Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (2025), 1–21
doi:10.1017/S0080440125100285

ROUNDTABLE

The Future of (Environmental) History: A Roundtable Discussion

Alexander Hibberts[1], Emma Yeo[1], Islay Grace Shelbourne[2], Jonathan David Roberts[3], Kirill Kartashov[4], Nick Pepper[5], Alex Worsfold[6], Robert Suits[7], Thomas Banbury[8] and Aakriti Suresh[9]

[1]History Department, Durham University, Durham, UK; [2]School of History, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK; [3]School of History and Faculty of Biological Sciences, University of Leeds, Leeds UK; [4]Department of History, University of York, York, UK; [5]Department of History, Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK; [6]School of History, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; [7]Department of History, University College London, London UK; [8]Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK and [9]Department of History, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

Corresponding author: Alexander Hibberts; Email: alexander.hibberts@durham.ac.uk

(Received 20 November 2024; accepted 23 June 2025)

Abstract

In April 2023, eighteen scholars from nine different subjects representing the humanities, natural and social sciences came together for a one-day workshop at St John's College, Durham. Despite our differences, all had one aim: the study of past environmental change and its effects on human societies. Talking across disciplinary divides, we discussed what environmental history is, how it may or may not contribute to tackling the climate crisis, and the problems of sources, scale and temporality. This article collects select conversations into a roundtable format split into four areas: scale, time and space, interdisciplinarity, and the future of environmental history. We argue that environmental history is more usefully understood not as a distinct sub-field of history, but as an interdisciplinary meeting place for innovative collaboration. This also presents a model for future research aimed at tackling the climate crisis at higher education institutions.

Keywords: environmental history; climate crisis; scale; temporality; space

Other Workshop Attendees

Robert Naylor, Louis Holland Bonnett, Camilla Allen, Lucy Lawrence, Fiona Banham, Matthew Kelly, Alex Dunhill and Serena Turton-Hughes.

Introduction

Alexander Hibberts

We live in an age of unprecedented crisis. In 1972, a group of social scientists produced twelve scenarios for the future.[1] The most infamous, Business as Usual, predicted that by the 2040s global economic growth would peak followed by a demographic crisis exacerbated by natural resource shortages. When published, this prognosis must have seemed devastating but distant. In 2023, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that 'human-caused climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe'.[2]

Stating facts, however, is easier than finding commensurate solutions. Historians are not the first point of call for policy-makers, strategists or the general public when thinking about climate change. It is certainly true that historians alone cannot solve the climate crisis. Nevertheless, to tackle such a complex, urgent problem demands multiple perspectives and cross-disciplinary collaboration within and beyond academia. Historians specialise in reconstructing and understanding the past, including historic climate change. We can offer data from the previous 10,000 years since the end of the last Ice Age, and beginning of the Holocene, when humanity began to impress itself permanently on the planet.

This article will explore the future directions of environmental history. Nonetheless, many of the topics addressed are relevant to all historical sub-fields – issues of scale, time, spatiality, positionality, presentism, sources and interdisciplinarity. Hence, in many ways, the predicaments facing environmental historians offer a microcosm of the challenges facing the entire historical discipline. The state of the sub-field is also a reflection of society. Like human society, environmental history stands at a crossroads. In 1995, Alfred Crosby claimed that historians before him had been 'purblind' to the role of the environment in human history.[3] The environment was, to them, a peripheral factor of little importance. By 2025, in part helped by the growing climate emergency, history and the environment are acknowledged as inextricably linked. Indeed, Donald Hughes has argued that environmental history now offers an 'essential perspective' not only on the past but on how socio-natural processes produced the 'present situation'.[4] Carolyn Merchant similarly suggests that humanities scholars, including environmental historians, can make critical contributions to climate change debates and 'illuminate options for the future'.[5] Nevertheless, there is a stark dissonance between environmental history's increasing relevance and the number of historians explicitly employed to teach it. Few professed environmental historians are employed *as* environmental historians. Often, they must wear other, sometimes borrowed, hats. Instead, an expertise in environmental

[1]See Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jørgen Randers and William Behrens, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (Washington DC, 1972).

[2]Hoesung Lee and José Romero *et al., Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers* (Geneva, 2023), 5.

[3]Alfred Crosby, 'The Past and Present of Environmental History', *American Historical Review*, 100 (1995), 1181.

[4]Donald Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* (Cambridge, 2016), 135.

[5]Carolyn Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability* (New Haven, 2020), 1–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

history – or more commonly the broad umbrella of environmental humanities – is but one facet of a desired candidate's skillset.

This reality is reflective of a broader historiographical challenge facing the sub-field and one previously encountered by past newcomers, such as social and economic history, or historical geography. These were distinctive sub-fields of historical scholarship whose calls to action have been so persuasive that their ideas, methodologies and source bases have been embraced by most practitioners. Even if historians do not always call upon them, or work within their remit, they recognise their importance. For instance, historians can no longer dismiss calls made by social and economic historians to write more democratic and inclusive histories. This acceptance, however, sometimes comes at a price. Unlike their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, historical geographers are now comparatively rare. Some have also lamented the decline of economic history, although others, such as Christina Romer and Joel Mokyr, argue that the picture is more complex.[6] This is because economic historians may be counted within different types of history or other disciplines entirely, including economics. As Andrew Seaton notes, those researching environmental history similarly often find themselves 'buried' within other sub-fields or departments.[7] The enduring influence of landscape, rural and urban historiographies in Britain has meant that those who, in other circumstances, would have called themselves environmental historians have found alternative intellectual homes. In comparison, environmental history in the United States can trace a self-conscious pedigree stretching back to the 1970s.

A new definition of environmental history as an interdisciplinary meeting place may allow greater innovation and, more importantly, enhance cohesion among its practitioners. John R. McNeill once asserted that environmental history 'is as about interdisciplinary as intellectual pursuits can get'.[8] J. M. Powell dares to go further, arguing that environmental history is not a sub-field of history but rather an interdisciplinary methodology.[9] At our workshop in April 2023, the common goal of studying past interactions between human society and the natural world offered an inclusive setting for a diverse subject range. Not allowing environmental history to be swallowed up into broader historical practice enables it to be taken out of specific disciplinary or sub-disciplinary boundaries. In doing so, the methodologies and perspectives of other disciplines can be more fully integrated building bridges across the often-daunting social sciences – arts and humanities – natural sciences divide. This is not to say that legitimacy comes from association with the sciences alone, but rather scientists and historians have a common ground to share. Without doubt, scholars from fields other than history have contributed much to environmental history. Foundational texts include Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1976), examining environmental

[6]Joel Mokyr, 'On the Supposed Decline and Fall of Economic History', *Historically Speaking*, 11 (2010), 23–5; Christina Romer, 'The End of Economic History?', *The Journal of Economic Education*, 25 (1994), 49–66.

