

# ХРОНИКА НАУЧНОЙ ЖИЗНИ

## Environmental History and Interdisciplinary Perspectives: The 8<sup>th</sup> Biennial ESEH Conference, 30 June — 3 July 2015

*ELENA A. KOCHETKOVA*

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Saint-Petersburg, Russia;  
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; lena-kochetkova2008@yandex.ru

The European Society for Environmental History is a terrific forum for environmental research. The network was established in 1999 to encourage research of environmental history in interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives. Today it includes more than 600 individual members representing a wide scope of disciplines, countries and continents. The Society supports diverse activities such as publishing the peer-reviewed journal *Environment and History*, an online forum *H-Environment* as well as holds biannual gatherings of scholars.

Its latest, the 8<sup>th</sup> ESEH Conference was organized between 30 June and 3 July 2015 in the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines in Versailles (France), a beautiful city with a diversity of parks and landscapes. The topic of this year conference was “Greening History: Studying the Environment across Discipline: Past, Present and Future”. Such broadly defined theme enabled the participants to tackle a broad chronology and a wide range of aspects. Four days of the conference offered an outstanding array of choice: about 300 papers presented by scholars from Europe, Americas, Asia, and Africa. The presentations were distributed across 89 parallel sessions. Along with traditional panels, there were posters with three-minute presentations and round tables.



Presentation by Neil Macdonald  
(University of Liverpool)  
(photo by Maxim Vinarsky)



Conference venue during the lunch-time (photo by Maxim Vinarsky)

The central aim of the conference, as defined by the organizers, was to bring together various experiences in methodology. Indeed, most of conference papers had an apparent interdisciplinary focus and provided a productive dialogue between different disciplines and approaches. The conference brought scholars from social, economic, technological, political and cultural history, sociology, and natural science. While the chronological focus of the conference was past, contemporary issues appeared to be of importance. It enabled the participants to connect the reflections on past and present processes as well as speculate on future developments.

The interdisciplinary character of the conference was stressed by a plenary lecture given by Dr. Jean Jouzel, a French glaciologist and climatologist who specializes on Antarctic and Greenland ice. Being a recipient of the highest French scientific award, the gold medal of National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS), today he is one of the most quoted scientists. The lecture presented the latest updates on the activities entailed after the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference held within Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris in 2015. The speaker focused on challenges of the agreement and possible solutions. He outlined a number of crucial problems such as global warming and carbon outlets as well as ways to overcome them. Among other things, he mentioned an intention of the convention to develop environment friendly transport and fuel as well as waste treatment and recycling.

Several common themes of all the presentations were very much in evidence. Environment in war conditions was one of well represented topics. The programme included such panels as “Environmental Histories of the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1793–1815” and “Environmental Histories of the First World War: The World beyond Europe” both orga-

nized by Richard Tucker from the University of Michigan, “Weather and Food during the Great War — Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability regarding Agro Food Chains 1914–1918” made by Daniel Burkhard from the University of Burn, and “Securing the Environment in Times of War” constituted from individual applicants. The papers on war environment covered different periods and regions and reflected on war damages to environment, interactions between humans and nature in war and its aftermaths. Among others, such issues as effects of the Napoleon wars on environment and society (Elisabeth Johann, Austrian Forest Association), impacts of militarization on rice cultivation in Egypt in 1793–1803 (Zoe Griffith, Brown University), environmental disputes during the Napoleonic war in Spain (Antonio Ortega Santos, University of Granada) were presented. Several presentations were focused on imperial dimensions, in particular, mineral extraction for strategic purposes and environment in European empires (Corey Ross, University of Birmingham), French agricultural policies in wartime Morocco (Graham Cornwell, Georgetown University), and the role of the USA in global food production in the First World War (Tait Keller, Rhodes College).

More colonial aspects were covered by a laconically titled panel “Colonies and Colonialism” which brought together scholars of the Third World colonialism and environment in German South West Africa and the question of climate improvement (Harri Siiskonen, University of Eastern Finland), Britain’s commercial activities and the extraction of resources in colonies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dimitrios Theodoridis, Gothenburg University) as well as the use of colonial land-grant documents and GIS to reconstruct soil carbon sequestration in 16<sup>th</sup> century Mexico (Andrew Sluyter, Louisiana State University).



