in the near future, not in the sense of inverting the proportions – what is wrong in having engaging panels on forests and cities? – but actually adding more and new research themes, including migrations and many other relevant topics which still deserve more attention.

Together with wars, forests and cities, animals are another recurring theme in the Zagreb conference. Looking at the programmes of the previous ESEH conferences, it is clear that animals have not always been so present in our research. I would argue that the relevance of animals in the Zagreb conference might be related to the growing debate on agency in environmental history and in what I would define as a post-human turn in the humanities. However, while our discussion on agency has been more developed, it seems to me that the post-human/more than human turn is still rather under-addressed in environmental history – we have only one experimental panel contemplating multispecies ethnography. This might be somehow related to a surprisingly weak connection between environmental history and environmental humanities; of course, one can claim that there is no connection because there is identity, but I would not be convinced by such an argument. Environmental history is a founding pillar of the environmental humanities but the two do not coincide. In order to be relevant in shaping this growing field, environmental historians should engage with the challenges of an interdisciplinary arena, navigating the same kind of problems raised in this special issue by Pawson and Dovers. By only analysing the programme, it is difficult to rate the level of interdisciplinarity that will materialise in Zagreb. It is a fact that the conference has been organised by our colleagues in a geography department, signalling clearly that environmental history is not the private property of historians. I would have wished to have more contributions explicitly from non-historians, or, even better, panels, roundtables and papers reflecting on the possibilities to work across disciplinary fields. I realise there is a tension between different visions for the discipline. For some, flexibility and inclusiveness have transformed environmental history into a nomadic tent, so large and permeable that everything and everybody can claim to be part of it. As Mark Hersey has suggested, this can weaken the heuristic power of the discipline, leaving us without any specific methodological and theoretical tool which can constitute our contribution to history in general.<sup>5</sup> Although I do find this argument valuable and agree that it is extremely important to reflect on the methodological contributions of our field, I still believe that the tent metaphor is actually wonderful. It gives the impression of a mobile community, it

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5. I thank Mark Hersey for having shared with me his concerns. I also refer here to his intervention at the panel ‘State of the Field: Environmental History’ organised by Lisa Brady for the 2015 Organization of the American Historians in St. Louis. See Lisa Brady, ‘Has Environmental history lost its way’, published online at <http://www.processhistory.org/has-environmental-history-lost-its-way/>

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evokes the tradition of hospitality – something so much needed in the desert of current academic specialization; it is, obviously, weaker than a mansion or a fortress, but it is more adaptable and manageable. Perhaps, my point is that we no longer need the kind of disciplines we have been trained into and using for so long. Facing the current multifaceted crises, or we might say the Capitalocene,<sup>6</sup> which are the knowledges we need? Is the inter/multi/transdisciplinary approach still a doable option? It is not by a chance that since 2015 a collective of political ecologists, of which I am part, has started proposing the idea of undisciplining disciplines.<sup>7</sup> The bottom line is the rather modest result of multi/trans/inter disciplinarity – something that everybody who has been on the job market should know very well – and consequently the need to address the inherent limitations of our disciplinary way of organising not only university life, but our understanding of the world. Undisciplining means breaking free from the usual frames, experimenting while openly challenging the ‘rules’ of what has been formalized as the disciplined canon. Our political ecology collective held an international conference in Stockholm in 2015 entitled *Undisciplined Environments*, which gathered five hundred participants from all over the world and from any kind of background.<sup>8</sup> We had an artistic stream in the conference, with people performing, reading poems or exhibiting their visual works; an activist forum; and we invited an indigenous leader as one of our keynote speakers.

As chair of the ESEH conference I have tried to bring in some of these undisciplining options. I am happy to see that we will have a few experimental sessions in Zagreb and I truly hope we will develop more of this in the future. We will also host a two-day movie session, which might stimulate a debate not only on the themes of the films but also on the challenges and opportunities to think of engaging with peers and public beyond the text.

The truth is that I love trespassing, challenging the ordering of borders and people, exploring new paths and pushing the rules. I would not be content with a well-established discipline, safe behind impenetrable fortifications. Just to stay in the military metaphor, I prefer a guerrilla approach; I would like to see environmental historians not entrenched in a fortress but so blended into the landscape that it would be difficult to distinguish us from the rest. To paraphrase a famous image, we can strive to become a bigger and more fearsome fish in the ocean, or, instead, towards becoming the ocean, entering everywhere and continuously changing to the shapes of land and the light of the sun.

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6. I am employing here Jason Moore’s counter-definition of the Anthropocene.

7. I am referring here to the European network of political ecology – Entitle (<http://www.political ecology.eu/>).

8. The website of the conference is <http://www.ces.uc.pt/undisciplined-environments/>



# With and Without Borders

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The continent of Europe is filled with borders. There are 48 countries (even more if you divide the UK into constituent nations) that attempt to co-exist on the little over ten million square kilometres of territory. Historically we know that these borders have been contested over and over again: from the great expansion of the Roman Empire 1,000 years ago to the creation of the USSR and its eventual dissolution, from the Norman Conquest of England to the two World Wars.

Croatia, the location of the European Society for Environmental History 2017 biennial meeting, has been perpetually caught up in border struggles – at different points in its history Croatia has been part of the Rome Empire, Ottoman Empire, Hungary, Austria-Hungary, Yugoslavia, as well as an independent kingdom and modern country. No place in Croatia is located more than seventy kilometres from an international border. It is no wonder, then, that when a group from Croatia offered to host the ESEH 2017 meeting, they chose a theme to highlight that history: ‘Natures in between. Environments in areas of contact among states, economic systems, cultures and religions’. The organisers wanted to push environmental historians to think about the consequences of borders and other areas of contact.

As President of ESEH, I was pleased that *Environment and History* decided to make a special virtual issue to highlight papers on this theme. Nature has often been caught in between – captured as a bystander in social, religious, ethnic, and ideological conflict and contact. Species like the prickly pear in Madagascar from Middleton’s study in this collection and the wildflowers-turned-weeds in Clayton’s work stress that zones of contact involve more than the human, even if unintentional. Nature has also been intentionally harnessed at meeting points to fulfill human needs, whether those needs were physical (as in the colonial reshaping of rivers discussed by Beattie and Morgan in this collection) or ideological (as shown by Zeisler-Vralsted’s analysis of the Volga River in this collection). The historical legacies of contact and conflict leave us at times with a Nature pressed in between.

At the same time, Nature in those in-between places is not helpless. Nature may in fact have a heyday with the disturbed spaces created by humans for entirely other purposes, as evidenced in Coates’ investigation of militarised landscapes. Nature should not be portrayed as only a victim in the exchanges zones built for humans.

In envisioning what happens at points of contact, the program for ESEH 2017 in some senses turns the theme ‘Nature in between’ on its head, emphasising instead how humans may be the ones caught in between. From the keynote lecture by Rob Nixon, who has stressed the slow environmental consequences of modernity, to a plenary panel on ‘Trespassing. Environmental history and the challenges of migrations’, these histories have immediate relevance for ongoing social and environmental dilemmas. At the conference we will be challenged to think about exchanges of resources, ideas, people, and species over the long history of Europe and beyond and how that places both us and Nature in tough spots.

I will close by challenging the theme to claim that Nature is not in between, but rather all-encompassing. Nature may be squeezed by humans in some ways, but that chokehold inevitably affects us. This is why attempts to downplay the risks of climate change to humans and other existing species is dangerous. Nature as an abstract entity will survive everything, but the specific Nature that makes our lives possible may not. Nature may be stuck in between political and ideological struggles in the twenty-first century, as it has for millennia before that, but in the end, Nature is the one without borders.