[7]Andrew Seaton, 'Environmental History and New Directions in Modern British Historiography', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 451.

[8]John R. McNeill, 'Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History', *History and Theory*, 42 (2003), 9.

[9]J. M. Powell, *Historical Geography and Environmental History: An Australian Interface* (Monash University Working Paper no. 40, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ideas in Western literature from antiquity to the eighteenth century, and work by historical climatologists Hubert Lamb, Christian Pfister and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Biologists have also been critical of environmental determinism in science, including within Paul Shepard and Daniel McKlinley's edited collection *The Subversive Science* (1969).

However, if environmental history is going to become an interdisciplinary meeting ground rather than part of a well-defined discipline, it must be sure of itself. As Veronica Strang notes, there are considerable 'social, political and economic impediments' to interdisciplinarity.[10] Working across disciplinary boundaries is certainly not easy nor, in many cases, is it encouraged. Nevertheless, change may be forthcoming. Recently, scholars whose work intersects multiple fields have made vital contributions to environmental history. Christine Corton's *London Fog* (2015) interweaves literary sources with studies of industry, pollution and social conditions in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London. In *The Herds Shot Round the World* (2017), Rebecca Woods combines agricultural, colonial and economic histories when writing about livestock breeding in New Zealand, Australia and Britain. Novel research environments are also being cultivated at new research centres. The Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University was founded in 2006. It predicates collaboration across multiple disciplines by building on each individual's disciplinary foundation as a launch pad to spark unexpected conversations on topics such as pollution, artificial intelligence and indigenous rights.[11] Other centres focus on single issues around which different disciplines can gather. The Water Centre at King's College London, launched in 2022, is a fine example, drawing in geographers, political scientists and film studies scholars to critically assess human–water interactions (it's only a shame that historians do not have a seat at the table). Is it possible for environmental history to be reconceptualised not as a subject but a space or a meeting point of collaboration? Pushing for this may be challenging but the effort would be worth it, not least for the paradigm it could model for the future of academia.

Part 1: The scale of environmental history

Islay Shelbourne, Thomas Banbury, Jonathan Roberts

As our workshop demonstrated, environmental historians work across a huge range of scales, using varying approaches. Here we discuss issues of scale, institutionalisation, disciplinary boundaries and interdisciplinarity in relation to the future of environmental history. Starting the conversation, our first three discussants question the role of scale within environmental history.

Jonathan Roberts: This appreciation of different scales is one of the great strengths of environmental history. Ecologists recognise that ecosystems come in all shapes and sizes, from the microbiota within the gut of a beetle to the vastness of the oceans, but environmental history provides a means to move across these scales. We can, for instance, link the parasites disrupting one person's microbiome to landscape-level

[10]Veronica Strang, 'A Decade of Interdisciplinary', in *Transforming the Way We Think*, ed. Veronica Strang (Durham, 2016), 14.

[11]*Ibid.*, 14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ecological changes.[12] Within my own work, I can move between data showing the distribution of a disease across an entire country (and the environmental factors influencing this) and letters from ordinary people describing their experiences of this same disease. This necessitates operating across both chronological and spatial scales. Both archives and infection surveys provide a wealth of information about a single place and moment in time, but the tendency of the historian is to follow the archive forward and trace changes over time. Archives flow. Infection surveys are frozen moments: how many people were infected on the day they were tested. This is not a resolvable tension, but instead facilitates moving across and mediating between both spatial and chronological scales to create a far richer representation of the past. Environmental history allows us to talk about landscapes, environments and ecologies while also considering the intimate and the human. We can tell stories that relate individual people to large-scale historical and environmental events.

Islay Shelbourne: Questions of scale have provided most of the headaches in my work to date, so my appreciation of different scales has definitely come with a pinch of salt! For my work on perceptions of the 1918–19 pandemic, I was initially challenged by the tendency of many environmental histories of disease to favour large-scale sweeping narratives, as exemplified by the dominance of what Alfred Crosby coined 'ecological imperialism' (the devastating effects of the introduction of old-world pathogens to new world populations by European colonisers) within the literature of the field.[13] This approach does not suit the scale of my research, which as an exploration of individual experiences and perceptions most closely fits the 'cultural/intellectual' wing of environmental history, as defined by John R. McNeill.[14] The discipline's somewhat nebulous definitional borders, however, have allowed me to venture beyond this restrictive macro-scale approach and instead draw upon microhistory/everyday life history methodologies to study reactions to the pandemic in Southern California, as well as employ epidemiological analysis to link 'big-picture' mortality statistics to local level experiences of the disease.

As our recent experiences of SARS-CoV-2 have shown, times of crisis, whether epidemic or environmental, are experienced in different ways across spatial and social scales and trigger a variety of responses from both academic and public audiences.

This raises the question of whether environmental history has been shaped by the responses of historians and institutions to our ongoing environmental crises?

Thomas Banbury: Reacting and responding to ecological challenge is, naturally, a valuable aspect of an environmental historian's work. But in my area of research, the particularly modern aspects of climate change (being inextricably linked to modern industrial capitalism) mean that sometimes attention is focused on issues and periods

[12] See John R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (Cambridge, 2010); Steven Palmer, *Launching Global Health: The Caribbean Odyssey of the Rockefeller Foundation* (Ann Arbor, 2010).

[13] Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, 2015), 196.

[14] McNeill, 'Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History', 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

where we see our own problems most clearly reflected. In my own case, little historical research has been done on issues of air quality and approaches to the atmosphere prior to the industrial revolution, where what we can clearly label as pollution begins to appear in the historical record. Responding to crisis can be the stimulus for highly rigorous work, but we might be wary of setting the boundaries of our research through a strictly contemporary lens.

Jonathan Roberts: As Thomas says, the urge to respond to crisis is a valuable stimulus, but it can also be dangerous. The current climatic and ecological crises seem to offer environmental history relevance, but we should be wary of trendiness. There are risks to universities and other institutions pretending to invest in environmental history in order to appear environmentally conscious (or conscientious). The fate of Black and African History at many universities in recent years should remind us that importance and relevance to contemporary societal problems are no protection against funding shortfalls and institutional cutbacks. I also worry about what might happen to a trendy field when it loses trendiness: would excitement translate into long-term support and interest, or would the field be left with little more than a few books and some new terminology as scholars move on to other things? This particularly forebodes for early-career and postgraduate researchers – are universities and funding bodies training us to do a job they have no interest in paying for in the long term?