Participants from the National Research University Higher School of Economics:  
Marina Loskutova, Margarita Dadykina, Elena Kochetkova, Julia Lajus

Several panels and papers were built around the role of experts in conceptualizing and use of natural resources. Some presentations enlarged our understanding of the interplay between expert knowledge and politics of states and research institutions. Thus, the session “Forestry Specialists in the Long 19th century and Their Understanding of Forest Ecology” examined such themes as discussions on the impact of deforestation in the Russian empire in the 19th century (Marina Loskutova, National Research University Higher School of Economics), the development of life and environmental sciences in the Imperial Saint-Petersburg Forestry Institute (Anastasia Fedotova, Russian Academy of Science), the debate on relation of forest and water and the role of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (Christian Lotz, Herder-Institut in Marburg). More precise focus on science and politics was given in the panel “Politics and Science in International Environmental Programmes, 1960s–1990s”. The presenters discussed UNESCO and the World Heritage Convention (Andrea Rehling, Leibniz-Institute of European History), nature conservation at the United Nations conference for the Human Environment in Stockholm as a marker of the role of science and politics (Simone Schleper, Maastricht University), the NATO environmental programme in 1969–1979 (Simone Turchetti, University of Manchester), experts on conservation and the politics of sustainable development in the 1980s–1990s (Hans Schouwenburg, Maastricht University). In sum, these papers signaled that to a large extent tackling environmental issues was a matter of smaller actors (experts) who had rather significant impact on influencing state and institutional policy.

Environment and resource use in non-democratic regimes was another topic at stake at the conference. The session “Good or Evil? The Environmental History of Dictatorships”, consisted of three panels, offered a variety of cases ranging from the Soviet Union to Latin America. Presenters stressed that although being quite exhausting for environment, dictatorships brought not only destructive, but also some positive moments on dealing with nature, such as control of pollution and preservation. In each presentation, it was obvious that the theme still requires further research and discovery of new sources. In the first sub-session “The Case of East-Central Europe in the Twentieth Century” presenters examined climate change of arable lands in the Great Hungarian Plain in the 20th century (Pinke Zsolt, University of Pécs), water management in Czechoslovakia (Štanzel Arnošt, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), and water pollution and protection discourses in socialist Hungary (Viktor Pál, Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration/New Europe College Bucharest). The second session was devoted to the Soviet Union. It included papers on the ecological restructuring of agriculture in the Russian South during the NEP period (Stephen Brain, Mississippi State University), water pollution and protection in the USSR between the mid-1950s and 1960s (Elena Kochetkova, National Research University Higher School of Economics / University of Helsinki), and pollution and protection discourses of water resources in Lithuanian SSR (Simo Laakkonen, University of Turku/Södertörn University).

Use of water resources in other countries and periods was considered in some more panels. Thus, “Rivers and Waterscapes in the Pre-modern World” gave a glance on the concepts of pre-modernity and modernity and their relation to environment. The panel examined such topics as Klagenfurt Drava and Sava River floods in preindustrial times (Hrvoje Petrić, University of Zagreb), a comparative analysis of England’s fenlands and New Spain’s Basin of Mexico (Vera Candiani, Princeton University), climate variability in the New Kingdom of Granada between 1690 and 1810 (Katherine Mora Pacheco, Giselle National University of Colombia) as well as the question of water use in Canada in the 17–18th centuries (Benjamin Furst, Université de Haute Alsace / Université de Montréal). Modern times were considered in the panel “Rivers and Waterscapes in the Modern World Room” which debated over flood control



in the Himalayas in the 20th century (Eric Strahorn, Florida Gulf Coast University), deep-sea mining and its influence on environment in the late 20th century (Ole Sparenberg, Universität des Saarlandes), water governance in the North-East India since the 19th century (Jagdish Lal Daar, Mizoram University, Aizawl).

National parks and preservation of species was another topic at the conference. Raf De Bont (Maastricht University) organized a panel “Science and the Spatiality of Conservation in the 20th Century”. In his presentation “Extinct in the Wild: Finding a Place for the European Bison, 1919–1945” discussed political meanings of preserving bison. The panel also discussed space and science on conservation’s islands on the Galapagos (Elke Ackermann, Leibniz Institute of European History), and the relation of conservation in the West and decolonization (Bernhard Gissibl, Leibniz Institute of European History).

