



Notes from the Icehouse

In a Northern Sandbox: A World Congress in Finland

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Graeme Wynn

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stimuLating
Understanding

Putting on a quinquennial conference for close to a thousand people takes years of planning, an endless supply of human energy and goodwill, and a seemingly infinite number of emails and Zoom calls. But when it all goes well, one is reminded that this form of intellectual and social engagement is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a scholar. What follows is some account of how the

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2024 World Congress of Environmental History developed from idea to reality, and of what this trajectory says about environmental historical scholarship today.

The eye of the storm: Or, adventures in maybesitting

The International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations is an umbrella organisation of member societies, institutes, departments and networks. Its threefold mandate, broadly defined, is to increase the visibility of environmental history (and cognate fields); to foster international communication and networking; and to serve the amorphous global community of people interested in the interactions of human and nonhuman elements of the biosphere.

These are challenging obligations at the best of times for the purely volunteer leadership of ICEHO. Chartered as an association of societies, ICEHO has no individual members; it does its work on behalf of the several thousand individuals who belong to its constituent organisations, and any others who might appreciate its efforts. Since its inception in the early 2000s, its major endeavour had been the organisation of successive World Congresses – in Copenhagen, Denmark (2009); Guimáraes, Portugal (2014) and Florianópolis, Brazil (2019). Following their election, at the third WCEH, an entirely new slate of officers and directors affiliated with consortium member groups sought to enhance ICEHO's visibility and intellectual contribution between World Congresses by adopting a three-pronged communication strategy.

First, we established the ICEHOUSE at the beginning of 2020. This was envisaged as a community of ICEHO associates, designated **U**nderwriters, **S**upporters and **E**nthusiasts, whose engagement is signalled by various levels of financial commitment (\$50.00; \$25.00 and \$0.00 respectively – sign up now at <https://www.iceho.org/donate>). Second, we partnered with The White Horse Press to include 'Notes from the Icehouse' in this journal as it transitioned to three issues per year. Third, we made the ICEHO website more dynamic,

adding intellectual content and ensuring that it disseminates information of interest to our community in a timely manner (see: <https://www.iceho.org>).

Then, as just as our obligation to organise WCEH4 loomed, the COVID-19 pandemic closed down the world, as though in response to the recurrent ‘flight-shaming’ discussions of 2019 (<https://www.iceho.org/flight-shaming>). ICEHO’s leadership was forced to gamble. Pandemic lockdowns surely would not, could not persist until 2024 (would they, could they?!) Should they continue, would ‘environmental types’ travel the world to an in-person conference? We opted to roll the dice. Six months or so into the pandemic, we circulated a call to host WCEH as planned, five years on from Florianópolis. Several bids arrived by the May 2021 deadline. The Board debated. And one proposal stood out for its mix of academic and intellectual commitments, its location (just short of the Arctic Circle), its venue (both the city and the university) and the involvement of its environmental studies programme (Biodiverse Anthropocenes). The votes were cast and the choice was made. The University of Oulu would be our hosts. Roger Norum, who fronted the Oulu bid, appointed a Local Organising Committee, and Graeme Wynn, as ICEHO President, asked Claire Campbell to chair the Programme Committee. By 2022, the fundamental building blocks of the conference were in place (as the global number of COVID-19 infections continued to climb). We would organise a congress, though what exactly it would look like was far from clear at that point.

‘How could we bring the world to Oulu?’ the three of us asked one another in an early flurry of what would become a torrent of communications. This, of course, is the core riddle of any international meeting, but it was especially pressing at the time, and especially poignant for environmental history, a field that is so deeply rooted in place. Roger likened us to the planners of a destination wedding eyeing a hurricane looming on the weather maps, and worried, at times, that no-one would actually show up. He had his own reasons for concern. As a transplant from the US living in Oulu, he had had a challenging time getting friends and family to visit him in Finland. Even those who came rarely stayed longer than was

required of them: one close friend, invited to give a talk at the University, came, lectured and left within fourteen hours, lured south to another four-letter Nordic city.