Islay Shelbourne: Jon is right to warn of the impacts of trendiness. Not only does the sub-discipline, and especially its early career scholars, face a future made uncertain by potentially short-lived institutional greenwashing, but growing historical engagement with environmental issues will also force a re-evaluation of the place environmental history, as a sub-discipline, holds within the field. The impact of the current environmental crisis will undoubtedly engender historians beyond our sub-discipline to consider the environment and its impacts within their work. But these new works will not be *Environmental History*, instead representing historiographically distinct explorations of the environment which do not follow the conventions and methodologies by which we differentiate our historical contributions from those of other fields. This is by no means a bad thing; indeed we should encourage any engagement with the environment given its contemporary significance. However, for environmental history to remain relevant when environmentally focused works occur throughout the field of history and elsewhere, environmental historians will need to ensure that our sub-discipline and its associated methodological approaches are accessible and adaptable in order to support these new explorations. Internally, as well, environmental historians should be mindful of what makes our field unique, and not assume that a new environmental focus among historians will automatically bring prominence by dint of our 'claim' to the subject material.

This also leads us to our problems of definition. How do we define environmental history? In what ways might these definitions need to be solidified?

Thomas Banbury: Despite the tendency to rank environmental history amongst up-and-coming fields, we are well into our disciplinary maturity, with a clear sense of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

our methodologies, trends, bones of contention, and so forth. We are a discipline with which to interact, rather than just the space in which interdisciplinarity takes place. However, we must bear in mind Islay's point that we may risk losing ground to other historical disciplines as they take a deeper interest in the environment. We are a solid, but not fully consolidated, field of history, especially in an institutional sense. There is no major organisation in the UK dedicated to environmental history, though of course there is a strong British presence in the European Society for Environmental History. Environmental historians in UK universities are often scattered throughout different departments, making opportunities for collaboration with others all the more valuable. With these issues in mind, there is a risk that the benefits of decades of research, the refinement of methodologies and conceptual tools are not as available as they could be to our colleagues both in history and in the humanities more widely. The shine has worn off environmental history, and it cannot rely on the novelty of its subject matter nor the variety of approaches to sustain its ability to intervene, and be listened to, on critical issues of ecology and environment. Maintaining our disciplinary self-confidence, our belief in the value of our work to both humanities and the sciences, alongside the newer and more diffuse interests in the environment, may ultimately be as consequential as maintaining the quality and relevance of our research.

Islay Shelbourne: Our self-confidence is challenged by the interdisciplinarity which is foundational to our sub-discipline: 'the new academic field of environmental history' being described as 'the interdisciplinary study of the relations of culture, technology, and nature through time' by Donald Worster in 1993.[15] Though we benefit from the ability to cross disciplinary boundaries within our research, this also isolates us from history as our 'parent' discipline, shaping not just the form and function of our work but also how we are viewed and view ourselves as historians. A historian in a room full of scientists is unlikely to be questioned on their historical methods, and a room full of historians may not engage as fully with an environmental history paper which draws heavily on scientific data for the purposes of a cross-disciplinary audience. This limits our ability to interrogate our own academic practices, and can create an environment where we feel imposter syndrome not in the disciplines we enter beyond history, but within history itself. We must be careful, in embracing interdisciplinarity, not to lose sight of our historical roots.

Thomas Banbury: Retaining our foundations in historical methods, alongside our commitment to interdisciplinarity, is certainly what sets us apart from allied fields. A useful comparison is the emerging project of Environmental Humanities. This field now boasts two major journals and several research centres, with the aim of drawing together history, philosophy, literary studies, media theory, and science and technology studies as they relate to the environment. We might wonder where environmental history fits within this ecosystem. Philosophy, literary studies, and other more theory-heavy humanities can and do already have a fruitful intersection with environmental history. Despite its origins as an interdisciplinary project, Environmental Humanities seems to have a narrower range of collaborators than environmental history and, while

[15]Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York, 1993), viii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this has begun to change in the last few years, it lacks the sort of sustained engagement with the sciences that has characterised so much fruitful research, such as that by Bruce Campbell and Stacey Alaimo, amongst others. Are we at risk, therefore, of ceding half of our territory, so to speak, to the environmental humanities? Maybe this challenge can help us to think more clearly about what we bring to the table, and in particular the value to being the discipline 'in-between' humanities and the sciences; borrowing from, and hopefully contributing to, both.

Jonathan Roberts: Our in-betweenness is one of our greatest strengths, but environmental history, encompassing so many different scales, subjects and approaches, can also struggle to define itself. Environmental history is a big tent, covering a huge range of methodologies, often tied together only by a shared interest in environments. I was nervous approaching this roundtable, as the proportion of the vast environmental history literature with which I am familiar is tiny! But while our tent may be broad and cover a lot of ground, and although interdisciplinarity is central to our project, we still face the problem that academia is not structured to facilitate interdisciplinary discussions. As Alexander noted in the introduction, environmental history can be a meeting place of different disciplinary approaches, but such interdisciplinarity comes with its own unique set of challenges which our monodisciplinary training may not have prepared us to navigate.

To my mind there are two key challenges to interdisciplinarity, neither of which environmental history has wholly overcome. First is language: as Thomas Kuhn pointed out long ago, people operating in different paradigms not only speak different languages but also use the same words to mean different things.[16] While we can usually read science, we have tended to fall back on our training and speak history, and to converse with other environmental historians. Not speaking science makes it harder to enter scientific spaces and to explain to scientists why our work is interesting and important, which feeds into the second challenge: awareness.

I vividly remember picking up a British Ecological Society booklet about how to do interdisciplinary studies: the entire thing was framed around collaborating with social scientists. There was no recognition that collaborating with environmental historians could be something an ecologist might want to do! In my experience the ecologists and epidemiologists whose methods we have pilfered have little to no awareness that environmental history as a field even exists. And while we have all encountered the scientific paper on a historical topic authored by people who have apparently never read any history, scientific ignorance of environmental history is nearly matched by the new environmental humanities, and sometimes even within the discipline of history itself.

We perhaps need to emulate history and philosophy of science (HPS), which though a small discipline, has successfully managed to embed itself in history and non-history

[16]Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2012), 141, 148–9. I recently had an interesting disagreement with a biologist because of our different usages of the word 'defined'. I posited that invasive species were defined as a category of life against which violent and lethal control was necessitated; they very reasonably pointed out that the term 'invasive species' was never defined in terms of control in the scientific literature. I meant 'defined' in a very broad, constructivist sense; they meant it in a very narrow, technical sense. Both our statements were correct *in the sense that we meant them*, but not in the sense that the other person understood them.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

departments, facilitating useful exchanges of knowledge. Here at Leeds HPS is based not in the School of History, but in the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, and offers a joint Biology and HPS undergraduate degree with the School of Biology. Can we imagine an Ecology and Environmental History BSc?

