



# Notes from the Icehouse

## Building Environmental History Around the World

*Notes from the Icehouse* emerged in 2020, as a collaboration between Global Environment and the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations, ICEHO, after Graeme Wynn assumed the presidency of the Consortium. Under the new president, Claudia Leal, *Notes from the Icehouse* will invite renowned environmental history scholars from around the world to tell their personal stories, in order to better understand the formation of the field. These stories will also portray the context in which environmental history emerged in particular countries and the shape it took. The essays will be paired with similar ones by younger scholars from those same places, which will be published a month later on the ICEHO webpage and the White Horse Press blog, so as to illuminate how this vibrant field has changed and the new challenges it faces.

We start the series with Sverker Sörlin, whose essay will be paired with one by Jonathan Palmblad, to explore the development of environmental history in Sweden.

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**Figure 1. Winter in Lapland.**



Source: lutz6078, Pixabay.

## **Staying open – shaping environmental history in Sweden**

*Sverker Sörlin*

As historians we tend to agree that historical change occurs in a complex interaction of broad, gradual processes on the one hand, and, on the other, local circumstances that play out across shorter time scales, with chance involved. In retrospect, though, even the chance events seem to form a pattern. In my view at least, such was the official arrival of environmental history in Sweden, when I was appointed the first professor of the subject in 1993 at Umeå University, also to my knowledge the first designated chair in Scandinavia.

Before enrolling into PhD training in 1981, I had been studying history, economic history, social sciences and, importantly, intellectual history, the latter within a diverse and integrative field called

‘history of science and ideas’. My first conscious interest in environmental history came, when I was an absolute beginner in the programme, at a symposium at Umeå in the fall of 1981. I was asked to present Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980), a book that was reviewed and well received in the Swedish press and later translated to Swedish.<sup>1</sup> It was among a set of seminal books, often by North American authors, that drew my interest increasingly to environmental history. High on that list were: Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Hope and Mountain Glory* (1959); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967); Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (1986); Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada* (1987); and the eternal classic, Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967). When I started teaching, I sometimes used Donald Worster’s edited collection *The Ends of the Earth* (1988). There was also considerable interest in works from the French *Annales* school. We read especially Fernand Braudel, and early climate- and environmental historians such as Jacques Le Goff and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie; Lucien Febvre I read only later. Among British historians I remember particularly reading Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) and *Man and the Natural World* (1983); and Janet Browne, *The Secular Ark* (1983).

Another strand of interest among the Umeå historians was women’s history, which explains the support for the idea to invite Carolyn Merchant as a Fulbright scholar in 1983. Through interaction with Carolyn and her inspiring graduate seminar at Umeå, I included a

<sup>1</sup> The Swedish translation appeared in 1994 as C. Merchant, *Naturens död* (Stockholm: Symposion). Early and favourable reviews of the original in English were published in leading Swedish newspapers by historians of ideas Ronny Ambjörnsson in December 1981 and Tore Frängsmyr in February 1982. For further detail on the Swedish and Scandinavian receptions of the book and Merchant’s work more generally, see Sverker Sörlin, ‘Carolyn Merchant and *The Death of Nature* in Sweden’, *Organization and Environment* 11 (2)(1998): 193–97; and ‘Carolyn Merchant and the environmental humanities in Scandinavia’, in Kenneth Worthy, Elizabeth Allison and Whitney A. Bauman (eds), *After the Death of Nature: Carolyn Merchant and the Future of Human-Nature Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 178–97.

stop at Berkeley in the fall of 1984, where she invited me to present my research, during a trip I took as a PhD student. I travelled for a month in the USA and Canada, connecting with research environments not just in environmental history but also human ecology, a subject I had started teaching in collaboration with a team of mostly scientists. In Canada (Edmonton, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec), I learnt about Arctic resource extraction and the role of resources in the formation of national identities. These insights became strong themes in my own work in the 1980s, including my dissertation, *Framtidslandet* [Land of the Future, 1988], which dealt with the political history of the industrial and scientific appropriation of nature and society in the Swedish north.