Yet we persisted, buoyed perhaps by faith in our colleagues, and the words of an ad hoc committee of the ICEHO Board, which reported in 2021 that ‘the benefits of meeting people, networking, and debating with colleagues from around the world and across linguistic, cultural, geographical and scholarly divides far outweigh the costs’. More practical considerations – financial, logistical and intellectual – soon drew our attentions, however. Roger and his Oulu colleagues applied for grants in aid of the conference. Within a year the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, the KONE Foundation and the Research Council of Finland had committed support. Later, on request from the President of ICEHO, the American Society for Environmental History, the Forest History Society and the University of Chicago Press also contributed generously. And at the last The White Horse Press sponsored a ‘best poster’ prize. Roger also contracted NomadIT, a Europe-based company well experienced in the logistics and legwork of academic conference organising. The Programme Committee pondered how to incorporate diverse experiences and knowledges spanning the globe, in four and a half days.

Imagining the congress

Would we be in-person, online or hybrid? We certainly wanted to reconnect – we are humanists, after all. We also needed to confront the very real, deeply inscribed and seemingly broadening inequities in academia. As a non-profit organisation, ICEHO could not single-handedly redress disparities between countries in Euro-America and those elsewhere, between senior and junior scholars, between those with secure institutional affiliations and those without. Yet we did not want a hybrid format to propagate a tiered conference model in which the privileged travelled and the less privileged joined online. ICEHO found means to offer partial travel and accommodation support to 22 colleagues, mostly junior scholars from Latin

America, South and East Asia and Africa, whose presentations had been accepted by the Programme Committee and who were recommended for financial assistance by an external committee. Still, organisers worried that going hybrid – which, they agreed, would make WCEH as inclusive and diverse as it could be – might also give many people the perfect excuse not to attend in person. As anyone who studies power and the state will know, bringing the centre to the periphery is never a walk in the park.

Ultimately, we opted for a fully hybrid format simply because we recognised that not everyone could or would be able to travel to Oulu. Over ensuing months we were also reminded, with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the eruption of violence in Israel and Gaza in 2023, that academic conferences are hardly immune to geopolitical conflicts. Conference planning is exciting but one is often planning on a razor's edge, uncertain and fearful of what might be looming around the corner.

The Programme Committee – convened for its diversity of research interests, and expertise in different periods and geographies, as well as open-minded curiosity – also deliberated over the entailments of the programme theme: 'Transitions, Transformations and Transdisciplinarity: Histories beyond History'. What is the relationship between environmental history, the environmental humanities and the arts? Or between environmental history and the natural sciences? How far beyond History (or history) should the programme of a History congress venture? The committee decided that the programme needed to be both a measure of the field and – a much trickier task – an exercise in imagining where the field might go next. The programme had to incorporate diverse global content alongside the conference's welcome to the particular landscapes of Oulu. It needed to be coherent, even as we wanted participation to be diverse.

So we adopted a two-stage submission process that took place over six months or so in 2023. First, we opened a call for panels, which brought the Programme Committee to some of its most exciting intellectual work. What were people researching and what did they want to talk about? What themes were on the horizon? How could we connect them? The Committee also spent time blue-skying

organisational patterns: earth, water, sky? extraction, cultivation, co-existence? eras, lives, seasons? light, heat, cold, dark? (it was northern Finland we were heading to, after all). Eventually we devised a set of thematic streams about:

...professional practice and audience:

Deeper Histories, Diverse Sources, Different Narratives;
Expanding the Practice of Environmental History;
Creativity, Sensibility, Experience, and Expression;
Human and More than Human;

... particular resources and types of land use:

Landscapes of Cultivation and Consumption;
Nature for Harvest: Commodities and Resources;
Water;
Energy and Infrastructure;

... the contexts of geographies and localities:

North & Nordicity;
Envisaging A Global South;

... responses to and critiques of the legacies of those geographies:

Climate Change and Knowledge;
Questioning Capital and Growth;
Decolonising Environmental Pasts;
Navigating Conflict, Governance and Activism.

