

Invitation to the Conference: Our Common Present 2016

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Our Common Present 2016

Great expectations, projects and mistakes – efforts to understand and control nature in the past and the present

The Conference will take place at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague 1, square **Jana Palacha 2, room 104** (see [map](#)), on **31st March (Czech part) and 1st April 2016 (English part)**.

Up-to-date information about the conference and its [program is here](#).

For capacity reasons the participants should register; the [registration form is here](#).

The theme of the conference:

Throughout the ages, people have tried to deal with the unpredictability of nature and at the same time influence it through their interventions. They have always longed to transform the environment, society, or even man as such; they have strived to harness the forces of nature or prevent unpredictable risks. Attempts to interfere with nature or engineer human beings and their social or economic relationships have often been (self) destructive due to misunderstandings over fundamental internal principles. The boundary between what is based on dreams or mere illusion, and appropriate plans and processes, is almost indistinguishable – the real benefits or, conversely, major risks, usually become apparent only in the long term. Desired progress and unintended disaster are often two sides of the same coin. And so even in a fully responsible and scientifically sound relationship with nature we can observe an indistinct dividing line between the possible and the impossible, reality and fiction, which is easy to regularly transgress by technical means.

In this sense, we are looking for lessons from the past, but at the same time trying to look into the future – we see big (and small), often utopian plans for social or technical development, and artistic achievement. We attempt to map the past attempts which have led to dead ends in the past and directions which are now being pursued. We consider this a way of learning more about the relationship between man and nature. At the same time, we have numerous questions that directly affect us. In what we can hope for today, what should we worry about, where are we heading? And how (and what) we will report back to those who come after us – will they live in a world built on our ideas and decisions?

Organizing team

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Abstracts of the conference presentations

March 31st, 2016, Czech/Slovak part of the conference

Presentations (*in alphabetical order of speakers*)

Nature as an Obstacle, Value and Rival in the Journalistic Discourse on Coal Mining and the Demolition of the Old City of Most

Jaroslav David

Czech Language Department, Philosophical Faculty, Ostrava University

This paper focuses on the decay and relocation of the city of Most between 1964 and 1982 (1987), which was carried out to pave the way for open-cast coal mining, and the reflection of that period in the press.

Emphasis is placed not only on the historical context, but predominantly on how language is used to discuss the topic in journalistic discourse. The key theme is concerned with changes in the perception of nature and landscape as values and obstacles to coal mining from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Introduction: Efforts to understand and control nature - mistakes are our destiny ... (?)

Jana Dlouhá

Charles University Environment Centre

What is the relationship between man and nature based on in the era of technological development? Is this bond tight and (rather) unalterable; how it is demonstrated externally? Why should we deal with specific phenomena in their natural (historical, local) context? And what use are case studies for leading us to this understanding? Introductory words open the conference theme and try to answer these and similar questions.

Global megatrends: our common future

Miroslav Havránek

Charles University Environment Centre

This presentation will focus on global megatrends and weak signals that might change their direction. Global megatrends are certainties, statistically robust collectors of converging trends that can help us to interpret the present and help us with a high amount of certainty to predict something about the future. However, these trends that have been forming for decades are not unchangeable. They can be and often are influenced by something that from the beginning seems irrelevant or insignificant. However, this seed of change often sends out weak signals regarding upcoming new trends or unexpected nonlinearities under development (aka wild cards or black swans). In the presentation a complex system of current megatrends will be illustrated, together with some identified weak signals that might change their direction.

Nature and landscape in Slovakia (lost and found in recent years)

Mikuláš Huba

Parliament of the Slovak Republic

The author deals with the issue in question from multiple parallel perspectives: as a researcher at the Institute of Geography, a protagonist of the Society for Sustainable Living, a volunteer engaged in the conservation of historical monuments and landscape protection, a teacher involved externally in Slovak and Czech universities, a publicist, an active tourist and in the years 1990 - 1992 and 2012 - 2016 also as a member of the Slovak Parliament and twice chairman of the Environmental Committee. This enables the author to perceive, evaluate and interpret environmental problems in all their dimensions and complexity. From these points of view, the recent developments of nature, landscape and environmental protection, and relationships to these phenomena have been in the Slovak context more negative (lost) than positive (found). This contribution discusses how to look at things realistically, and yet find a source of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