They also connected with my own roots. Well before I became a history student, I had a kind of personal environmental interest that I suppose predisposed me to explore the field. I grew up in Lapland, far north. Winters were long with deep snow, unaffected yet by any noticeable climate warming. My main pastime in the winter was cross country skiing. I liked winters and snow. ‘The elements’ fascinated me – the sharp shifts between seasons, the extreme February cold and its death white silence.<sup>2</sup> We were rich in natural resources, interspersed with national parks and reserves, especially in the high mountains towards Norway. Forests and forestry, as well as minerals, hydropower and peat bogs, played an important role in local economies and just as much so in the national, export-based Swedish economy. There was also reindeer herding and a sizeable Sámi community. I likewise had a strong interest in international issues. In school I was an intellectual omnivore but I found that what I liked most was to build patterns of understanding. When people asked me why I didn’t pursue any of the attractive professional schools at university, I told them, ‘I want to find out how things really work’. ‘Things’ meant society, cultures, history. The world we inhabit. So familiar, yet so strange.

<sup>2</sup> I recently returned to these childhood winters in a literary non-fiction book, *Snö – a History* (2024; English trans. London: Doubleday, 2025), a book much informed by Anthropocene thought and elemental history.

**Figure 2. At work on the dissertation *Framtidslandet* [with an English summary: *Land of the Future: The Debate on Norrland and Its Natural Resources at the Time of the Industrial Breakthrough, 1988*, reissued in a revised version in 2023].**

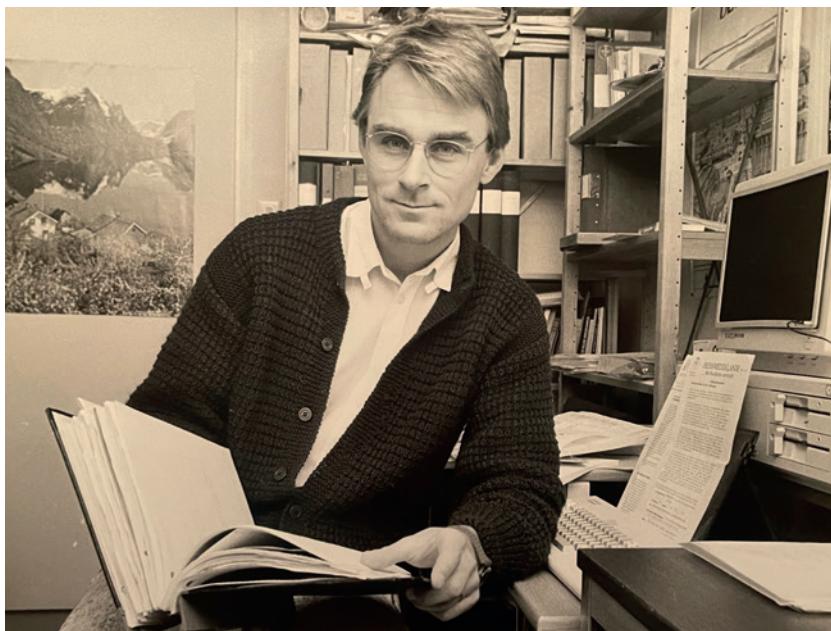
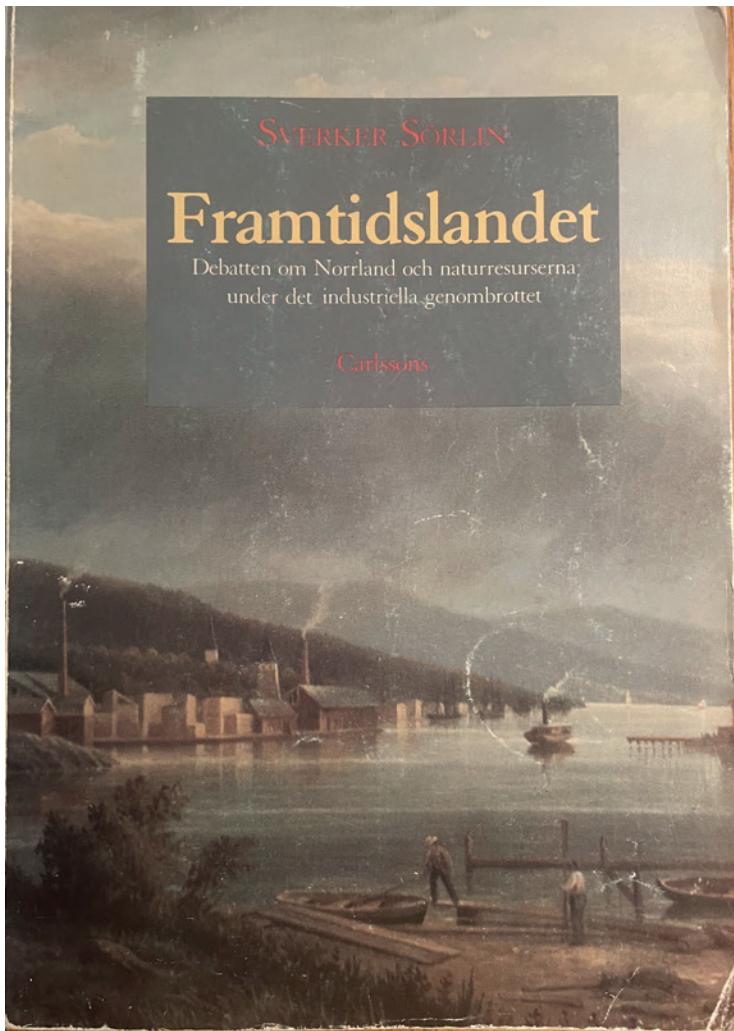