This also requires us to address how we navigate our innate interdisciplinarity. How do we work to include both scientific and historical methods, data and findings?

Jonathan Roberts: One of the great advantages of environmental history has always been its ability to take knowledge and approaches from both sciences and humanities and, by doing so, provide new ways of addressing history's thornier problems. In recent years we have started to see environmental historians extend this by carrying out their own scientific analyses, especially in fields such as climate history and disease history. As someone trained in both history and biology, this fills me with joy, but I am also acutely aware of the challenges interdisciplinarity presents. Making my work acceptable and comprehensible to both scientists and historians is a perennial headache for me, and interdisciplinarity also requires an appreciation of what disciplines can do. Science is both a precision tool and a blunt instrument: it applies a tremendous amount of epistemic power to a very specific hypothesis, but struggles when this specific hypothesis is not generalisable, or when the available data is irregular or patchy. History, by contrast, thrives on limited evidence and eccentric sources. History also works best when embedded in specific contexts, in contrast to science, which sees specific contexts as means to elucidate general truths. History can, finally, move between all kinds of scales where a focus on hypothesis testing tends to tie scientific methods to a particular scale. As Bruno Latour pointed out, a well-designed scientific experiment allows for the movement of scientific knowledge across spatial scales.[17] Similarly, statistics relies upon information about a sample being applicable to the whole population. But in history experiment is impossible, and it is seldom easy to get representative samples. To integrate the two disciplines requires a real appreciation of the limitations of each, but environmental history is well placed to carry out this work.

Thomas Banbury: In my own research, bringing scientific evidence to bear on historical analysis can sometimes be a double-edged sword. My research into deforestation in eighteenth-century Staffordshire relied primarily on literary evidence, but I wanted to ground this in a clear understanding of the ecology of the forest landscape. In addition to research on soil types and tree distribution, an initial draft of my article on the topic included a detailed explanation of deer diet and behaviour! Ultimately, this had to be dispensed with, as re-explaining the elementary concepts of a separate field was not an economical use of words. But this impressed upon me the need to be cautious of borrowing scientific language and concepts extraneously, particularly when there is a risk of mishandling the material, or overwhelming the historical analysis in which I have been trained.[18]

[17]Bruno Latour, 'Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World', in *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*, ed. Karin Knorr-Cetina, and Michael Joseph Mulkay (London, 1983), 141–70.

[18]Thomas Banbury, '"The Fall of Needwood": Social Dimensions of Landscape Change in Eighteenth-Century Staffordshire', *Midland History*, 48 (2023), 49–64.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Islay Shelbourne: Like Thomas, I am wary of drawing too heavily on modern scientific knowledge within my research. Part of this is a matter of training: I do not have a scientific background and so my understanding of the virological and epidemiological concepts required for my work is self-taught. However, more than this, my reticence stems from concerns over the anachronistic application of scientific fact, which in the case of the 1918 influenza pandemic is both common within the pandemic's literature and antithetical to the reality of medical understanding during the period. Doctors in 1918 did call the flu's aetiological agent a 'virus', but virology as we now understand it was several decades from formation and an influenza bacillus was instead suspected as the pandemic's cause.[19] Drawing on modern virological research, especially that which relates directly to the genomic profile of the 1918 influenza, is thus a fine balance between enriching historical understanding of the disease as we now know it, and avoiding the retrospective application of scientific facts, and with it the murky waters of retrospective diagnosis.[20]

Thomas Banbury: Medical historians have long grappled with the issues of retrospective diagnosis: attempting to apply modern medical labels to the affective experiences of historical communities. The epistemic slippage between modern disease categories and the specific medical social, and religious contexts of ill-health in the past mean that modern terminology can often obscure as much as it helps to 'solve' the question of historical health. The same is certainly true of environmental history. I work on 'atmospheric history', but no one in the period I study would have recognised the term, nor have readily accepted the concept as it exists today. We can only ever begin our investigation of the past with the analytical categories familiar to us. The artful management of the disconnect between what we look for and what we find is what separates a mature environmental history from more casual historical engagement with the natural world.

Jonathan Roberts: Thomas makes a compelling case, and I'd add that it's fine to project medical and scientific knowledge backwards (epistemic presentism) as long as you are clear what you are doing and why. I am comfortable referring to the parasite scientists in the past have called *Trichocephalus trichiura* by the modern name *Trichuris trichiura*; neither term would hold any particular significance to the people infected by the parasite a hundred years ago, and a minor anachronism seems an acceptable price to pay to make my work comprehensible to parasitologists as well as historians.

Thomas Banbury: In some ways it can also be fruitful to do the reverse, and bring historical categories to bear on modern analysis. In a recent edited volume, Nükhet Varlık uses early modern travel records to make a compelling argument for the existence of a plague reservoir in Anatolia which may be responsible for several outbreaks of the Black Death.[21] Where the genomic and bacteriological evidence is insufficient to draw a conclusion, Varlık's analysis shows the potential benefits to the modern study of *Yersinia Pestis* from historical accounts of the 'Black Death'.

[19]Islay Shelbourne, 'The Influenza Problem: Paradigms, a Pandemic, and the Search for Pfeiffer's Bacillus', (M.A. Thesis, Institute of Historical Research, 2021), 12–18.

[20]See Jeffery Taubenberger and David Morens, '1918 Influenza: The Mother of All Pandemics', *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 12 (2006), 15–22.

[21]Nükhet Varlık, 'The Rise and Fall of a Historical Plague Reservoir', in *Disease and the Environment in the Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, ed. Lori Jones (Abingdon, 2022), 159–183.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jonathan Roberts: Our discussions have shown how environmental history's lack of definition and institutionalisation presents problems, but we should avoid responding to this by pulling up the disciplinary drawbridge. We do not need to define a disciplinary turf to be defended; the best environmental history, whether on forests or the Black Death, often happens in the gaps between disciplines. Our ability to draw on different sources and methods allows us to work between the sciences and humanities, and often to do more than either would be comfortable with. To mix metaphors further, our big tent is pitched in a disciplinary borderland, and we should embrace the opportunities this provides to engage with the tribes on either side of the epistemic fence.

Part 2: Contested landscapes in environmental history

Aakriti Suresh and Alex Worsfold

Human culture has been shaped massively by the landscape around it. Culturally constructed imaginaries, alongside the physical landscapes themselves, have and continue to be political objects. Environmental history in many cases is inseparable from political and social histories that contest the landscape in which they're situated. Our section, therefore, draws upon sociology, political geography, and social history – alongside a sensitivity to environmental context – to explore colonial attitudes and contested landscapes in upland South Asia and Palestine. This demonstrates the value of conceptualising environmental history as an innovative interdisciplinary meeting place.

