

## Environmental history: introduction

*Simon Goldhill and Georgie Fitzgibbon*

*Abstract:* The papers presented here serve as examples of intellectual, political, and social responses to climate-related phenomena and their consequences. They grapple with several key issues including the agency of nonhuman nature and environmental determinism, environmental governance, climate as a cultural construction, the history of environmental ideas and discourse, environmental narratives, and the commodification of nature.

*Keywords:* History, geopolitics, Anthropocene, deep time, water, Gondwanaland, Cherokees, Antarctica.

*Notes on the authors:*

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This issue of the *Journal of the British Academy* showcases some of the excellent work historians, geographers, and other specialists in the humanities and social sciences are doing on climate and environmental history. Together these articles demonstrate the benefits of including perspectives on environmental history in wider conversations on climate change, as part of a series of special issues curated by the British Academy in the lead up to COP26.

This issue demonstrates that it is timely and welcome to intensify historical research into climate change and climate as factors of history. While climate change is often presented as something new, controversial, and technical, historians have much to contribute. Natural climate fluctuations predate human history; and the politics and policy of climate change have their parallels in previous environmental and social issues. What stories can we tell to move the conversation forward?

The articles presented here serve as examples of intellectual, political, and social responses to climate-related phenomena and their consequences. They grapple with several key issues including the agency of nonhuman nature and environmental determinism, environmental governance, climate as a cultural construction, the history of environmental ideas and discourse, environmental narratives, and the commodification of nature.

In the first article Alison Bashford *et al.* (2021) explore Gondwanaland's modern history, its unexpected political and cultural purchase since the 1880s. Originating with geological and palaeontological research in the Gond region of Central India, 'Gondwana' has become recognisable and useful, especially in settler colonial contexts. This prospectus sets out a program for a highly unusual 'transnational' project, involving scholars from India, Australia, Antarctica, southern Africa and South America. Unpredictably across the five continents of former Gondwanaland, the term itself signals depth of time and place across the spectrum of Indigenous land politics, coal-based extractive politics, and, paradoxically, nationalist environmental politics. All kinds of once-living Gondwanaland biota deliver us fossil fuels today – the 'gifts of Gondwana' some geologists call southern hemisphere coal, gas, petroleum – and so the modern history of Gondwanaland is also a substantive history of the Anthropocene.

The second article explores the traditional ecological knowledge of the Cherokee people. Gregory Smithers argues that in their traditional homelands, located in the southern Appalachian Mountains, Cherokees have accumulated vast repositories of knowledge – known as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) – about changes in geology, fluctuations in local ecosystems and the importance of biodiversity. This knowledge, collected and stored in oral traditions, sacred beliefs, and daily life, ensures the resilience of Cherokee communities. Water stories are key to this resilience. As this article reveals, water stories are sacred stories, part of a living body of knowledge that connects the Cherokees to the landscapes and waterscapes of southern Appalachia.

Water stories flow through Cherokee scientific and spiritual knowledge. They are stories thousands of years in the making and provide vital insights that can inform the co-governance of rivers and clarify strategies for living in balance and harmony *with* local ecosystems. In the old stories of the Cherokee people are fresh insights that can guide climate resilience into the future.

The third article (Howkins *et al.* 2021) uses the history of New Zealand's Vanda Station in Antarctica to make a case for the inseparability of human history and environmental change in the epoch of the Anthropocene. Vanda Station was built in the late 1960s to promote New Zealand's sovereignty claims to Antarctica and to promote scientific research in the predominantly ice-free McMurdo Dry Valleys region. The McMurdo Dry Valleys (MDV) are the largest ice-free region in the Antarctic continent and have become an important centre for scientific activity. Since the early 1970s, the region has been at the forefront of debates over the environmental protection of the Antarctic continent and in 2004 the MDV became an Antarctic Specially Managed Area (ASMA). Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the levels of the nearby Lake Vanda rose dramatically and in the early 1990s the decision was taken to close the station. Rather than seeing the closure of Vanda simply as a consequence of the rising lake levels, Adrian Howkins suggests instead that it was the result of a number of interconnected social, political, scientific, and environmental factors. In this way, the 'biography' of Vanda Station is used to add depth and nuance to our understanding of the geological 'age of humans'.

To inspire more environmental history research on climate, this special issue highlights diverse new research and underscores accomplishments, deficiencies, discrepancies, and debates about climate history. The articles presented here demonstrate the opportunities to incorporate insights from the humanities and social sciences into environmental management, provide historical 'data' about past human activity (environmental impact), and aid in the production of historically informed policy suggestions.

This issue forms part of the British Academy's COP26 series which aims to raise awareness of the importance of the humanities and the social sciences in understanding the complex human and social dimensions to environmental challenges and their solutions. The authors are drawn from a range of Academy programmes, including the *Global Professorships* scheme, which enables researcher mobility and collaboration, and the *Knowledge Frontiers* scheme, which aims to enable different communities of knowledge and practice to illustrate the unique added value of international and interdisciplinary collaboration, as well as from the Fellowship of the British Academy.

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