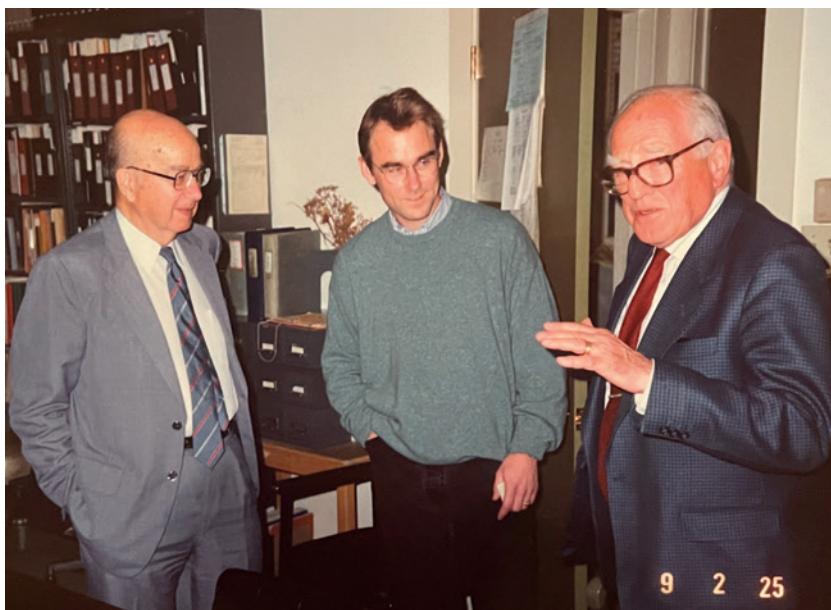
Photo from Sörlin's office at Umeå University, likely in 1987.

I kept going regularly to North America for conferences, including, from around 1990, ASEH meetings. With a grant from the Wallenberg Foundations, I spent a good deal of 1993 as a postdoc at Berkeley. I was hosted by the Center for Studies in Higher Education, CSHE. Higher education, along with research policy and planning, were fields that I had increasingly cultivated after my PhD and which, for long periods of my career, became a mainstay. I had also started working with colleagues in Sweden on futures studies, on the politics of European integration, and on Early Modern econom-

**Figure 3. The cover of *Framtidslandet* in the original 1988 edition, emphasising the export oriented resource extraction economy of the north.**



**Figure 4. Sverker Sörlin spent the better part of 1993 as a visiting postdoctoral fellow with the Center for Studies in Higher Education, CSHE, at the University of California Berkeley, the same year as he was appointed professor of Environmental History at Umeå University, Sweden. Here with Clark Kerr (left), former first chancellor of Berkeley, and, later, president of the University of California and Swedish educational scholar Torsten Husén (right), after a seminar Husén gave at CSHE in February 1993.**



ic botany (Linnaeus and his expansive, cameralist projects), while continuing my interest in the 'science politics' of northern regions and natural resources, extending my comparative efforts to other colonial contexts in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Arctic. I did an increasing amount of cultural journalism and essay writing, and established a certain presence as a public intellectual on the national level, contributing regularly to major media and even hosting a talk show on Swedish public television in 1992.

