

## ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND THE OCEANS

Conference at the Carlsberg Academy, Copenhagen, June 2–5, 2004. Co-sponsored by the University of Southern Denmark, the Danish Research Council, and the GHI. Conveners: Poul Holm (University of Southern Denmark) and Frank Zelko (GHI).

Participants: Kurk Dorsey (University of New Hampshire), Richard Grove (Australian National University), David Helvarg (Blue Frontier, Washington, DC), Julia Lajus (European University at St. Petersburg), David Lazar (GHI), Anne Marboe (University of Southern Denmark), Christof Mauch (GHI), Karen Oslund (John W. Kluge Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC), Michael Reidy (Montana State University), Helen Rozwadowski (University of Connecticut, Avery Point), David Starkey (University of Hull), Phil Steinberg (Florida State University), Gary Weir (U.S. Naval Historical Center, Washington DC).

The *Bow Mariner*, the ethanol-filled tanker that sank off the coast of Virginia in February 2004, provides us with a pointed reminder of how little our attitudes toward the oceans have changed. With reassuring equanimity, a spokesman for the company that owned the ship explained that “There’s not a great deal of anxiety about the slick at this point . . . Of course there’s concern, but it’s drifting out to sea and there’s not much concern about further environmental effects.”<sup>1</sup> Initially, the most pressing problem, apart from rescuing survivors, was that the slick might have come ashore at the Chincoteague Island National Wildlife Refuge. Nobody seemed too concerned about the effect the slick may have had out in the open ocean. Despite Rachel Carson’s immensely popular *The Sea around Us*, the lessons of the 1995 *Brent Spar* incident, and countless National Geographic specials and David Attenborough documentaries about the oceans, it seems that our environmental consciousness retains a strong terrestrial focus. The notion that the oceans constitute a limitless expanse of water, a bottomless sink capable of absorbing anything that humans throw into it, continues to linger in the popular imagination.

Environmental historians, on the whole, have shown relatively little interest in exploring this attitude, or, indeed, in examining the oceans in general. In his recent survey of the state of the discipline, John McNeill noted that “the field of environmental history maintains a terrestrial bias,” with aquatic ecosystems “receiving scant attention.” While there is “a burgeoning literature of the Atlantic world,” he argues, “no one has tried to write the environmental side of that story.” Likewise, “the Indian Ocean world, probably the most coherent of all the oceanic spaces, has yet

to be assessed in its environmental dimensions." Only the Pacific, "the least coherent" oceanic space, "has inspired a few efforts."<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the Copenhagen conference was to redress some of the above shortcomings, and to attempt to outline how environmental historians can better approach the history of the world's oceans. Key questions included: What are the potential insights—theoretical, methodological, and conceptual—of environmental history when it comes to studying the oceans? How can environmental history provide us with a more complete picture of how humans have interacted with the oceans in the past? How have the participants' own projects contributed to these insights and how could they further benefit from them?

Some environmental historians and historians of science have grappled with these issues, but there is much scope for new work and new approaches. For example, the collection of essays in *The Exploited Seas* constitute an important effort to inject traditional maritime history with a solid dose of ecology.<sup>3</sup> However, it mostly deals with the material and ecological realms without really discussing the cultural, intellectual, and political spheres. Ideally, historians studying the oceans should seek to combine these elements as much as possible. We should seek to understand and explain, not just how the oceans have been exploited as a natural resource or as a dumping ground, but how various peoples—scientists, artists, or simply "the masses"—have perceived the oceans at different points in history. This may involve more abstract and theoretical notions, such as how the ocean has been socially "constructed." We might even begin to question fundamental concepts, such as the distinction between "land" and "sea" as separate environments. Perhaps it is time that environmental historians subjected the oceans to the same critical scrutiny they have meted out to the traditional concept of wilderness.<sup>4</sup>

Poul Holm started the proceedings with an overview of the human impact on marine life over the past two centuries. His narrative emphasized the ways in which human beings' desire for marine resources, combined with an optimistic view in which the sea is seen as inexhaustible, have generally trumped more cautious and critical assessments of the oceans' limits. The analysis of historical levels of biomass and extraction, and time-series of climate and ecosystem variability, he argued, would be a productive way to improve our understanding of the oceans from both a scientific and humanistic perspective.