Once the panels approved by the Programme Committee were posted online, the second stage of the process began. People were invited to submit a paper abstract to a panel (or more than one), after which panel convenors reviewed the pool of papers directed their way, and assembled their panels from the submissions. One member of the Programme Committee was assigned to each panel to answer procedural questions and to remind convenors to consider

applicants from a diversity of backgrounds.

This two-stage process was unfamiliar to many in the environmental history community, particularly North Americans, who are more used to pitching a ready-made panel composed of people they already know or whose work they admire. But what of those scholars whom we don't know, whose work we haven't yet read? We hoped that the two-stage process would open the door to those situated outside established networks and communities, create panels with greater diversity and ultimately build new connections. Once launched, all this took some explaining, to be sure. It was not always clear what role the Programme Committee should play in selecting papers; and, in this, as in previous iterations of WCEH, most of those who participated in the conference came from North America and Europe.

But the open call for papers did markedly broaden participation. A number of convenors noted their excitement at finding scholars previously unknown to them whose work spoke compellingly to a panel topic; many convenors asked for double, even triple, panels to accommodate more papers. And within a month of registration opening, the conference had more registered delegates than any previous WCEH.

We decided to invite three keynote speakers. Although none expressly identified as an environmental historian, each spoke compellingly in ways that wonderfully expanded our sense of what environmental scholarship could be and how it appears in the world: Áile Aikio from the University of Lapland (indigenous knowledge and museum representation); Rob Dunn from North Carolina State University (mutualisms and public understandings of natural science); and Amal Ghazal of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (the politics of generating knowledge). This trio was exactly what we were hoping for in featuring 'transdisciplinarity': history in conversation with other fields and the value of historical thinking more broadly.

We also generated four regional plenaries in an explicit attempt to reach outward from Oulu – to teleport us (in imagination at least) to a different part of the world on each day of the conference. Led by members of the Programme Committee, these plenaries took on lives of their own, and circled the globe in rather astonishingly varied

ways. Each gravitated toward a different thematic emphasis: the non-human; terrestrial and agricultural history; literature and the arts; and water. Because of distance, and because we seized the opportunity to involve underrepresented voices, each plenary also adopted a different format, exploring what technology might allow us to do in conferences. The South Asian plenary featured a real-time discussion and film screening, the African plenary was fully hybrid, Latin America was in-person, and the Pacific plenary compiled pre-recorded presentations. Each sought to push the ideal and form of the regional-global plenary.

The three of us were aligned in our belief that social and experiential benefits are critical in making any conference memorable for delegates, and productive of the connections, friendships and academic partnerships that we all hold dear. Roger, whose responsibilities for and commitment to local events knew no limits, took the challenge as his own: if he could promise people a stupendous conference, then at least some of his academic friends might finally come to visit him. If riverside saunas, visits with reindeer and karaoke shindigs in a silent forest were layered atop alluring panels and roundtables, perhaps people would find it difficult to say NOulu to Oulu.

The world comes to Oulu

In the end, the numbers were overwhelming, in all its positive senses: 753 colleagues registered for in-person participation in WCEH4, and another 220 took part online. It was the largest conference ever hosted by the University of Oulu. Our anticipated intimate gathering turned into something else entirely. How on earth? Whence all this interest? Yes, WCEH only occurs every five years; but perhaps people really wanted to see the Arctic before it melts; or beat the queues with an early visit to the European Capital of Culture for 2026. Most likely, the diverse and inclusive nature of WCEH4 brought people in. Once registrations passed a critical mass, word got around: this was going to be the place to be in the summer of 2024. Even academics get FOMO.

The conference theme encouraged delegates to push beyond fa-

miliar disciplinary envelopes and look into the margins. Real appeal lurks on the periphery. The conference offered 176 sessions; 114 panels; and over 720 papers and contributions. Delegates came from over seventy countries. Among those present in person, US scholars formed the largest group (117), but there were registrants from six continents and healthy numbers (more than twenty) from each of Britain, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Spain and Sweden. Such numbers posed several challenges: how to serve food to so many people; how to arrange bus transport for everyone; what in heaven's name will all these people actually *do* in Oulu? It turned out that they did what anyone looking for a good time usually does: they found each other, and went from there. We gave delegates a few social points of departure to start them off: floating saunas, failure sessions, reindeer soup, reindeer tours, ghost tours, mushroom tours, screaming choirs, Arctic cuisine and PowerPoint karaoke. But in the end, it was clear that WCEH4 was so wildly successful – way more of a hit than we imagined a conference could be in the little city of Oulu – because of the people who came.

