

What is Environmental Humanities?

Environmental humanities is the study of the interactions between people and nature in the past, and how they have changed with time. African Network of Environmental Humanities includes:
The environmental history of Africa,
Environmental humanities being done in Africa and other places
Environmental humanities that compare Africa with other places

INTRODUCTION

Environmental humanities is a rich collection of inquiries into the transformation of the natural world by human action and the consequences for both nature and people. It takes nature as an actor in history as much as it takes people as actors in nature. It aims at a synthesis, although the weighting given to human or natural agency varies considerably between inquiries.

It overlaps many areas of the humanities, the sciences and the social sciences and draws in archeologists, foresters, geographers, historians and scientists of many sorts, for example. It includes or is closely related to fields such as agricultural history, forest history, garden history and historical climatology.

Environmental history is often stimulated by a concern for current environmental problems. If we know more about how they arose, perhaps we can do better in the future.

What is Environmental History? By: K.J.W. Oosthoek

1. Origins

Environmental history is a rather new discipline that came into being during the 1960's and 1970's. It was a direct consequence of the growing awareness of worldwide environmental problems such as pollution of water and air by pesticides, depletion of the ozone layer and the enhanced greenhouse effect caused by human activity. In this development historians started to look for the origins of the contemporary problems, drawing upon the knowledge of a whole field of scientific disciplines and specialisms which had been developed during the preceding century (Thoen 1996: 1; Worster 1988: 190; Verstegen & van Zanden 1993: 11). We can distinguish two important 19th century origins of environmental history: ecology and geography. In modern environmental history, ecological concepts are used to analyse past environments and geography used to study the ever-changing face of the earth. The surface of the earth is constantly changing and reshaping under geological, climatic, biological and human forces. At the beginning of the twentieth century geographers stressed the influence of the physical environment on the development of human society. The idea of the impact of the physical environment on civilisations was first adapted by historians of the Annales school to describe the long term developments that shape human history (Bramwell 1989: 40-41; Worster 1988: 306; Burke 1991: 14-15).

Two other roots of environmental history are the archaeology and anthropology of which the

latter introduced ecology into the human sciences. The emergence of world history, with works by McNeill and Thomas (McNeill: 1967; Thomas 1956) among others, introduced interdisciplinary and continental wide, even world scale studies into history. Ecology and the interdisciplinary method became later two important features of environmental history (Thoen 1996: 2).

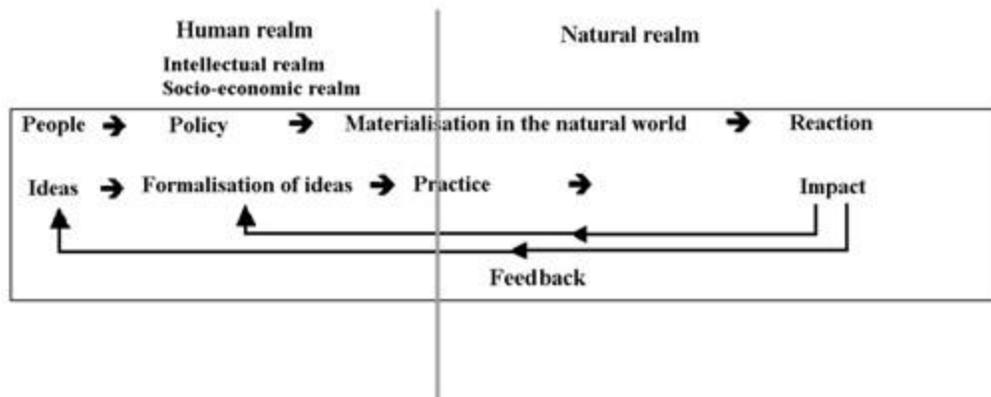
These were the foundations on which environmental history was founded in the 1960's. Rodrick Nash coined the term environmental history in an article about the impact of past human societies on the environment published in the *Pacific Historical Review* in 1972¹. Nash's writings were initially unilateral: he studied the impact of human society on the natural environment. Thanks to the work of Worster, Pfister, Brimblecombe, Ponting and others, environmental history became matured, what means less unilateral and influenced by political motives (Worster, 1988; Pfister & Brimblecombe, 1992; Ponting, 1991). At the present day environmental history is an international and interdisciplinary undertaking.