David Helvarg brought to the conference the perspective of a writer and activist who is well informed by history. He described how the sixteenth-century Dutch jurist, Hugo Grotius, developed the doctrine of the Free Seas, which became the global standard for the ocean commons after 1609, but which has gradually been eroded over the past two centuries as nations sought to exert greater influence on their surrounding

oceans. Over the past seventy years, nation-states have extended their claims on the resources within two-hundred-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). EEZs now fence in 40 percent of the global seas, with further claims being extended under the Law of the Seas Convention and additional attempts to “privatize” the seas for activities such as bio-prospecting and fish-farming, both within and outside national EEZs. While there has been much discussion about “the tragedy of the commons,” Helvarg noted, the enclosure and privatization of the world’s oceans has, to date, appeared to accelerate the cascading series of environmental disasters that now threaten to turn the living seas into vast dead zones within our lifetime. The concept of eco-management of public and common seas is only now being given lip-service in forums ranging from the Johannesburg Earth Summit to the report of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy.

Karen Oslund, Kurk Dorsey, and Frank Zelko focused their papers on whales and whaling. Oslund outlined how the history of whale hunting and whale protection might be told from an environmental history perspective, and examined how this history illustrates some problems and themes in the international history of the oceans. Unlike many other animals that are the subject of environmental history, the nature of whales and the oceans they live in means that both the hunting and the protection of whales have been international rather than national issues. Thus, the different understandings and meanings that people of various cultures attach to whales and their living environments have often come into conflict in international discussions, treaties, and negotiations. In his paper, Zelko provided an example of one such cultural understanding, examining how the image of the benevolent, intelligent, and ecologically benign whale was constructed over the past half-century, particularly in the United States, and how this was used by activist groups such as Greenpeace to further the cause of whale preservation. Dorsey also focused on the challenges that whales have posed for international maritime conservation. His paper examined whaling diplomacy from the first treaties on the subject in the 1930s to the low point of the International Whaling Commission’s history in 1965. By then, it had become clear to most observers that the International Whaling Commission had failed in its efforts to either regulate whaling properly or to find a workable formula for managing various species of whales on the high seas. Dorsey outlined three factors, each related to the nature of pelagic whaling in the Antarctic seas, which contributed to the failure of thirty-five years of whaling diplomacy: scientific uncertainty; a lack of precedents to guide diplomats, scientists, and whalers in setting international regulations; and government subsidies for companies that took huge financial risks.

In his paper, Phil Steinberg proposed two possible narratives that can explain the recent popular fascination with the ocean's endangered nature. The first narrative outlines how the ocean, previously considered immune to overfishing and systematic pollution, is now being exploited and degraded at an unsustainable rate. The second narrative, by contrast, locates increased concern for the marine environment in the ways in which interaction with marine nature has become *less* relevant in individuals' everyday lives. According to this view, the ocean, previously an arena that was encountered as a space of danger or as a provider of resources, is now encountered simply as an empty surface (perhaps with a few charismatic megafauna), to be gazed at from afar or to be traveled over by a tiny, specialized minority of humanity. As such, the ocean is encountered as a romanticized space of "pure" nature, outside of society and insulated from socially generated change. Steinberg then demonstrated how each narrative has its origins in changing uses of the ocean over the past few centuries and how the contemporary marine environmentalist movement borrows tropes from both narratives.