Looking back, and looking forward

COVID-19 taught us that, yes, we can hold conferences online. A hybrid format is a compromise; it allows for greater participation, and this has real merit. Post-pandemic, WCEH4 made clear that what we really need, what feeds us, what keeps us alive, is the human connection. As students of things environmental, we are particularly well suited to connect the tactile immediacy of local landscapes with the longer threads of global history, and to invite local communities into the conversation about larger issues and concerns. The essence of the connectivity and synergy that in-person sociality provides was emblematised in Oulu by the many conference participants who worked together to craft a stunning environmentally-themed quilt from found objects and materials, and generously donated it, at the conference's end, to the University of Oulu for permanent display. The technicolour quilt that they assembled cooperatively stands as

mark of human understanding and collaboration, and of the beauty created from people simply coming together and spending some time with one another, even for a few days.

What's next? Where might we be for WCEH5? What shape might that conference take? These questions remain open for now, but as we all begin to imagine and plan, we should remember our histories. The size and energy of the Congress at Oulu confirmed the value of historical thinking in environmental understanding – environmental history, with intellectual roots going back a century and more, holds an archive of scholarship and insight worthy of reconsideration and re-evaluation. A global meeting encourages engagement with earlier scholarship, and with currently urgent problems from many angles. Even as the professional impulses of academia drive us to trademark particularities, we need occasions to remind ourselves that we *are* a community. We are stronger together than apart. Our individual curiosities, contexts and research passions will shape our research questions, approaches and methodologies, but our work will be stronger as it engages common questions about the intricate relations between humans and the rest of the biosphere through thoughtful conversation and enlightened connection.

Figure 1. Local Organising Chair Roger Norum opening WCEH 2024 at the University of Oulu.



Credit: Eeva Kuikka.

Figure 2. Keynote speaker Áile Aikio with Graeme Wynn, Taina Pihlajaniemi (Vice-Rector of Research, University of Oulu) and Roger Norum. Aikio's talk, 'Rievdat, Jorrat, Gulahallat: The Unrecognized Environmental Histories', was a lyrical and thought-provoking introduction to Sámi landscapes and *duodji* (traditional Sámi handicrafts), and their place in museum spaces.



Credit: Vesa-Pekka Herva.

Figure 3. Craft activist quilt 'Using the Past to Envision the Future', created by conference attendees in the Maker Space and then presented to the University of Oulu at the end of the conference. Left to Right: Marko Mutanen (Professor of Ecology and Genetics, University of Oulu), receiving the quilt on behalf of the University from Britta Fluevog, Anna Svensson and Verena Winiwarter. For more, see: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2883441/2883442>



Credit: Graeme Wynn.

Figure 4. Long days and luminous evenings near the Arctic Circle. The floating sauna on Oulujoki (seen here at a few minutes after 10:00pm).



Credit: Graeme Wynn.

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Roger Norum is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oulu, where he co-directs the Biodiverse Anthropocenes research programme. He is committed to transdisciplinary research on mobility, media, and environment that fosters understanding and collaboration among humanities scholars and natural and human scientists. He is the co-author of *Weirding Landscapes: Arctic Glacier Extinction and Otherworldly Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Palgrave, 2025). In 2026, Roger will co-chair the European Citizen Science Association conference in Oulu, Finland, when the city is crowned European Capital of Culture.

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Graeme Wynn was President of ICEHO between 2019 and 2024. He is Emeritus Professor of Geography in The University of British Columbia. His research contributions straddle the ground between historical geography and environmental history and range widely in time and space. A former President of ASEH, he is grateful for the good fortune and satisfactions that he has enjoyed as teacher, administrator and scholar.

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- *Offer travel assistance to young scholars from lower-income countries to attend world congresses of environmental history*

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