2. What is environmental history?

Environmental history is always about human interaction with the natural world or, to put it in another way, it studies the interaction between culture and nature. The principal goal of environmental history is to deepen our understanding of how humans has been affected by the natural environment in the past and also how they have affected that environment and with what results. This is called the bilateral approach of environmental history (Smout 1993: xiii.; Verstegen & van Zanden 1993: 11). The most common definition of environmental history is as follows: environmental history is studying the interaction between humans and the environment in the past. To study the relationships between humans and the surrounding world, we must try to understand how the interaction between the two works.

Donald Worster has recognised three clusters of issues to be addressed by environmental historians (1988: 289-308). The first cluster deals with the human intellectual realm consisting of perceptions, ethics, laws, myth and the other mental constructions related to the natural world. Ideas about the world around us influence the way we deal with the natural environment. Here we enter the second level of issues to be studied: the level of the socio-economic realm. Ideas have an impact on politics, policies and the economy through which ideas materialise in the natural world.

But the world is not static, so it reacts on our actions to influence the material world. With the impact of human actions the natural world we enter the third level of environmental history. This level deals with understanding nature itself, the natural realm. In the case of woodland history it is the way forest ecosystems have been working in the past and how they were changed by human actions. The impact of human actions on the natural world is causing a feedback that changes our ideas, policies, economy etc. In this way the natural world defines the limits of what we can do, and what not. Within this framework we try to change reactions we do not like and continue practices which, in our view, are successful. This model of the interaction between man and the environment depicts the concept of the separation between humans and nature. Although this division between the human and the natural realms is an artificial one, it can be a useful tool for the environmental historian in identifying important questions, the sources that might be able to answer the questions and the methods used to study these sources.



Model of the interaction between human culture and the natural environment

The fields of study in environmental history includes analysis of data on tides, winds, ocean currents, the position of continents in relation to each other and geology and includes the history of climate and weather and the pattern of diseases. Environmental history is also the story of human exploitation of the natural world. It is about the impact of agriculture on soil and landscape, the history of forests, the effects of hunting and grazing; but also about the environmental impact of mining, transportation, urbanisation and industrialisation. And last, but not least, environmental history is about unmasking myths and distorted perceptions of the past. Myths and false perceptions are not based on historical facts and can be highly influential, even in government and scientific circles. It is an important task of environmental history to correct these misconceptions of the past. It can help to understand our current problems better and to make proper decisions to deal with these problems, now and in the future (Smout 1993: xiii-xv).

3. The historian and environmental history

Environmental history is an interdisciplinary subject. That means that historians, scientists and other scholars must look over the boundaries of their own subject. The historian must be aware that he or she sometimes needs to apply some principles from the natural sciences, such as ecology, biology and forestry, to understand what happened in the past. However, this does not mean that the historian must become a scientist. He is and remains an historian with the task to master and understand the past as a key to a better understanding of the present. But to do so he or she must look over the boundaries of history and even the humanities and acquaint themselves with the nomenclature and principles of other disciplines, especially the natural sciences. This does not mean that they have to become experts in these fields, but to use it as a tool to get a better understanding of historical problems.

However, the contemporary valuation of environmental criteria is different from those used in the past. To analyse the impact of human action on the natural world in the past and the changes caused by this, a historian must use the modern principles of ecology and the environmental sciences. But this poses a threat to the way we interpret and value the past because notions as sustainability, equilibrium systems, biodiversity etc. are modern notions. Environmental historians, like any historian, must be aware that the present and its problems influence how we perceive the past. The historian is a product of his own age, and bound to it by the conditions of the times in which he lives. This can lead to a distorted or even false vision of the past. Therefore we must recognise the historically defined character of the values and ideas in our sources. We must try to prevent ourselves from projecting our contemporary ideas and values on the past

(Carr 1991: 21-24). It is to others to judge the actions of people in the past and try to learn from it.