Why are we as people drawn to contested spaces?

Alex Worsfold: A lot of people, particularly in western society, have something of a fascination with contested landscapes – perhaps it scratches the same itch as extreme sports, deep sea diving or polar exploration. Sites like YouTube are replete with content showing people visiting conflict and disaster zones, indulging the curiosities of viewers who can experience these sites from the safety of their own homes. It is interesting to explore the origins of this itch: contested spaces have been sites for tourism and interest, particularly in Britain and the West, since at least the early nineteenth century. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, British travel writers and 'explorers' published extensively on their journeys through Palestine, which through this writing was transformed from a physical landscape to an imagined landscape that was known more as 'the Holy Land'. This land was, of course, already known – but through the act of 'discovery', British writers were able to create a competing imaginary of the land, a form of environmental orientalism. In works such as *Rob Roy on the Jordan*, towns, rivers and lakes were re-christened with associated biblical names, and the landscape marvelled at as a relic from times of antiquity.[22] These travel stories, much like their modern YouTube descendants, involve tales of danger and threat from

[22] John MacGregor, *The Rob Roy on the Jordan, Nile, Red Sea, and Gennesareth: A Canoe Cruise in Palestine and Egypt, and the Waters of Damascus* (New York, 1870).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indigenous peoples and a foreign world that needs to be distilled and translated into a digestible format for western consumers.

Aakriti Suresh: I agree with the term that Alex has used here, fascination – an attribute intrinsically woven into the fabric of contested spaces. There are multiple factors that drive this fascination. Often state-sponsored tourism as well as corporate tourism play a crucial role in carefully generating a sanitised image of regions that seek to conceal violent realities to attract tourist footfall. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the agency and the conscious decision-making of what scholars have called 'conflict zone tourists', whose fascination is driven by their mistrust in 'what the media shows'.[23] Looking at environmental history as a meeting ground for diverse yet congruent research interests, I am also intrigued by the avenues that scholars working on eco-war tourism have opened up, bringing together fields of security studies, political ecology and environmental history.[24] Delving into the colonial legacies of the modern-day politics of conservation and the reproduction of binaries of safe vs dangerous space is an extremely interesting niche environmental history can make contributions to.

As well as being politically contested, it is clear landscapes and the environment can hold religious significance – what role do sacred spaces play in or as contested landscapes?

Aakriti Suresh: People's association with landscapes are formed through a diverse set of meanings that they assign to spaces, and those associations are often religious or spiritual in nature. Firstly, it is important to note how sacred spaces themselves are often sites of contestations and of competing narratives. In the context of India and its sacred geography, there are multiple examples of shrines, temples and cities with spiritual significance (example: Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, India) where pilgrims, local residents, commercial entities and administrative bodies represent and negotiate over a wide range of contesting interests and claims. Sacred spaces, in this context, serve as a 'microcosm for the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, spirituality, and commercialism, and conservation and development'.[25]

It is also interesting to explore how spiritual meanings are regularly capitalised upon to further political visions. Compelling examples come from the Valley of Kashmir and from Nepal in upland South Asia. Historically, the Valley served as a centre for the development and propagation of Buddhist, Hindu, and then Islamic religious philosophies. This religious past was appropriated, from at least the early twentieth century, to propagate the idea of *Kashmiriyat* – a political imagery of Kashmir as a land that celebrates communal harmony and coexistence. In the context of Nepal, the European visions of the region as a 'Himalayan Shangri-la' is mobilised today by the Nepalese tourism industry, often at the expense of non-Himalayan territories in the

[23]Antonio Pedro Cruz Costa Alves, Rafael Sadocco and Vivian Iara Strehlau, 'Batten Down the Hatches! Conceptualizing Conflict Zone Tourism', *Journal of Travel Research* (2025), 1–20.

[24]Esther Marijnen, 'Eco-War Tourism: Affective Geographies, Colonial Durabilities and the Militarization of Conservation', *Security Dialogue*, 53 (2022), 550–66.

[25]Ridhu Dhan Gahalot and Charlie Gupta, 'Regenerating and Reclaiming the Contested Spaces in Sacred Landscapes', *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, 21 (2025), 74–100.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

country that do not fit the imagery. These territories, like the lowland Terai region of southern Nepal that shares its geography and border with India, are purposefully left out as it allows for a conscious construction of Nepali nationalism as distinct from India.[26] These intersections between political and spiritual expression form important aspects of socio-political transformations, of human to more-than-human interactions and are a promising avenue for environmental historians to explore.

Alex Worsfold: I also see religious and political contestation overlapping in my research. Religious landscapes were 'rediscovered' by evangelical British explorers, often conflicting with local religious sites and Sufi shrines throughout the region. Other locations, such as the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, held religious significance to communities which have been emphasised by nation-building projects. Here, the environment is harnessed as a symbol of a national project: most evidently in the case of the State of Israel, which has utilised religious symbology and integrated it into a nation-building project. These landscapes can be traditionally religious, as is the case with the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem, or can be modern sites with significance in a historical event: Tel-Hai in Northern Israel is famous for being the location of the death of Josef Trumpeldor in 1920, whose passing became a foundational myth of the developing Zionist identity. Memorialisation often confers the same protections on a landscape that sacredness affords, particularly in the modern nation-state. Thus, landscapes can develop a spiritual and religious significance over time through tradition and practice, but also through a deliberate constructive process that attaches a sacred (sometimes in a secular manner) status to a landscape or environment.

In these examples the contested nature of the landscape is very clear – but can there be such thing as an uncontested landscape?

Aakriti Suresh: I believe this question stems from the underlying concern that social scientists across various disciplines have been debating for a long time now – that is, if there is such a thing as a 'real' landscape, or an 'original' landscape. I, for one, am inclined towards the claim that all landscapes are in a perpetual state of evolution. They are shaped by, and simultaneously shape, socio-political transitions. In this context, as scholars of political geography would assert, all landscapes are landscapes of power. Thus, to concern ourselves with the question of whether or not there exists an uncontested landscape would be irrelevant. Instead, what shapes the realities that allow multiple, contradictory meanings and ways of associating with a landscape to coexist is what triggers my interest. As environmental historians, we can, therefore, play a crucial role in challenging meta-narratives and producing histories that are layered, and based in a wilful acknowledgement of contestations.

