

Introduction

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Introduction

Corey Ross and Frank Uekötter

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Abstract

The essays in this special issue show what historians can contribute to the emerging field of environmental humanities. They focus on the interplay between natures and nations. Natural icons have served as resources for nation-building from soaring eagles to national parks, and the relationship goes equally in reverse: natures change when seen through the lens of national sentiments. The essays aim for a meta-narrative that supersedes ongoing debates over whether nations are good for nature, and vice versa. On a planet where natural icons and national identities are invariably entangled, historians can foster a much-needed culture of self-observation.

Keywords: environmental history, environmental humanities, identity, nationalism

Nature has played a role in the construction of national identities throughout the modern era. Nations incorporated forests, mountain ranges and other features of nature into their mythologies, they put soaring birds of prey into their coats of arms (sometimes a rooster had to do, as for the French), and they created nature reserves that were not named national parks for nothing. But the relationship also worked in reverse. Nationalism has framed the appreciation of the natural environment since the dawn of modernity. People have called for the protection of animals and landscapes in the name of collective identities, and it is difficult to imagine species like the panda or the bald eagle without a

strong whiff of nationalism nowadays. But natures were no more stable than national identities, and that made for all sorts of complications. A vanishing species or a changing landscape gained an additional dimension if they left a void in the collective imagination. The iconography of Indian tigers looks like a straightforward affair only if one fails to acknowledge the complexities of hunting practices.

The essays in this special issue explore this relationship from multiple angles. They look at plants, animals, natural disasters and iconic landscapes. They explore identities below the national level in Hamburg, Goa and two very different parts of Sweden. Articles include cases where nature was an asset and others where natures were under threat. They also combine perspectives from European countries with a discussion of conflicts in the Global South. Matters of identity were not a European peculiarity, though these contributions show a notable divergence in the scope of actors, which in turn reflects power relations that linger in a post-colonial world. People in Sweden and Finland did not need to bother to inquire about opinions in the colonial world when it came to their imagination of their respective national countrysides. In dealing with tigers, Indians might have wished to ignore the British in similar fashion, but that was not an option.

Was nationalism good for the environment? Nationalists have filled entire libraries with treatises on their distinctive treasures, and critics have tried to take a lot of air out of nationalist hyperbole with everything from nuanced assessments to full-scale indictments. On first glance, the essays in this volume can be read as contributions to these debates, but they ultimately aim to supersede them by shifting the discourse to the meta-level. National identities are emotional issues, and so are iconic natures, and these emotions are unlikely to disappear from the sentimental households of humans around the world any time soon. Nationalist sentiments and natural treasures are so closely enmeshed in so many ways that the entanglement will be with us for the foreseeable future. As it stands, the most rewarding approach may be to unpack and understand this relationship as best we can. That is what these essays intend to do.

Needless to say, every such effort is bound to remain incomplete, as scholars are keenly aware that every deconstruction is a reconstruction nowadays. But this special issue is intended as a contribution to the emerging academic field of environmental humanities, and

specifically to the lingering question over what it is really good for, and as members of the Birmingham Seminar for Environmental Humanities (BISEMEH), we humbly suggest that there are more rewarding issues in play than theoretical conundrums. Faced with numerous challenges on a diverse and crowded planet, where the outlines of problems and solutions are increasingly blurry, twenty-first-century environmentalism needs to acknowledge that things that were formerly a given are now matters of perspective. We need to know more about the full range of views in play, the interests that they serve, their cultural frames of reference, the passions of people and their taboos, lest we fall back into the essentializations of a bygone age.

The humanities have plenty of tools to put things into context, and it is time to bring these assets into a science-heavy environmental discourse that has been loath to reflect on these issues, or to take them seriously at all. National sentiments are a prime example. We know that nationalism can be toxic, but more often than not, it is a part of an intricate arrangement that is waiting to be untangled. Environmental humanities scholars cannot say with authority whether nationalism is good or bad for the environment. But we can show what it means to see nature through the lens of nations, and nations through the lens of nature, and thus move towards a better understanding of what is in play.

In historiographic terms, these essays explore the intersection of environmental history and the history of nationalism. It is a worthy endeavour in light of the fragmentation of historical scholarship into a bewildering array of fields and sub-fields, but as this introduction suggests, there are issues at stake that move beyond the disciplinary concerns of historical scholarship. Taken together, these essays provide an idea of how the environmental humanities can help to build a culture of self-observation.

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