Richard Grove focused his paper on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bermuda, which, he argued, was the "precocious site for some of the world's first formal conservation laws both at sea and on land." Conservation measures began as early as 1616, when Bermuda passed laws protecting the cahow, or Bermuda petrel. Intermittent drought and crop failure impelled the protection of alternative marine food sources, while early mercantile ambitions forced consideration of formal controls on the harvesting of fish and whales. Grove argued that the failure of most of these measures did not detract from the unusual Puritan circumspection and innovation that they represent.

Michael Reidy moved the discussion into the nineteenth century, examining the process by which the British Admiralty, maritime community, and scientific elite collaborated to organize the world's oceans, coasts, ports, and estuaries in the first half of the nineteenth century. These experts transformed the vast emptiness of the ocean into an ordered and bounded grid inscribed with isolines depicting tidal, magnetic, thermal, and barometric information. One important result of this transformation, according to Reidy, was the expansion of science from a limited and local undertaking receiving parsimonious state support and embracing only sporadic communication among philosophers of different nations, to worldwide and relatively well-financed research involving a hierarchy of practitioners working with increased budgets and sophisticated instruments. At the center of this transformation, the modern scientist emerged.

Gary Weir analyzed the impact that twentieth-century scientific and military research has had on our understanding and perception of the

oceans. Focusing on the U.S. Navy's Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS), Weir demonstrated how applied research in ocean acoustics opened up entirely new frontiers in understanding ocean dynamics and the oceans' role both as a heat sink and an indicator of climate change. Like Reidy's paper, Weir's work demonstrates how our scientific understanding of the oceans is frequently a byproduct of military necessity and imperial ambition. Julia Lajus also examined how the accumulation of scientific knowledge has impacted people's attitude toward the oceans. Her paper focused specifically on the Russian fishing industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She described how Soviet fisheries scientists, drawing on the quantitative approach of geochemists such as Vadimir Vernadsky, "modernized" fishing practices and transformed fish into calculable and manageable resources.

Finally, Helen Rozwadowski and David Starkey presented papers providing broad guidelines for how the study of the oceans in their subfields, the history of science and maritime history respectively, could benefit from an environmental history perspective. Rozwadowski used Richard White's *Organic Machine* and William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, standard texts in the environmental history canon, to consider how we come to know and understand the ocean through work. In doing so, she mounted the argument that the history of science must be part of marine environmental history if scholars are to adequately explain how knowledge about the ocean environment has been created. In addition, we need to recognize that our knowledge and understanding of the ocean environment has been constructed not just by scientists studying the ocean, but also by those who work on the oceans, such as fishermen and whalers. Starkey's paper identified the problems that have increasingly afflicted the subdiscipline of maritime history over the last two decades. He argued that maritime historians should address these issues by considering more closely the relationship that has ultimately conditioned the use made of the sea and its resources by human societies in historic times: the relationship between human capabilities and the marine environment. He further contended that in conducting such an examination, maritime historians should deploy their particular expertise and techniques in conjunction with those of specialists in other disciplines. Such an environmental, multidisciplinary approach will perhaps enable maritime history to move from the periphery of the historical profession to the mainstream of intellectual enquiry, which is to be found at disciplinary interfaces such as those between the humanities and the natural sciences.

Although all the participants recognized that there was still much work to be done, both empirically and theoretically, there was a general sense of optimism that the oceans would become an increasingly important focus of historians' inquiries over the coming decades. Environmen-

tal historians, with their focus on the interplay between human actions and natural processes, as well as their interdisciplinary focus, were in an ideal position to provide a leading voice in this field.

*Frank Zelko*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Washington Post*, March 2, 2004, 2

<sup>2</sup> John McNeill, "The Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 42 (December 2003), 42, 33–34.

<sup>3</sup> Poul Holm, Tim D. Smith and David J. Starkey, eds., *Research in Maritime History No. 21, The Exploited Seas: New Directions for Marine Environmental History* (St. John's, Newfoundland: International Maritime Economic History Association/Census of Marine Life, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I am referring to seminal texts such as William Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995).