

# Rachel Carson Center

## Perspectives

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Fabian Zimmer

## What I Found at the Bottom of a Reservoir



Figure 1  
Schwarzenbachtalsperre,  
Black Forest, Germany,  
1997 (Source: Cornelia  
Echte-Zimmer)

### Schwarzenbachtalsperre, Black Forest, Germany, 1997

The photograph shows me as a seven-year-old boy walking along the crest of the Schwarzenbach Dam in the northern Black Forest in Germany. Even as a child, I loved water. Fountains in public parks fascinated me and so did the sea. I loved to watch the waves break on the shore, washing away the sand castles I had built. Growing up in southern Germany, the sea was always far away, mysterious, and frightening. Even today, the thought of taking a swim in the sea, or even a lake, makes me shiver. I fully appreciate why on the edges of old maps, the oceans abound with monsters and magical creatures. Who knows what waits below the surface?

However, in 1997 the Schwarzenbach Dam was not a frightening place. That year, its reservoir was emptied for maintenance work. As solid as a dam might seem, it is indeed a living thing. It is guarded by a *Talsperrenwärter*, a dam warden, who regularly patrols several kilometers of tunnels that run through the dam's body.

The warden monitors the overall state of the concrete, its slight movements, as it expands and contracts with rising and sinking temperatures, and the constant flow of water that seeps through the massive wall at the rate of one liter every second. In order to make sure the movements of the dam and the flow of water remain within certain limits, a general overhaul is undertaken every 10 to 30 years.

These envirotechnical miracles did not interest the seven-year-old me all that much. I only remember the fascination of venturing into the dried-up, cracked mud-land behind the dam wall, studded with old tree stumps—a resurfaced subaqueous forest. The emptying of the reservoir must have been a major tourist attraction. Hundreds of visitors flocked to see the seemingly useless dam towering above the new, moon-like landscape behind it. Rumor had it that there was a drowned village in the lake, whose church bells could be heard ringing on holy days—an Atlantis six hundred meters above the sea. Even though there was never a church in the Schwarzenbach valley, and the foundations of two farmsteads were carefully removed before inundation, public interest was immense. There were guided tours through the dry valley and an information booth from the electricity company where original film footage from the years of construction was screened. When I returned to visit the dam almost 20 years later, the kiosk along the road leading over the dam was still selling postcards commemorating the emptying of the reservoir.

### **History I: The City**

For me, history was never in a book. Towards the end of high school, I had the worst history classes imaginable. History lessons consisted of two columns, one on the left with dates, another on the right with events. The task was to link them correctly. Yet during this time, I began realizing that history could be something very tangible. A new inner-city shopping mall had been built around the corner from where my family and I lived. When I saw photographs of how the place had looked before, I was shocked. Not because I mourned the buildings that had been demolished (a number of drab, pastel-colored, modernist houses from the 1960s), but because I realized how quickly I had forgotten an aspect of this part of the city that I was so familiar with. This must have been the moment I understood—even if only in blurry

outlines—that the built environment was far from static. It had a history that without the work of remembering would inevitably be lost. Walking and cycling through the city, I gradually realized I could read its history. I learned to decipher the year of construction from the style of a building. I learned to read the city’s annual growth rings, the physical scars left behind by the bombings of World War II, or the marks of later redevelopment sprees. I decided I wanted to study history.

## **History II: The Country**

A few years into my studies, I traveled north to live in Sweden for several months. It was only there that I began to understand that nature was not natural and that it was not just the city that was full of history—the countryside was too. I made friends with an archaeologist whose perspective on history has since deeply intrigued me. To him, history was a landscape, and landscape was history—sediments of time deposited in space. We were part of a larger group of fellow nature lovers, hikers, and daydreamers. As often as we could, we went out hiking in the woods, trying to read traces in the landscape, finding stone walls from previously farmed fields, long abandoned and now overgrown with moss and trees. This is how I still try to see history today—it helps to think with the object of study rather than from a particular disciplinary standpoint. This approach is what I share with the field of environmental history.

## **Trollhättan Power Plant and Waterfall, Western Sweden, 2015**

Like many other people standing next to me on a summer’s day in 2015, on the brink of the once world-famous waterfalls of Trollhättan in Western Sweden, I took a photograph to mark the view. Since the 1920s, the only thing to be seen at the falls on a normal day is a dry rock gorge. But since the late 1950s, every year in early summer they come back to life again, with the power company that operates the waterfall using a portion of its precious resource not for the production of electricity but for the production of a spectacular view.



**Figure 2**  
Trollhättan power  
plant and waterfall,  
Western Sweden,  
2015 (Source:  
Author)

My first, rather unspectacular, encounter with hydroelectric dams had occurred a few years earlier when I moved from Sweden back to Germany. It was during a university course, not unlike the history lessons I suffered through during high school, that I learned about dams around the world: their size, length, weight, retention volume, kilowatts, investment costs, and the number of people displaced by them (it was a history course, after all). Yet, I still sensed something mythical about dams, with their promethean force to alter rivers, landscapes, and the people around them. They seemed to bear within them a deeper meaning, something that I felt inclined to bring to the surface. Something, perhaps, like the story of an invented church at the bottom of a lake.

I have myself gone from being a dam tourist, gazing at the technological sublime of emptied reservoirs and revitalized waterfalls, to being an observer of dam spectators. I study acts of seeing and the art of making the power of water visible to the public. I have traveled around Europe and through the archives to understand the

national histories that are so frequently told about dams to distill a common experience of modernity out of numerous, often very similar, narratives. I have learned that the spectacle at the Schwarzenbach Dam in 1997, as extraordinary as it seemed to me back then, was quite normal. I understand now that large dams have always attracted spectators, and that companies and other hydro-enthusiasts have developed intricate strategies to guide and frame the perceptions of these dam spectators. Indeed, the history of hydroelectricity implies a history of vision. On the one hand, this is a history of displaying and seeing hydroelectricity, mediated through touristic activities, photographs, and films. On the other hand, these displays embody a history of hopes, fears, and utopian desires of an electrical life, made possible by clean and quiet “white coal”—a vision of the future voiced prominently by figures like Lewis Mumford in the first half of the twentieth century. By the latter half of the century this had become hotly contested, as the environmental disadvantages of hydroelectricity became apparent. This history of vision thus not only tells us stories about dams and rivers but also about the contested views people had of the technology and the future it represented, testifying to the physical power of dams to transform landscapes, as much as to their power to capture the imagination of the public.

There is, one might say, a church spire below the surface of every lake.