4. European environmental history today

During the last 30 years environmental history grew from an interest of some historians and natural scientists into a full-fledged academic discipline. In the United States environmental history gained a firm institutionalised base which is reflected in the fact that the annual meetings of the [American Society for Environmental History](#), established in 1975, attracts over 500 participants. Environmental historical research in Europe is still fragmented but there are very promising and successful initiatives, both on the national and pan-European level. In 1986, the Dutch foundation for the history of environment and hygiene *Net Werk* was founded. One of the most important goals of this foundation was to improve the communication between Dutch researchers with an interest in environmental history. The foundation publishes four newsletters per year.

Since 1995, the White Horse Press in Cambridge (UK) is publishing a journal with the title *Environment and History*. As an interdisciplinary journal, *Environment and History* aims to bring scholars in the humanities and biological sciences closer together in constructing long and well-founded perspectives on present day environmental problems. The same can be said for the *Tijdschrift voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* (Journal for Environmental History), a combined Flemish- Dutch initiative published by the Academia Press in Gent, Belgium. This journal is mainly dealing with topics in the Netherlands and Belgium but it also has an interest in European environmental history. Each issue contains abstracts in English, French and German. In 1999 the Journal was changed into a yearbook for environmental history and since then every year a volume has been published. The aims and content of this annual book is similar to the former journal.

The first Institute for Environmental History in Europe is based at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. This institute plays an important role in co-ordinating research in Scotland and since its establishment in 1991, the Institute organised several conferences on woodland and environmental history. The purpose of the first conference in December 1992 was to demonstrate the breath and vitality of environmental history in Scotland. One of the spearheads of research in Scotland is woodland history. With this knowledge it is not surprising that the second conference held in April 1995 was on Scottish woodland history. Both conferences resulted in the publication of two books containing papers presented during the conferences. Titles of these books can be found in the [bibliography](#) section of this website.

In other European countries there must be similar initiatives as described above. The problem is that most environmental historians are not familiar with similar journals, and institutions that exist in other European countries. One of the difficulties is the language barrier that prevents historians from looking for environmental history books and journals in other European languages than their own or in English. In April 1999 a meeting was held in Germany to overcome these problems and to co-ordinate environmental history in Europe. This meeting resulted in the creation of the [European Society for Environmental History](#) (ESEH). Only two years after its establishment, ESEH held its first international conference in St. Andrews, Scotland. Around 120 scholars attended the meeting and 105 papers were presented on topics covering the whole spectrum of environmental history. The conference showed that Environmental History is a viable and lively field in Europe and since then ESEH has expanded to over 400 members and continues to grow. Furthermore ESEH has organised to more

international conferences attracting increasing numbers of scholars in 2003 and 2005. Also important for the further development of environmental history in Europe is the creation of an institutionalised base at University level. In 1999 the Centre for Environmental History was established at the University of Stirling. Today it continues as the AHRC Centre for Environmental History. The Centre is mainly a research institute, but also organises seminars and offers postgraduate training. In addition some history departments at European universities are now offering introductory courses in environmental history. Furthermore the first postgraduate courses in Environmental history were established at the Universities of Nottingham, Stirling and Dundee and more recently a *Graduierten Kolleg* was created at the University of Göttingen in Germany (see further: Winiwarter, 2004). For more information on environmental history teaching in Europe see [Studying Environmental History](#) in the student section of this website.

With all these initiatives the future of environmental history looks bright and it is to be expected that other universities in Europe will follow the example of Stirling, Nottingham and Göttingen.

Notes and bibliography

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