Alex Worsfold: This is a very interesting question, and it is very true that as you dig beneath the surface in many areas you see contested aspects of the landscape. In Palestine, especially now but also historically, the contested nature of the landscape

[26]Kalyan Bhandari and Tapaka Bhandari, 'Imagining the Nepali 'Nation' through Tourism', *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 7 (2012), 239–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has been very visible. However, by observing the impact of pronounced divisions in Israel/Palestine on the contested landscape, we can perhaps understand superficially un-conflicted, quiescent, landscapes in Europe and the rest of the world. This question can be broken down into two parts, which deal with sharing the physical space of the landscape and then the cultural and collective imaginary associated with it. Landscapes may be shared between private homes, gardens and common land as well as public infrastructure and nature reserves. The collective imaginary may include a landscape's historical or cultural significance – although these physical and imaginary factors often overlap. Think of how the physical intrusion of wind farms in some environments, while not occupying much space, may clash with cultural imaginaries of a pristine landscape. Major areas of conflict over the environment have in the UK faded out of collective and cultural memory – stories of the Levellers at St George's Hill in 1649 are now remembered only in folk songs. Equally, whilst wind farms provoke modern debate, much of British culture has accepted pylons as a part of the landscape. Modern environmental efforts to rewild areas of the UK have brought contested landscapes back into the forefront of both policy and the news: efforts to re-establish beaver habitats, or reintroduce wolves to parts of the UK have resulted in clashes between different parties who aim to use land for different reasons. Environmental restoration pits collective need against individual and local needs, often resulting in legal conflict and disputes. Environmental historians are thus charged with bringing together disparate elements from many disciplines in a way that is sensitive to, and aware of, these conflicts and contested spaces.

Part 3: Environmental history and interdisciplinarity

Kirill Kartashov, Nick Pepper and Alexander Hibberts

The discussions so far have explored environmental history as an interdisciplinary meeting ground without explicitly stating exactly *how* this interdisciplinarity may be achieved. This issue is critical to establishing environmental history as a space which fosters genuine interdisciplinarity exchange, as opposed to a magpie-like collection of disconnected ideas and methodologies. In this session, we discuss how creative methodologies helped break down intellectual barriers during our workshop, and how this inspired an immersive field trip to Northumberland National Park in April 2024.

Alexander Hibberts: We were keen to welcome scholars from as many diverse disciplinary backgrounds as practically possible to our workshop in April 2023. However, even after successfully assembling participants spanning seven subjects representing the social and natural sciences and the humanities, challenges persisted. As Jonathan has previously spoken about, one of the main barriers to interdisciplinarity is language; the same words may mean completely different things to different people. To overcome this hurdle, we shifted the focus of our workshop plenary onto 'found' objects. Participants were asked to bring an item that encapsulated how they understood, and related to, the environment in their research. They would then present their object to the group to spark unexpected conversations and synergies. This activity was partly inspired by a similar exercise within William Cronon's *Uncommon Ground* (1996) – a series of interdisciplinary essays examining approaches to the study, and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conception, of the environment.[27] Each author used objects, including posters, newspaper reports, placards or cereal packaging, to inspire provocative written contributions.

Kirill Kartashov: The plenary session described above by Alexander certainly did produce some unusual conversations, and it was interesting to see what other participants brought to the study of past environments. Emma Yeo used sea glass, the waste product of numerous glass factories along the Sunderland coastline, to remind us that just as our actions may mould the landscape around us, we too are shaped by the world around us. Today, sea glass is regularly washed back upon the shore, rounded and smoothed by the waves, and is particularly sought after to make jewellery; what was trash is now a trinket. I brought a pack of mosquito coils that I purchased in 2022 from a shop in Tsushima (Aichi Prefecture), Japan. While most mosquito coils nowadays contain synthetic pyrethroids as active ingredients, these coils were handmade using the powder from dried pyrethrum flowers – the only available technology in the late 1910s to late 1930s, when Japan was the world's leading producer of the crop. The era of large-scale cultivation of pyrethrum flowers in Japan ended in the late 1950s, when natural pyrethrum's synthetic analogues started gaining traction. The last decade, however, has seen the resurgence of consumer goods manufactured from natural pyrethrum, appealing to environmentally conscious consumers, often with an interest in artisanal goods. This pack of mosquito coils serves as a tangible link to the changing fortunes of pyrethrum-based mosquito coils in Japan: from an expensive item in the late nineteenth century to a mass-produced commodity during Japan's dominance in global production, and now back to an artisanal product valued for its natural properties. It was through this interactive exercise that the themes of this roundtable arose. The plenary activity also inspired a fieldtrip which made more explicit use of creative methodologies to deliver interdisciplinarity outcomes.

Nick Pepper: As Kirill says, it was in the immediate aftermath of our workshop that we began planning for a second venture to be carried out in April 2024. We debated about what we would do, why, and for the benefit of whom. In the end, we settled upon a piece of immersive fieldwork in Northumberland National Park using walking as a research method – a common thread from which a piece of interdisciplinary collaborative work could be teased out. At the time, I was already on a doctoral placement at the park – my research explores late twentieth-century national park history – and I had grown familiar with the park's Hadrian's Wall Recovering Nature Project. The question which was in my mind was how you could make The Sill – the visitor centre in the Hadrian's Wall corridor – the visitor centre for Greenlee Lough (pronounced 'loff'), a relatively inaccessible nature reserve around three to four miles from The Sill. We began thinking about how, from our various disciplinary viewpoints, we could interpret the walk from The Sill to Greenlee Lough and back again, and mediate this collective experience through film, photography or sound recordings. And that's essentially what we did. We carried out the walk which, with a lot of stopping and starting, took a surprisingly long time! At the core of our activity was the idea that we were to be immersed as figures in the landscape, not separate from it, and to think about it through all of our senses.

[27] See William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York, 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kirill Kartashov: The fieldwork not only provided an immersive encounter with the landscape but also created a space of shared attention, facilitating exchange of insights and ideas. Our observations during the walk provided conversation starters and fostered discussions about various research topics and methodologies. Given our diverse academic backgrounds, these discussions might have never taken place in a different setting, and this alone made the walk a precious experience. To help us collectively reflect on the fieldwork, we did a free writing exercise right after returning to The Sill. Using the prompt 'At Greenlee Lough I …', each of us wrote about the walk for five minutes without pausing to edit. The following task was to pick a particularly thought-provoking line as the next prompt and repeat the exercise. We then discussed the resultant texts with each other. A recurring theme in my writing was the human–nature relationship manifested in the landscape of Northumberland National Park. To me, the park emerged as a vibrant site with various (often competing) interests, including those of foresters, farmers, tourists and locals. Balancing these interests is an ongoing challenge. Traces of human activity – barns, fences, drainages, and of course Hadrian's Wall – were evident here and there throughout the walk. All this prompts us to examine national parks as products of historical development rather than spaces of pristine wilderness, as the popular image suggests.

