

Review: Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research

By Jocelyn Thorpe, Stephanie Rutherford, and L. Anders Sandberg, eds.
Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 9781138956032. 322 pp. €47,99.

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In *Behind the Curve: Science and the Politics of Global Warming* (2014) historian Joshua Howe analyses the twentieth-century American scientific discourse about global warming. Howe concludes that the eventual entanglement of climatological science and politics in the late twentieth century undermined the possibility for effective change, which makes the history of this discourse one with very real, and sometimes devastating consequences. ‘Ask an Inuit who has watched her traditional way of life disappear with the Arctic sea ice about climate change,’ he writes, ‘or a Pacific Islander who has watched his island sink into the ocean. They will tell you about this aspect of the tragedy’ (Howe 2014, 203). However, in order to tell those stories and connect them to larger themes, such as global warming or the relation between humans and their environment in general, serious methodological considerations need to be made. They do, after all, not rest on clear-cut evidence that is readily presented in the archives. An excellent starting point for writing those stories is provided by Jocelyn Thorpe, Stephanie Rutherford, and L. Anders Sandberg’s edited volume *Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research* (2016).

Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research came into being at a conversation at the 2014 World Congress of Environmental History in Guimarães, Portugal, during which the participating researchers shared and discussed the possibilities of conducting and communicating research on the history of relationships between humans and their environments. This volume is based on the same principle; it is a collection of essays containing several case studies that aim to present a rich array of methodologies in order to stimulate scholars in environmental humanities. The term ‘nature-culture,’ which is used in the title, was defined in 1993 by social philosopher Bruno Latour, who argues that definitions of culture are inherently dependent on definitions of nature. He argues that it is therefore better to speak of them as one domain; as a nature-culture. ‘The very notion of culture,’ Latour writes, ‘is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures – different or universal – do not exist,

any more than Nature does.’ (Latour 1993, 104). Thorpe, Rutherford and Sandberg follow Latour and take the term nature-culture as the starting point of their book, in order to indicate that the relation between humans and their environment is the general subject that the articles in *Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research* aim to address.

The book contains four sections that each deal with a prominent methodological challenge in the study of environmental history. The first part deals with the issue of agency, as humans are not the only actors that need to be considered in environmental history, even though the common archival records that we tend to use is built by them. Part two is built on historian Ann Stoler’s conception that archives are not simply sources of information, but sites of knowledge production with significant power relations in play (Stoler 2010). Scholars examining historical relationships between nature and culture often conduct research in colonial archives, and this section seeks to decolonise historical research in order to come to a richer understanding of the past. In part three, the role of senses and affect in environmental history are examined, in order to deepen our understanding of the way people related emotionally to nature in the past. In the fourth and final part of this book, the possibilities of digital outreach of research are explored.

The first section of *Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research* urges us to think of human history and natural history not as two different domains, but as one and the same story. This section is based on the premise that not only humans, but animals, trees, landscapes, and other elements of nature could also be historical actors. The section explores how research can show the way history was shaped by humans as much as it was shaped by other elements in their environments. Stephanie Rutherford and Michael Hathaway respectively address Canadian wolves and Chinese elephants in their articles in order to explain how they shaped the daily lives of thousands of humans around them and vice versa. They manage not only to write about how animals affect human lives, but they also manage to reconstruct the history of the animals themselves. Beside animals, other elements of nature can be studied as historical actors too. Sverker Sörlin’s contribution demonstrates how the shrinking and growing of glaciers played an important role as a marker of climate change in nineteenth-century climatology. ‘Glaciers had what we might call “voice”,’ Sörlin writes. ‘They spoke, albeit in a soft voice and with a language that required patience in the listener’ (Sörlin 2016, 13). By shrinking and growing, he argues, glaciers communicated with climatologists and therefore they had a significantly active role in the way knowledge about nature was produced.

The second section presents several ways of overcoming the problems that come with the composition and exploration of colonial archives. Lianne Leddy examines environmental history as told in stories and reflects on who tells them, how they are told, and why they are told. She seeks a balance between the archives and the stories that were told to her by Canadian Indigenous communities, and she explains how she managed to find a way of describing how people in the past related to the land they lived on. While Leddy uses source material from outside the archives to decolonise her research, Aimée Craft's contribution explains how a shift in focus in the way we view the source material we already have can also help to decolonise historical research. Craft demonstrates how *Anishinaabe* water laws focus on responsibility rather than rights, and how those laws are assessed and identified by ceremony, song, language and story rather than by codex. As Leddy, Craft, and the other authors in this section illustrate, a shift in the selection and use of historical evidence and a shift in focus of the object of study can help researchers to escape the colonial dimensions of the archive and write histories that would otherwise remain unwritten.

The third section, which deals with senses and affect, also makes a shift in focus and source material. The authors describe how they address their senses in order to study how people in the past encountered the world. Ian Mosby explains how he lets his students follow cooking instructions from historical recipes to make them understand what the past tastes like, but also to let them encounter information in primary sources that might otherwise be overlooked. Descriptions and measurements of ingredients have changed over time and in many recipes the prescribed cooking equipment only exists in museums nowadays. Stephen Bocking subsequently addresses the history of cycling in order to research how people experienced rural areas while riding their bicycles. By cycling through the landscapes he studies, he improves his ability to relate to his research subject, as he argues that due to its pace, cycling permits careful observation and slow reflection. Cycling 'therefore provides many opportunities to assemble diverse observations and forms of evidence and experience in order to understand the complex mosaic of a rural landscape' (Bocking 2016, 229).

The authors in the fourth section of *Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research* explore the possibilities of digital technology in the communication of their research, as they explain how a digital environment helps them to share their results with others. Dolly Jørgensen's contribution especially stands out. She explains how the effects of blogging about her research and its results were threefold: blogging helped her to become a better writer, it allowed her to write about environmental history for an academic and

a non-academic audience alike, and it shaped the course of her research itself. This section of the book could be of great value to environmental historians who seek to make a contribution to debates about global warming or to the relation between humans and their environment in general, as it makes them aware of different possibilities to communicate results not only to their colleagues, but to the general public as well.

Methodological Challenges in Nature-Culture and Environmental History Research poses challenges for scholars in environmental humanities and offers a wide range of methodological considerations in order to overcome them. This makes it a highly useful volume for anyone who wishes to engage in the field of environmental humanities. The subjects of the articles in the volume range from cycling to glaciers, from elephants to water laws, but thematically they all address the relation between humans and their environment. It is not a volume in which one particular subject is analysed in depth, as most of the authors tend to stay on the surface regarding their case studies. However, its composition perfectly illustrates the possibilities of environmental humanities by demonstrating a wide variety of subjects that can be studied, and by offering several innovative methodological considerations in order to do so.

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