The engineering dream of the DOL (Danube-Odra-Elbe) canal – planning major technological projects in the twentieth century

Jiří Janáč

Institute for contemporary history CAS

The DOL (Danube-Odra-Elbe) canal project, continually revised since the early twentieth century, largely encapsulates the history of modern water management in Czechoslovakia. This paper focuses on issues of continuity and discontinuity in the planning of the canal. It is thus a case study of the changes in the professional discourse about water as part of the natural environment and an essential condition of society, but is also a study of the relationship between water engineers and state power during the twentieth century.

"Command the wind, the rain ..." Between communist mythology and environmental policies before 1989

Doubravka Olšáková

Institute for contemporary history CAS

This presentation concerning the example of the Stalinist planned transformation of nature will focus on the changes in the relationship of nature and man in the 1950s and 1960s. To what extent did the big plans for the transformation of nature actually result from the artificial change of the social climate and/or how were they a result of the desire and illusion of the Communist authorities to show their superiority over natural phenomena? The paper also focuses on the key milestones and moments of change in this relationship in communist Czechoslovakia.

“And I am telling you: bananas will grow on Manín hill !” Communist social engineering and transformation of the cultural landscape in the Slovak countryside

Juraj Podoba

Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava

Social engineering became an inseparable part of the Communist development project, proclaiming “progress” as its main goal. The communist experiment was originally a Utopian project developed by a cluster of urban political extremists, in addition to the rural aristocracy and (petty) bourgeoisie targeting first of all the peasantry. With some exceptions, this project was undertaken in under-developed agrarian countries with inefficient agriculture. The socialist collectivisation of agriculture was intended to be the instrument to improve agriculture, to produce a more effective agricultural model, and at the same time break the peasantry. In conditions of the Slovak countryside in the second half of 20th century, socialist collectivisation was interconnected with the policy of “bringing together town and village”. This was in reality a mechanical transfer of cultural phenomena originating in the small town (petty bourgeois) environment to the conservative rural environment.

The paper aims to analyse the impact of the communist development project on the character of the settlement and cultural landscape of the Slovak countryside. For this analysis, the author exploits his long-term ethnographic research of the settlement structures, architecture and housing in three model rural settlements, conducted during the second half of the 1980s and continued during the following decades.

“Risk society” reconsidered: the perspective of historical geography

Pavel Raška

Department of Geography, Faculty of Science, J. E. Purkyně University

This contribution begins with Giddens’ (1999) view of risk society and its characteristics, mainly the aspects of the end of nature and the end of tradition. The theory of risk society is then applied to natural risks and to societal adaptation strategies to reduce these risks. Based on recent research in the Czech Republic and framed by studies from abroad, the author points to the issue of mythologies in natural risk discourse. The discourse may be characterized by a contradictory view of traditional and modern cultures of natural hazard mitigation and risk reduction. These contradictions are seemingly obvious primarily concerning problems of ecological care, perceived possibilities for coping with hazards and the cultural representation of causes of natural hazards. In contrast, this contribution tries to emphasise some fundamental similarities between traditional and modern cultures in respect to natural risk reduction. In addition, it will be shown that the contradictory view may limit the thematisation and development of several questions concerning the effectiveness of risk reduction in today’s society.

The dynamics of environmental discourses in Czechoslovak state socialism: the case of the removal of old Most

Matěj Spurný

[Institute for contemporary history CAS](#)

The end of the fifties and sixties are, especially in most industrialized countries, associated with changes in thinking about the environment and historical heritage. This of course applies to socialist countries as well. After the fading of the postwar industrial pathos, culminating in the era of Stalinist constructive enthusiasm, we can observe the dominance of a technocratic relationship to the world in the Czech Republic, which emphasises exact scientific knowledge and rational planning. There is however discussion and sharp criticism of the reduction of life to measurable quantities. One of the symbolic focal points of the public debate is the issue of the environment in northern Bohemia, including the discussion about the salvation or destruction of the historic town of Most. In this example from northern Bohemia, we can observe the evolution and the role of environmental criticism during the normalization period, which ultimately played a crucial role in the process of delegitimization of the Communist Party estate.

