

PIERRE DU BOIS ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2018

Wednesday 3 October | Thursday 4 October 2018

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AS IF THE FUTURE MATTERED

Writing the History and the Future of the Anthropocene

BACKGROUND NOTE

Environmental history is an exploding subfield in history for several reasons:

- 1 the more general concern in this moment of history about the changing environment at macro scales and the broader scientific and governance raised by this moment of planetary change
- 2 a broad range of new scientific elements for tracking and understanding environmental change has emerged in the last decades, giving rise to the idea of the Anthropocene, the epoch when humans have become a geological force in the shaping of the planet
- 3 the increasing use of historical documentation to ratify natural science information about human impacts on the biotas and geologies of the past
- 4 an increased interest in global, colonial and diasporic histories which often provide unusual links to large scale environmental events and provide additional elements of explanation in historical events
- 5 planetary scientists are “running their models backward” in order to see if they can “predict” the past, in other words the historical archive is used to verify the natural record
- 6 socio political, and environmental responses have been extremely variable, so that this process is not one of environmental determinism, but rather one of complexity of results that often produce new kinds of socio-natures, epistemes political and cultural structures
- 7 increasingly historians are using the “natural archive” to augment their understanding of events, not just as a slate of resources, but also as active elements of history

The 2018 Pierre du Bois Annual Conference has several goals, all of which highlight the relevance of this field in

- recasting the historical framing of events and processes that include environmental dynamics in shaping our world

- showing how the new integration of the natural and human archive can provide a fruitful set of tools for understanding the elements of the past, present and the Anthropocene of the future
- providing new inputs from historical contributions into modern policy

Environmental history increasingly informs political ecology, historical ethnography, climate change science and natural resources policy. For this reason we feel that it is time to profile environmental history as a means of providing a past that allows us to confront the questions of today in theoretical and concrete ways, and to explore how socio natures have changed over time, how we think about them has evolved in light of novel methodologies, new interdisciplinary work and the current impacts of environmental change of many types. In part, environmental history has moved from stories of local places into the broader arena of planetary change. Environmental history takes the questions of environment not as determinants, but categories and lenses of analysis.

This two day conference brings together multidisciplinary scholars from a range of specialities to explore the interactions of environment and human history. We might think of this effort as a new form of integrative “Natural History” devoid of the environmental determinism of earlier periods when environment was invoked, but rather one where the complexity of human and natural processes structure each other, where the elements of the planet itself influences and is shaped by human history. If scientists like to project their models both into the past and the future, it is interesting to see what historians, that is to say “big tent” historians: archeologists, historical ecologists, geographers, climate scientists, anthropologists, as well as more classic historians have to say about the past and its implications for the future. This conference is unusual in that it asks our panelists not only to reflect on the past through natural and human archives, but also on the future.