So, I suppose it would be fair to say that my early career to a large

extent reflected a confluence of long waves forming major fields. The most significant wave was the rise of environmental history, primarily in the United States but also in Europe. In the decade since I had met Carolyn Merchant in Umeå, and repeatedly in Berkeley and at conferences, I found myself successively surrounded by an expanding network of friends and colleagues in the field. They were often in the US and Canada, partly because of the relative maturity of the field there, but growing numbers appeared in Europe or overseas. Another long wave was what I many years later termed the 'Arctic Humanities',<sup>3</sup> extending an interest in the broader 'boreal' humanities and social science, including earlier and well-established fields such as Arctic anthropology and Inuit Studies.

What led to my own environmental history chair in 1993 was, nonetheless, something much more down-to-earth and happenstance. Before departing for my Berkeley postdoc, I was called to the University of Lund, where I had been shortlisted for a professorship in Human Ecology. I was prepared to travel to Lund for a trial lecture when, at the last moment, Umeå University came up with a counterbid offering a career-making opportunity to stay. I had personal reasons then to remain (a small family with our first child), having returned north after a period as director of the Center for History of Science in the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences from 1988 through 1990. When the preparations for the chair became more detailed, a designated field for the professorship was necessary. I was invited to make my opinion known, and I did not hesitate: environmental history was my choice.

I took this decision partly because there were already senior specialists in fields such as intellectual, social and demographic history at Umeå. Environmental history would add diversity and topicality. In addition, the environment was an issue destined to grow in importance. But just as much, it was where my own heart lay. By this time, I was confident that it would be tremendously fun and meaningful to be among a new generation of historians taking on

<sup>3</sup> Sverker Sörlin, 'The emerging Arctic humanities: A forward-looking postscript', *Journal of Northern Studies* 9 (1) (2015): 93–98.

this emerging field, making it flourish in Sweden and Scandinavia, in close collaboration with students and colleagues everywhere. Reflecting the two rising waves my own pursuits had rested upon, the position was first placed within the interdisciplinary Center for Arctic Cultural Research, reinforcing a northern profile, and, from 1995, in the Division of History of Science and Ideas, which would soon be part of merger processes with the History department and later with other fields. So, the position can also be understood as part of a strategic agenda of change in History and the humanities at Umeå University.

Personal circumstances and local university politics intervened, and quite decisively, to make me the first professor of Environmental History, so named. However, my appointment was not an isolated phenomenon. There were both forerunners and followers. At Lund University, Birgitta Odén, originally an Early Modernist, became profoundly influenced by the rising interest in environmental issues in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She formed a group of PhD students and postdocs to study the phenomenon, before the field was institutionalised internationally.<sup>4</sup> Partly due to lack of strategic foresight at Lund, the effort was allowed to peter out in the 1980s. Another reason was probably that the group did not manage to find any lasting international networks to be part of, although members of the group did visit ASEH meetings in the 1970s. Birgitta herself, late in her career, observed my work and encouraged me to continue on the environmental history path. A couple of her PhD students followed an academic career. One Russianist studied environmental politics in the USSR. Another started working in the Swedish equivalent of the US Environmental Protection Agency, alongside completing several books on state policies for the environment.<sup>5</sup>

Even earlier environmental history, *avant la lettre* had been prac-

<sup>4</sup> David Larsson Heidenblad, 'Environmental history in the 1960s?: An unsuccessful research application and the circulation of environmental knowledge', *History of Humanities* 6 (2) (2021): 635–47.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Lars J. Lundgren, *Acid Rain on the Agenda: A Picture of a Chain of Events in Sweden, 1966–1968* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1998).

tised by both cultural and physical geographers, ethnologists and archaeologists. A particularly strong group was the large Swedish community of palaeo-scientists working on ice ages and palaeo-sequencing of the late Quaternary, especially through post-glacial pollen analysis, using peat bogs as geological archives and fossil tree pollen preserved in them as data. Climate history and dating techniques in general were Swedish strongholds.<sup>6</sup> Many of these fields used to be quite historically oriented and their largely 'material' histories had long been regarded with respect in the Swedish historical community.