„Control or administer“: the dilemmas of Christianity and Christians in relation to the environment“

Ján Szöllős

[STUŽ SR](#)

Religion and faith had, and even today, continue to have a great influence on the formation of the relationship of man as an individual and human society to nature. This paper describes the development of philosophical and theological thought and the practice of "Western" society which is largely based on the Judeo-Christian concept of control or dominion over all creatures (nature) and behaviour based on the principles governing the created world. We will try to find an answer to the question whether Christianity has the potential to contribute to the transformation of thinking and conduct of man and society towards a sustainable life.

April, 1st, 2016 – English part of the conference

Presentations (*in alphabetical order of speakers*)

Our common present: Playing with dimensions in the space-for-time approach to understand climate change in science education

Ulrich Dettweiler

Technical University of Munchen, [Department of Sports and Health Sciences](#)

Global climate change influences ecosystems across the world. Alpine plant communities in particular have already experienced serious impacts and will continue to do so as climate change continues. From a didactic point of view, specifically phenophases of plants, i.e. their seasonal developmental status in relation to weather and micro-climatic conditions, are relatively easy to observe and allow for conclusions on climate change.

In our didactic concept, we sensitize secondary school pupils to the effects of climate change. We take the pupils on an eco-climatological expedition into the Berchtesgaden National Park during a one-week residential program, and “research weeks” at the Student Research Center Berchtesgadener Land. The “research weeks” combine social learning, personal development, and ecological knowledge on a regional level in an educational concept in order to achieve sustainable learning effects in “global learning”.

During the “research weeks”, the pupils are split in groups of three to four and become experts in plant phenology, meteorology and micro-climatology, glaciology, and pedology. On the first two days of the course, each group prepares for the expedition in the lab, i.e. getting to know their specific indicator plant, learning about weather parameters and local weather history, or the geological conditions in the area. Then the pupils set out for a 2 or 3-day expedition and collect their data along a transection of about 1,000m elevation. It is their responsibility to organize their research protocol. Each group is assigned one facilitator – an accompanying teacher, a student, or scientific staff from the Student Research Center – in order to empower the pupils to carry out the complex field work and document their findings.

Back in the valley, the pupils analyze their findings and share their knowledge with the others in the form of a group puzzle. During the reflection and de-briefing phase, the pupils gain a deeper understanding of their own findings, connect different pieces of information, and thus reach a deeper understanding of the complexity of weather/microclimate and plant phenology. Finally, we transfer the local findings to the global level. The space-for-time approach thus serves as a didactic tool. The difference in average temperature of approximately 2 degrees from the valley to the high mountain area over an elevation of 1,000m, which was experienced and measured during the expedition by the pupils, can be used as a model for global warming and be projected into the future.

Evaluative research has shown that this didactic concept is suitable to significantly enhance the pupils’ learning motivational behavior opposed to learning inside the classroom. We suggest implementing more expeditionary learning programs in local areas with respect to education and learning for climate change adaptation and resilience

Curating Environmental Landscapes and Ecomuseums

Amareswar Galla

Honorary Professor, Global Change Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia; Curator, Amaravati Ancient Town & Visiting Professor & International Curator, Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, Shillong, India; [International Institute for the Inclusive museum.](#)

The process and outcomes of the UN Paris Climate Conference (COP21) in December 2015 underline clearly that climate change is culturally induced. In this context the non-duality of culture and nature needs to be recognised as a colonial legacy knowledge system. Decolonisation of the discourse of environmentalism and heritage studies is critical for appreciating, understanding and acting on the COP 21 Action Plan through developing deep ecology models for integrated environmental management. This presentation brings together certain salient features for developing such models based on the speaker's first hand 'fingers in the dirt' work over the past three decades curating environmental landscapes and ecomuseums in the Marine Environment of Ha Long Bay, Vietnam; Riverine environments in Hoi An, Vietnam and Amaravati, India; and the Darjeeling mountainous environment in the Himalayas. It is the argument that when local communities benefit from developmental initiatives they become actors and amateurs in making changes environmentally sustainable, a non-negotiable must for minimising climate impacts. The conclusion will be substantiated from case studies on evidence based, quantitative and qualitative, benefit sharing in the volume produced by the speaker for Cambridge University Press and UNESCO in 2012/2013 (*World Heritage: Benefits Beyond Borders*) as part of the process for the drafting and adopting the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 September to guide the UN post-2015 Development Agenda.