As previously, the conference gave a space for papers which examined various aspects of national environment history and history of regions and networks. Thus, the Russian case was considered in a separate panel “The Environmental History of Russia”. It included papers on issues varying from the mid-16th to the early 20th century such as environment and Russian colonization of Kazan (Andrei Vinogradov, Kazan Federal University), landscapes of transportation in Russia in the first part of the 19th century (Aleksandra Bekasova, National Research University Higher School of Economics), water use in the industrial cities in Russia in the early age of industrialization (Aidar Kalimullin, Kazan Federal University), ecological education in kindergartens of the post-Soviet Yakutia (Carole Ferret, CNRS). Laurent Coumel (CERCEC, CNRS) organized a panel “An Ecological Turn in the USSR? Environmental Awareness in Late Soviet Politics and Society”, devoted to environmental policy in the Soviet period. Among the topics were the Upper Volga region (Laurent Coumel), land degradation and conservation on Kazakhstan (Isabelle Ohayon, CERCEC, CNRS) as well as problems related to the Aral Sea as a global environmental object (Raphael Jozan, LATTTS).

A roundtable “BRICS and Environmental History — Common Challenges and Historical Narratives” gave a rousing discussion on doing research on and in the BRICS countries. Today the network is entering quite fast into the field and offers new views and approaches to environmental history. The participants were Eunice Nodari (Federal University of Santa Catarina), Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center/LMU), Julia Lajus (National Research University Higher School of Economics), Lise Sedrez (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), Jane Carruthers (University of South Africa), Fei Sheng (Sun Yat-Sen University), and Ravi Rajan (University of California at Santa Cruz Eunice Nodari).

Although, the whole structure of the conference implied sharing experience in methodology, there were specific panels on new methods and ways of approaching environmental history. The panel “Seeing the Bigger Picture: Integrating Visual Studies and Environmental History” emphasized a set of visual methods. The themes included visual culture and anti-smoke campaigns in industrial Britain (Stephen Mosley, Leeds Metropolitan University), photographic visualizations of Victorian alkali waste (Jennifer Tucker, Wesleyan University), the aesthetics of fog in Britain in the post-war decade (Lynda Nead, Birkbeck College). There were also papers on law studies and application of environmental history (Nicole Graham, University of Technology Sydney), specific focus on historical sources (Inês Amorim, University of Porto), and interdisciplinary approaches (Susanne Klemm, Archeology and Communication AT; Dino Güldner, Klagenfurt University).

Quite unusual for the conference format were sessions on alternative tools and narratives which invited participants to watch and discuss films, such as short pictures “In the Shadows of Ebola” (the film by Gregg Mitman and Sarita Siegel), “Arresting the Petro-economy”,

in the session organized by Marco Armiero (KTH Royal Institute of Technology). Most movies shown at the conference dealt with environmental challenges of modern societies and stimulated discussions on their historical roots and future prospects.

The richness of the conference was also found in the roundtable plenary, organized in recognition of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War I. The table was titled "From Sarajevo to Versailles, and far beyond: Environmental History and the Centennial of World War I" and involved such scholars as Tait Keller (Rhodes College), Marco Armiero (KTH Royal Institute of Technology), Dorothee Brantz (Technical University of Berlin), Damien Baldin (Mission du centenaire de la Première Guerre mondiale), and Richard Tucker (University of Michigan Ann Arbor).

Several field trips were organized to explore surroundings through different perspectives. On their choice, participants took part in a trip on environmental history of the Louvre, the Palace of Versailles, the domain of Rambouillet to explore its biodiversity and natural heritage, the Vallée de Chevreuse natural park, a garden of the Museum National of Port Royal, and the Potager du Roi at Versailles, a laboratory for the management of nature. These activities enabled attendees to engage into exploring how Versailles reflects nature and imperial past, cultural heritage and its environmental implications as well as human-nature relations over time.

Lastly, the poster session held at the last day of the conference brought more than 30 posters presented both in a hall at display and in short talks. Posters covered a wide range of topics, including managing floods, food resources, digital humanities, visual studies in environmental research, influences of industry on nature, ecosystems, cross border influences, fishery, pest insects, history of biological and ecological researches among many others.

In general, all the presentations contributed to the discussion of a variety of environmental problems. Methodological issues and interdisciplinarity was very much in evidence. Organizing a meeting of this scale is undoubtedly an important achievement of the ESEH. The board members of the network and programme committee (chaired by Ellen Arnold) deserve all praise for bringing so many outstanding papers and interesting activities together.