In the 1980s and 1990s, environmental history drew ever more interest in Swedish institutions, certainly not only in History departments, but also there. This favorable reception can be partly explained by the strong general turn to environmental issues that occurred in Swedish political and public life. Sweden became a greening version of the 'progressive small state', alongside Norway, which, however, was burdened by its growing role as an oil country.<sup>7</sup> Stockholm, the capital city, with its multiple scientific, media and diplomatic capacities, and a key international convening power, for a long period held the status of one of the 'green capitals of the world'. As such, it also embraced a historiography of environment and climate.<sup>8</sup>

The new field had a capacity to win grants, I think partly because it addressed acute real-world issues and was keen to work across the boundary towards the sciences. Furthermore, resources for this

<sup>6</sup> Christer Nordlund, 'Peat bogs as geological archives: Lennart Von Post *et al.*, and the development of quantitative pollen analysis during World War I', *Earth Sciences History* 33 (2) (2014): 187–200.

<sup>7</sup> Peder Anker, *The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); idem., 'Greenwashing a nation', *LA+ Interdisciplinary Journal of Landscape Architecture* 15 (Spring 2022): 100–05, <https://pederanker.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/anker-lagreen.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Sverker Sörlin and Eric Paglia, *Stockholm and the Rise of Global Environmental Governance: The Human Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), esp. Ch. 1, 'The Stockholm story: A progressive counter narrative', pp. 8–44, which also reasons around contenders among other major 'green cities' around the world.

strand of history were available not just in the usual humanities sources, but through a wider array of public research funding agencies. When I started to take on PhD students in the 1990s, these smallish but useful grants were extremely important. Later, with more experience, I often funded new students and postdocs in cohorts with large grants for research programmes. These programmes were typically collaborative and thematic. One was on landscape history, others had an Arctic orientation. They served as platforms for building the field. I also organised workshops for edited collections and special issues, though not primarily to foster the sub-discipline itself. I believe that articulating a theme and working on it in large groups made an imprint and sent a message to relevant communities that there was something worthwhile going on here.

One of these meetings became a defining experience for the field. In August 1995, together with a young Norwegian colleague, Hilde Ibsen, I managed to set up a summer school in environmental history; funds came from a Nordic funder, NorFA. We were looking for some 20–25 participants but had more than seventy applicants and ended up accepting more than thirty, including some very insisting postdocs. They came from all over the Nordic region. Among the teaching faculty from around the world, I had invited some of my Berkeley friends, including both Carolyn Merchant and the influential heterodox development- and ecological economist Richard Norgaard, along with multiple Scandinavians such as Katarina Eckerberg, a political scientist. We spent an entire week together, hearing lectures, doing seminars and making field trips among forests and rivers.

What was remarkable was what happened to the participants, among them Eva Jakobsson, Timo Myllyntaus, Björn-Ola Linnér, Laura Hollsten, Kristin Asdal, Katarina Saltzman, Marie Stenseke, Erland Mårald, to mention a few. They liaised and bonded under the new banner, and formed literally a stratum of innovation in the field. Ten to fifteen years later, they and many others occupied a significant share of the key positions in academic environmental history (or cogent fields) in the Nordic countries, and were instrumental in many of the major research initiatives. Some of them served as deans, full professors and in scientific academies, in environmental

history or in related fields. I take this success to mean that the timing was optimal: early enough for the field to be extremely attractive and full of potential, late enough for universities and funding agencies to have realised it was relevant beyond its own boundaries. Environment was that major issue with a history of failures, and a few successes; established fields struggled to provide any useful new take on it. History looked promising.