Nick Pepper: More broadly, our fieldwork, and planned outputs, was centred on a key question: how could we curate the experience for a visitor to The Sill of walking to Greenlee Lough, spending time there, turning around and returning to The Sill? To this end, we are still gathering data and working on outputs including a sensory walking guide to Greenlee Lough.[28] I also hope we developed a slightly novel way of looking at the landscape for organisations like national parks, and other public bodies, which is more inclusive and truly interdisciplinary.

Alexander Hibberts: As Nick has implied, our fieldwork will largely be judged by the success of its outputs. However, the process of creative, collaborative and interdisciplinary work is important in itself, even for projects whose outputs may be more conventional.[29] The fieldwork took all of us outside of comfort zones, both physically and intellectually. Through the act of walking through unfamiliar landscapes, alongside scholars from other disciplines with unfamiliar methodologies and ways of seeing the world, we undertook a form of provocative or creative dislocation.[30] At a very basic level, this collective experience helped us think through our common identity as environmental historians. It made clear that environmental history is more than simply a narrow sub-field of history, but a surprisingly broad church capable of holding together incredibly diverse sets of epistemologies, methodologies and concepts within one academic community.

[28]Nick Pepper and Alexander Hibberts, 'Can Creative Methods Inform Landscape Policy? Fieldwork at Greenlee Lough in Northumberland National Park', *Transformations*, 13 (2024).

[29]See Robert Bickers *et al.*, 'Creative Dislocation: An Experiment in Collaborative Historical Research', *History Workshop Journal*, 90 (2020), 281.

[30]See Adrian Howkins *et al.*, 'An Excursion in the Environmental Humanities: Some Thoughts on Fieldwork, Collaboration, and Disciplinary Identity following a Day Trip to the Island of Lundy', *Green Letters*, 23 (2019), 39–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kirill Kartashov: It was the first time I had participated in the practice of 'creative dislocation', and I found it immensely fulfilling and refreshing. The fieldwork provided a space for co-discovery and the immediate exchange of comments and opinions. This made it markedly different from the more conventional methods of historical research, which tend to be solitary. The network-building role of the fieldwork is hard to overestimate, as conversations that arose during the walk naturally led to discussing potential future collaborations. As someone who identifies primarily as a historian of Japan, I am currently exploring how walking methods can be incorporated into my future research in the field of Japanese Studies.

Alexander Hibberts: In particular, our fieldwork drew upon the work of an anthropologist, Sarah Pink, and her practice of sensory ethnography which acknowledges the 'multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice'.[31] This demands that researchers utilise bodily experiences and sensory reactions to produce scholarship away from the well-worn grooves of familiar research and writing processes. Pink argues that this can generate 'new ways of knowing', including grasping concepts and lived experiences which are not 'necessarily ever spoken about or visible'.[32] In our case, the simple act of walking, and making sound and video recordings, undoubtedly made us more attuned to our surroundings and assisted us in gathering haptic and audio-visual data. We hope this data, when used as part of a sensory walking trail, can help produce a more inclusive national park visitor experience which recognises that not everyone can access heritage landscapes through mainstream media. Does the future of environmental history lie in developing creative methodologies like this?

Conclusion: The Future of (Environmental) History

Emma Yeo, Alexander Hibberts, and Robert Suits

Having addressed time, space, scale and interdisciplinarity, we now look to the future, if indeed there is one. In a broader sense, the development of environmental history is interwoven with the climate crisis. Its growth and increasing relevance are stimulated by the very factors that may ultimately disassemble human civilisation, or at least society as we now know it. We start by discussing the resonances between our current climate anxieties and past experiences of environmental instability.

Emma Yeo: During the Little Ice Age, people across the western world looked to religion as they sought meaning in crisis events such as floods and harvest failures.[33] As their crops failed or were swept away, their relationship with the physical environment was placed directly in conversation with their relationship to God. We may see a symmetry to the uncertainty early modern people faced during their own climate-related catastrophes and our own bewilderment as we face the consequences of our own inaction today. Providence provided a comforting hand in early modern England, and we hope science might protect us against the rapid warming of oceans, which will

[31] See Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, 2015).

[32] Sarah Pink, 'Sensory Futures Ethnography: Sensing at the Edge of the Future', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Sensory Ethnography*, ed. Phillip Vannini (Abingdon, 2023), 82–93.

[33] Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis* (New Haven, 2013); Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2018); John Morgan, 'Understanding Flooding in Early Modern England', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 50 (2015), 37–50.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have consequences beyond our comprehension.[34] Knowledge is powerful. The work of environmental historians to understand how past societies experienced environmental change will be vital as we continue to adapt to the realities of our changing world.

Alexander Hibberts: My own research explores storm surges, flooding and the impacts of erosion along England's late medieval and early modern coastlines during the Little Ice Age. Many saw changes in ocean behaviour as a sign of the end times. In All Saints, North Street, York, the *Pricke of Conscience* window, installed in the early fifteenth century, illustrates fifteen signs of the apocalypse: five of these are related to the sea.[35] Sea levels have often been an effective barometer of climatic instability. While reconstructing what happened in the pre-modern past, and how societies responded with remarkable resilience, I have been struck by the similarities to our own predicament. In 2019, the Met Office Hadley Centre published a report showing that human activity had locked in sea level rise past 2100 regardless of what action we take.[36] Even under a low emissions scenario, sea levels in London are predicted to rise up to 2.2 m. However, we must not go too far and let our own experiences misdirect how we engage with the past. There are distinct differences between then and now. Most importantly, unlike our own time, the Little Ice Age saw a temperature decline, rather than increase.

Robert Suits: We live in the shadow of apocalypse. All history is written in a particular time and place, but the future of environmental history is particularly linked to this simple fact. Our histories routinely explore the fragility of modern civilisation and of the fossil-fuelled infrastructure that underlies it, the unstable agricultural system that feeds it and threatens it with the occasional pandemic, and the climate disasters that assail it. Our field foregrounds how modern affluence is but a blip in historical time, with nothing to suggest it can or will last. The unusual methods, scales, long time horizons and unfamiliar temporalities of non-human life and abiotic processes would, by themselves, make environmental histories interesting. But it was a common theme across our workshop that they are also unavoidably relevant to the world we live in – and I argue that this is a good thing.

Does environmental history have a future? If so, what does it look like?

Alexander Hibberts: The future of environmental history lies firmly beyond the traditional borders of the historical discipline in interdisciplinarity. Indeed, to fully understand the nexus of human–environment interaction, we must first seek to work with scholars from other disciplines. However, this is cross- not interdisciplinarity.

[34]Andy Wood, 'Custom and the Social Organisation of Writing in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1999), 259; Libraries, Archives and Special Collections, Durham University, Add. MS.866; William Bray (ed.), *Memoirs Illustrating the Life and Writings of John Evelyn* (New York, 1870), 479; BBC News, 'Ocean heat record broken, with grim implications for the planet', hmps://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-66387537 (accessed 4 Aug. 2023).

