

## Environmental History in the United Kingdom: an overview

**Jan Oosthoek**

First published in ESEH Notepad No. 29, *Environment and History*, Vol. 15 (2009) No.1, 123-126. Download Notepad from [eseh.org/resources/publications/notepad/](http://eseh.org/resources/publications/notepad/).  
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In 2001 when the first ESEH conference took place in St. Andrews, Scotland, the prospects for environmental history in Britain looked promising. Now, more than seven years on, we may ask whether these expectations have been met. It might seem that the institutionalization of the subject has been much slower than anticipated, because there are not many lecturing posts in environmental history. But lectureships may not be a good indicator of the vibrancy of the field. It is time to take stock of environmental history in the United Kingdom, starting in the north in Scotland.

Between 1999 and 2006 the Universities of Stirling and St Andrews collaborated in the *Centre for Environmental History and Policy* and its successor centre, the *Research Centre for Environmental History*. This collaboration did much to establish Environmental History as a distinctive subject area in the United Kingdom. After funding came to an end in 2006 both universities went their separate ways. At Stirling the *Research Centre for Environmental History* <<http://www.cehp.stir.ac.uk/>> has become the epicentre for environmental history research in Britain. Although based in the history department, the centre brings together the humanities and sciences to create new ways of looking at the past. In addition, the Centre runs a Master's course in environmental history and offers environmental history modules at all levels of undergraduate study. The University of St Andrews also continues to offer both Master and PhD opportunities in environmental history <<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/institutes/envhist/>> and a team at the University of Edinburgh is preparing a distance learning MSc in Landscape, Environment and History <<http://www.shc.ed.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/landscape/>>. The latter is expected to start in September this year.

In England, environmental history is less concentrated in centres but depends more on individuals engaged in environmental history research and teaching. In the northeast of England, ESEH Regional Representative David Moon is based at the University of Durham and focuses on Russian environmental history, in particular related to the steppes. At Newcastle University, the author of this piece taught environmental history before moving to his current position in Edinburgh. At Sunderland University Dennis Wheeler's work on historical climate reconstruction using ship logs is innovative and extremely important in the light of current human-caused climate change. Stephen Mosley at Leeds Metropolitan University has achieved marked success in the institutionalization of environmental history: environmental history is now a compulsory element for all undergraduate history students. In addition Mosley's work on pollution history continues to be the most advanced of its kind in Britain. This group of individuals

working in the northeast of England has established the *Northeast Environmental History Seminar Series*, now in its second year.

Going further south, on the shores of the River Humber, the University of Hull hosts the *Maritime Historical Studies Centre*. This centre, under the direction of David Starkey, combines marine and maritime environmental history <<http://www.hull.ac.uk/mhsc/mhschome/mhschome.htm>>. At the same institution, Greg Bankoff is working on hazards in history, and teaches world environmental history. Southwest of Hull, in Sheffield at Hallam University, the *Tourism and Environmental Change Research Unit*, headed by Ian Rotherham, focuses on tourism and leisure in relation to urban regeneration, biodiversity, landscape and cultural heritage. Their work combines current issues and ecology with historical dimensions of environmental change and land use. In Nottingham, a strong, largely geography-based team headed by Georgina Endfield offers a Master's degree in environmental history <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/geography/taught-courses/postgraduate-courses/environment-history.phtml?menu=eh>>. Research conducted in Nottingham is diverse, and includes the historical geography of trees and woodlands, climate history, landscape and rural history and the history of nature conservation. Paul Warde is another leading environmental historian who was until recently at the University of Cambridge where he organized a series of meetings exploring the uses of environmental history and the teaching of the subject. Last year Warde took up a position at the University of East Anglia, and in January 2009 he is organising a meeting centred upon the theme of Environmental History and Education for Sustainable Development <<http://www.historyandsustainability.org/>>. Given Warde's profile we can expect to hear more on the environmental history front from this part of the British Isles.

On the South coast of England, at the University of Sussex, the *Centre for World Environmental History* (CWEH) was launched in May 2002. The centre is based in the School of African and Asian Studies and is very much focused on the environmental history of Africa and South and Southeast Asia. It is headed by Vinita Damodaran and Richard Grove <<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cweh/>>.

Finally, moving to the West Country, environmental history has had a long-standing presence at the University of Bristol in the person of Peter Coates. A specialist in American history, Coates has now ventured into comparative environmental history and is Principal Investigator for a 3-year research project, 'Militarized Landscapes in the Twentieth Century: Britain, France and the United States'. At the Cornwall Campus of Exeter University, Tim Cooper has established environmental history as one of the main strands of research and teaching. In September 2008 he organised a conference on Nature, Health and the Politics of Environment. This meeting was hosted by the *Eden Project*, which is based within the *Environment and Sustainability Institute*, showing once more that environmental history thrives best in an interdisciplinary environment. Like the University of East Anglia, the University of Exeter's Cornwall campus is one of the places to watch for environmental history.

While writing this overview of environmental history it became clear that a comprehensive overview of all persons and groups working in the broadly defined area of environmental history in Britain is practically impossible in a confined space like *Notepad*, so my apologies to those not mentioned here. Environmental history is slowly but surely percolating through the British university system, not so much as the result of purposefully created posts but through the research interests of groups and individuals. The strength of environmental history in Britain is its diversity: its lack of a clearly defined curriculum and in many places weak institutional profile provide space for interdisciplinary collaboration and the opportunity to approach historical problems in new and innovative ways, often by researchers who do not regard themselves as environmental historians.

Where does British environmental history go from here? That is hard to tell, but one thing seems clear: it will continue to expand through the university sector because of an increasing recognition that most environmental problems have historical dimensions.