Environmental history in Sweden matured into a strong field, with participation in ASEH and ESEH meetings becoming solid over the years. However, its practitioners rarely, if ever, got designated positions in the (sub-)discipline itself. My own first cohort of Umeå students, like most others, tended to be in history departments, but their later careers often resulted in a floating presence within environmental history *qua* discipline. Not all remained in the field for very long and disciplinary-building instincts have remained timid. I, too, had to take an early decision on that, a quite formative one.

In the early 1990s, the general expectation was still that a new full professor would start a new seminar and a new PhD programme, organisationally separate from existing disciplines, in line with the German chair system, that had been largely followed in Sweden. I did not want to contribute to more demarcation within a History community that was already divided on the three main disciplines (history, economic history, and history of ideas), and a few stand-alone PhD programmes such as History of Science and Technology at KTH Royal Institute of Technology and Agricultural History at the Swedish Agricultural University. I rather embraced an integrative, interdisciplinary environmental history, with relevance to the History community at large, and with open channels connecting to other disciplines. My own PhD students over the years at Umeå, KTH, Stockholm University and elsewhere (totalling more than 25, including some for whom I have been co-supervisor), have each carved out to what extent they identify with (environmental) history for their careers. Diversity is the norm. One self-identifies as an anthropologist, another moved into the history of sports. Some are historians of environmental politics. A couple work in international relations, IR, and climate geopolitics. One is professor of 'technol-

ogy and social change'. A large share though, expectedly, hold academic positions in historical fields.

There was another reason not to pursue a separate PhD programme. In 1992 the Swedish government had decided to decentralise some key functions to the universities and chairs were no longer formally appointed by the government. This allowed for a more intellectually diverse and less hierarchical view of academic departments, an idea that I supported and argued publicly and in the government's Science Advisory Board (*Forskningsberedningen*), where I was repeatedly a member between the mid-1990s and 2017. I became ever more convinced that I should not impose on my students a need to have a special PhD degree for environmental history, which might make their careers in Swedish academic life more constrained.

It took me some time, however, to take a decision that was unusual for new chair holders. I remember that at one ASEH meeting I approached William Cronon in a break between sessions and asked him if he had ever considered creating a separate degree in environmental history. His answer was brief, and I remember it very well: 'Oh, no! I wouldn't dare put them on the job market with a too narrow degree...' I added his comment to my list of arguments for opting out of an exclusive disciplinary career path. But the dilemma is in a sense eternal. Specialisation would perhaps advance more depth and secure the field institutionally. But it would set a false standard. It would become more vulnerable, with higher thresholds for entering. It would also bring the risk of a field being hijacked by narrow minded schools of thought. In larger surroundings, I assume both PhD students and their professors would be encouraged to ask bigger questions and be more open to new ideas.

Looking back, these two linked decisions were among the most important I took in my professional life. I am confident that they were the right ones: to argue that the new professorship at Umeå should be in environmental history, yes, but that a separate PhD training programme in this field was not the way to go. Embedded in larger environments, I found that lacking a PhD programme to oversee and constantly focus on was a blessing. It facilitated my own mobility, taking up positions, permanent or visiting, at other insti-

tutions both abroad and in Sweden. I could more easily take on a broader set of roles and build comprehensive networks both in academia and in society. In a certain sense, I could retain a sizable part of my identity from intellectual history and also from the economic history of natural resources and mix these experiences with topical issues in environment, climate and policy.

With this freedom I turned into an eclectic institutional builder myself. I worked with Christian Pfister (Bern) and Verena Winiwarter (Vienna) in the late 1990s as an interim task force of what became ESEH in 1999, with its first conference at St Andrews in 2001. With multiple colleagues in different countries, I worked to enhance the presence of social sciences and humanities in the 4<sup>th</sup> International Polar Year 2007–09, during which I was President of the Swedish committee.<sup>9</sup> Having moved to Stockholm in 2000, to become director of the new Swedish Institute for Studies in Education and Research, I was developing ideas about enhancing the public and political weight of the humanities and started thinking about what soon became known as the environmental humanities.<sup>10</sup> To me this was a logical extension of bringing humanities closer to the environment – but, even more, a step on the way of raising the importance and influence of humanities knowledge both in academia and in society. Individual disciplines could always be discarded as insufficient, but who could deny the importance of religion, culture, history, language, literature, art, thinking, knowledge, ethics – all these strands of expertise that humanities possess? The environmental was only one of potentially several entry points to an emerging interdisciplinary and ‘integrative humanities’ claiming a relevant centrality in addressing grand societal challenges like environment, climate, health, energy.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> I. Krupnik, M. Bravo, Y. Csonka, G. K. Hovelsrud-Broda, L. Müller-Wille, B. Poppel, P. Schweitzer and S. Sörlin, ‘Social sciences and humanities in the International Polar Year 2007–2008: An integrating mission’, *ARCTIC* 58 (1) (2005): 91–101.