[35]Alexander Hibberts, 'The Sea is History: Estate Management, Land Use, and Risk Calculation on the Late Medieval and Early Modern English Coastline, c.1350–1600′ (Ph.D. thesis, Durham University, 2025), 79–83.

[36]See Tom Howard, Mam Palmer, Galina Guentchev and Jusan Krijnen, *Exploratory Sea Level Projections for the UK to 2300* (Bristol, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The latter is far more demanding. Reading and citing unfamiliar literature is not always enough. Environmental historians must become familiar and confident in the methods of other disciplines, such as archaeology, climatology and computer science. Recently, I co-organised a summer school on climate history which was held near Bern, Switzerland, in August 2023.[37] We brought a group of early career historians into conversation with experts in geography, ice-core analysis, data computation and dendrochronology. The popularity of this event demonstrated a training deficit: many historians are not conversant in quantitative methodologies. Nonetheless, discussions with natural scientists also made visible the value of traditional source analysis skills. One of the barriers facing historians to these sorts of conversations is a lack of awareness. Many in the natural and social sciences have not heard of environmental history, despite being interested in employing the same data in their research. Therefore, the discourse needs to be bi-directional: historians and social or natural scientists reaching out towards a common ground.

Emma Yeo: The future of environmental history lies not only in the human past. Environmental historians increasingly grapple with questions that cannot be answered by reference to human-focused histories alone. Historical narratives which decentre mankind and place non-human actors at their centre remind us that the world is not ours alone. As Dipesh Chakrabarty succinctly put it in their magisterial *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, humanity is not the 'culmination in the planet's story'.[38] This is something I am increasingly aware of as I write my doctoral thesis. My research focuses on lived experiences of mortality crises in seventeenth-century north-east England. Non-humans appear only briefly. The rats whose disease-ridden bodies may have helped decimate the port towns of the North Sea by repeated plague outbreaks are silent in the descriptions of the devastation made by plague nurses, local officials and the bereaved.[39] When a beehive is lost just outside the cathedral city of Durham as a result of extreme adverse weather, this is listed in one man's diary alongside the harvest failures occurring that year. In light of the many social, political and environmental challenges faced at the time, the man's disappointment may partially reflect the symbolic relationship between the health of bees and the health of man.[40] How this event affects the man's future beekeeping, or the extent of hive losses in the vicinity, is not stated. I personally have no sense of how rats experienced their lives in early modern towns and cities, nor the role of bees in the ecosystems to which they belonged. My own engagement with the environment is human-centric. At our workshop, I was fascinated by the interdisciplinary discussions of environmental history which moved beyond human time scales and concerns. The future of environmental history clearly lies in understanding both the human and non-human pasts.

[37]Alexander Hibberts and Heli Huhtamaa, 'Young Researchers Explore Climate Histories', *Past Global Changes*, 32 (2024), 54.

[38]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, 2021), 151.

[39]Libraries, Archives and Special Collections, Durham University, Add. MS.866, Add. MS. 1675; Jules Skotnes-Brown, 'Scurrying Seafarers: Shipboard Rats, Plague, and the Land/Sea Border', *Journal of Global History*, 18 (2022), 108–30.

[40]Keith Botelho and Diana Newton, 'A Crisis of Regional Identity in North-Eastern England? Thomas Chaytor, 1554–1617′, *Northern History*, 52 (2015), 200–16; 'Honey, Wax, and the Dead Bee', *Early Modern Culture*, 11 (2016), 100–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In conversations at our workshop and as we prepared this article, we voiced existential questions that prompted us to reflect on the role of environmental history. Can it help to heal the rupture between the known past and a terrible unknowable future? One of the positive outcomes of these discussions was the strength of our collective belief that the ability of environmental historians to hold up a mirror to the past will be increasingly important. However, as the impact of the climate crisis becomes more acute, I do wonder how we'll cope when we don't like what we see.

Over time, perspectives shift. The climate crisis places us on the precipice of something awful. We are about to topple over the edge of a cliff built by human exploitation of the natural world. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin have suggested that the origins of the Anthropocene may be dated to the early seventeenth century rather than the twentieth, given the effects of growing industrialisation and the relationship between European nations and the places they colonised.[41] If the start of the Anthropocene is shifted to the early modern world, then how we view early technological advancements may also shift. The scales used for history, as well as whose stories are told, will always change the narrative. Perhaps tomorrow's historians will be able to write a happy ending when they recount today's climate crisis. Unlike the past, the future is still unwritten.

Robert Suits: Different scales, temporal and spatial, interlock in our work, like polyrhythms: abiotic and geological processes that can span hundreds of millions of years; evolutionary time lasting tens of thousands of years – or tens of thousands of hours, in the case of viruses and bacteria; human times spanning days, months, or years. Physical processes are precisely measured and located; cultural or political processes are usually intangible, untouchable. Wildly different source bases exist for each, and new technologies are beginning to make them a little less incommensurable. Data mining and text mining are allowing new ways of investigating primary sources and matching them to physical and spatial data; oral and visual sources are being taken more seriously. It has always been a strength – and a mainstay – of the subfield to match these myriad sources to affective storytelling. We do not lose sight of the beauty amongst the data. This, I think, is a persuasive case for the conception of environmental history as an interdisciplinary meeting point of diverse epistemologies, sources and methodologies with which we began this article. Environmental historians are keenly aware of the emotional content of maths, of the calculus and statistics describing climate change. Pressure waves in the atmospheric system can be expressed in numbers or they can be expressed in burned homes and ruined communities – either is accurate.

This is the project of environmental history, of connecting disparate scales and sources together – of connecting us with the world. It is an intellectual endeavour collecting the processes of more-than-human systems too complex to quantify into something useful to us; we have a lot to contribute to interdisciplinary conversations around environmental change. But it is also an endeavour of making them comprehensible, of translating these processes into social outcomes. When I wrote the bulk of my dissertation, Australia was on fire; a billion animals burned. As I write the end of my book, Canada is on fire, turning the skies of the northern hemisphere an alien

[41]Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 167–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ochre. The world is on fire, and we are uniquely positioned to understand and explain why.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their invaluable feedback on article drafts. We are also grateful to everyone who participated in our workshop, especially our two keynote speakers, Matthew Kelly and Alex Dunhill.

Financial support. The workshop behind this roundtable was made possible by generous funding from the Royal Historical Society.

Cite this article: Alexander Hibberts *et al.*, 'The Future of (Environmental) History: A Roundtable Discussion,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2025), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100285