How to whitewash the "black character"- environmental and cultural education contra false stereotypes which rule the relationship between man and wolves

Anna Kalinowska

University of Warsaw, The University Centre for Environmental Studies and Sustainable Development

Wolves have always been seen as man's big enemy. As an enemy they were exterminated in most areas in Poland. Extermination of wolves can be listed as one of the unsuccessful human interventions in nature as wolves play a key role in keeping the forest ecosystem healthy. Scientists are just beginning to fully understand the positive ripple effect that wolves have on ecosystems. Though wolves once nearly disappeared from most forests, they have returned to Poland today. Since 1995 wolves have been a protected species but it is difficult to "whitewash" the perception of them in the public mind. This dark reputation of the wolf as an cruel beast is strengthened by myths, legends and fairy-tales. Programmes of education considering these cultural aspects will be presented as an example of good practice in public education supporting conservation of the wolf population in Poland.

The nature-man relationship as a research topic

Roman Kroufek

Pedagogical Faculty, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University, Ústí nad Labem

The nature-man relationship affects not only the degree to which we behave responsibly towards our environment but also a number of personality qualities, including personal well-being and happiness. The paper discusses the history of the perception of the nature-man relationship, its current trends and the importance of this relationship from a pedagogical point of view. It works with constructs like nature relatedness, connectedness to nature, the inclusion of nature in self, love and care for nature and explains the differences between them as well as some psychometric indicators from Czech Republic. It focuses on the quantitative approach to the nature-man measurement and highlights the possibilities and limits of the use of different research tools.

Expectations and failures to control Nature - a gaming perspective.

Piotr Magnuszewski

Centre for Systems Solutions, Wrocław, Poland

Many failed projects to control nature often result from inadequate appreciation of the diversity of ways decisions are made at all levels of society. Policy resistance was the frequent, tragic result, reversing initial successes with policy failure. Analysis and understanding of complex policy issues is often hampered by the high costs of gathering data about how various members of society actually think and decide about such issues. Policy makers must often invest years to gain experience critical to managing systems that change and evolve without undertaking real risk. This raises the question: Can we lower the costs of learning through experience?

A variety of new gaming methodologies that combine computational models and the participation of real actors has emerged to fill this gap. They allow participants to analyze how problems emerge in complex systems and where points of policy intervention may lie because they are experienced as something that feels real, more information is retained, learning is faster, and an intuition is gained into how to make real decisions and improve policies.

This session will provide a simulation gaming perspective on the main conference theme. Using connected real life stories and related simulation games, the session will demonstrate the potential of games to create opportunities for deep reflection by its participants. With the capacity to "compress time and space" that the games provide, it is possible to gain further insight into a better understanding of the impacts of human interventions to transform Nature.

Perceptions of a drying landscape - two case studies from the Du-na-Tisza interfluve region, Hungary

Noémi Ujházy¹, Marianna Biró², Mária Szabó¹

1. [Eotvos Loránd University](#), Dept. of Landscape and Environmental Geography;
2. [Hungarian Academy of Sciences](#), Ecological Centre

In this paper two methodologically different case studies will be presented from a the Danube-Tisza interfluve, Great Hungarian Plain region of Hungary which has seen many anthropogenic transformations over the centuries. One of the most significant changes in the 20th century was the drainage of the inland wetlands and decline of the groundwater level. This significantly affected local living conditions and the state of natural wetland habitats too. The first case study will be a historical analysis of the polarized social perception of a drainage channel crossing the study territory (the Main Channel of the Danube Valley), which was poignantly labelled the "Cursed Channel". The second case study will be a more contemporary one, concerning the recent perception of landscape changes. Local farmers and nature conservationists were interviewed about how they perceive landscape changes, including the transformation of wetland habitats. Through a comparison of these two case studies, perceptions of environmental change, risk and vulnerability will be discussed.