<sup>10</sup> Sverker Sörlin, ‘Environmental humanities: Why should biologists interested in the environment take the humanities seriously?’ *BioScience* 62 (9) (2012): 788–89.

<sup>11</sup> Sverker Sörlin, ‘Humanities of transformation: From crisis and critique to

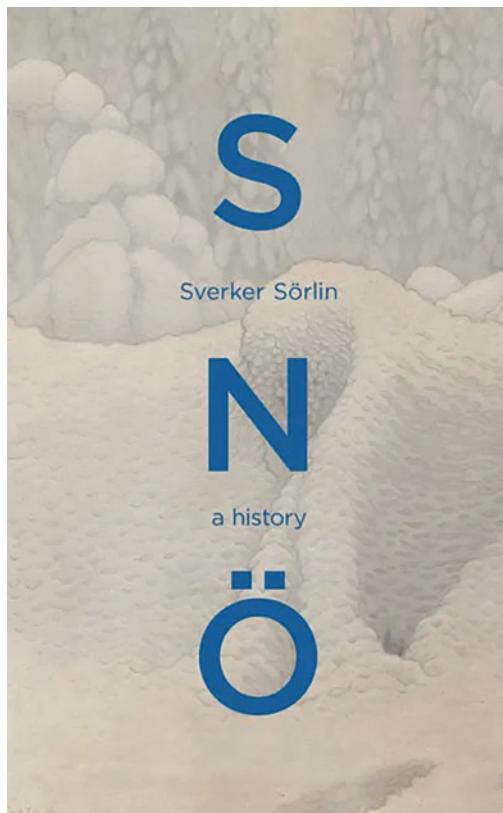
The idea of environmental humanities was at its core a policy idea, although I thought it would enrich our intellectual work as well, including in environmental humanities, where, along with fields such as ecocriticism and anthropology, history has been among the seminal contributors to the emerging interdisciplinary field. I was a co-founder of the KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory in 2011 (with Nina Wormbs). A theoretical idea that I also started contemplating at around the same time was about ‘environing technologies’.<sup>12</sup> I thought we needed more theoretical background to our most central concept. Where does the environment come from, after all? Was it always there? No, it is of our own making. We are an environing kind. It co-evolved with my ever-deeper engagement in Anthropocene thought and, in 2023, with KTH colleagues I co-founded the Center for Anthropocene History. I was also one among a small handful of humanities scholars engaged in building the Stockholm Resilience Center in 2007 and worked there on an adjunct position for five years, always eager to foster collaborations, big and small.

I have been a specialist, yes, but in several resonant fields. This condition has been, and remains, useful when I wish to comment on contemporary issues or when I write essays and, increasingly, literary non-fiction books, thus widening the reach of environmental history in the public sphere and in contemporary affairs. For this same reason I think that environmental historians in Sweden, in the past several decades, have become seeds of change wherever they have shown up. The Center for Anthropocene History provides a good example. It is largely an extension of environmental history, and other strands of history writing, into the complex and rapidly evolving field of Anthropocene practice and thought. History is part of defining our time, as it should be.

wards the emerging integrative humanities’, *Research Evaluation* 27 (4) (2018): 287–97.

<sup>12</sup> Sverker Sörlin and Nina Wormbs, ‘Environing technologies: A theory of making environment’, *History & Technology* 34 (2) (2018): 101–25.

**Figure 5. Sverker Sörlin has recently returned to the winter elements, snow and ice, but now as elegy, the elements of loss and mourning in a melting world. Here the cover of the UK edition of *Snö -- a history*.**



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