

A rewarding experience in many ways: The 3rd World Congress of Environmental History

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ABSTRACT

The 3rd World Congress of Environmental History, held in Florianópolis, Brazil had the theme: “Convergences: The Global South and the Global North in the Era of Great Acceleration”. The short paper gives an overview of the rewards such congresses can bring. It specifically deals with the plenary talks by Robert Billot and Brigitte Baptiste, highlights the role of scholarly co-operation and makes a case for the opportunity offered by such congresses to review the environment of the hosting country, for which the plenary roundtables, the excursions, and field trips and comparative panels are referred to as examples. World congresses might have an environmental cost, but they do provide unique opportunities for scholarly exchange, in terms of themes, methods, conceptual approaches, and sources used. Behaving in an environmentally conscious way but at the same time enabling and fostering international and intergenerational exchange is a challenge that will have to be taken up in the future.

Keywords: Environmental History; Florianópolis; Convergences.

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A huge effort goes into the preparation and hosting of a World Congress. Preparations start years in advance and holding such a conference needs the dedication of the program committee members, the members of the local arrangements team and that of all the contributors to the program, be they chairs, commentators or presenters. The first ever World Congress for Environmental History held in Florianópolis in Brazil, in the southern hemisphere, in the global economic south, needed extra dedication and would not have been possible without the co-operative effort of several Brazilian universities. The **first lesson to be learned** from the success of this conference – and it was a huge success – is the **value, but also the necessity of co-operative efforts**, as any one single university or other public institution is likely to be overtaxed with shouldering the multitude of tasks. Among those involved in the preparation, friendships have formed due to the collective effort and the experience of hardship and success. Organizing a conference like that is almost like an expedition into uncharted terrain, and after the team has reached the goal, the team spirit lingers. It can safely be assumed that the experience of Florianópolis will be similar to that of the first two conferences, which resulted in lasting co-operation within the preparation teams.

Each conference goer in many ways attends their very own conference, because the variety of themes and formats in parallel sessions allows to pick and choose. Even during the more informal settings like coffee breaks or field trips, everyone has a great choice of discussion partners. So it is very hard to say something about “the conference” other than speaking about the plenaries. These plenaries were a great opportunity to learn from some of the best minds in the world. Robert Billot, one of the keynote speakers, is a modest man. A soft-spoken lawyer, he has won a total of almost 770 million dollars in two major lawsuits against a chemical company acting irresponsibly. For more than 20 years he has been fighting against the poisoning of people all over the world with perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), a substance used in the production of Teflon®. The substance circulates in the blood and accumulates in bodies because it is practically indestructible. Billot, reading thousands of pages of internal company documents over several years and filing lawsuits by the dozen, was able to have independent studies conducted to prove what

is now called a “probable connection” between PFOA and kidney cancer, testicular cancer, thyroid diseases, high cholesterol levels, the pregnancy complication pre-eclampsia and the inflammatory bowel disease ulcerative colitis. Billot’s work has reverberations all over the world. In 2013, perfluorooctanoic acid was included in the candidate list of “substances of very high concern” under the chemical regulation system “REACH” in Europe. In May 2015, 200 scientists from various disciplines signed the Madrid Declaration, which expresses their concern about the production of all fluoro-organic substances or PFAS. This includes many products that are dirt-repellent, waterproof or non-stick coated. Robert Billot is now fighting for firefighters exposed to flame-retardant foam containing these substances and falling ill—presumably because of the foam. Billot, who took time off his law practice to be a keynote speaker at the Florianópolis Conference, is already considered “DuPont’s worst nightmare”, and the story of his life and fight was recently released as a Hollywood movie. Many conference attendants talked about him as an inspiration to keep on working to uncover pollution histories.

Diversity, perhaps even contrast, characterized the choice of keynotes. A person in her mid-fifties, with long, dyed hair, by comparison with the rest of the outfit rather serious-looking eyeglasses balanced by ruby red lipstick, standing firmly in flower-covered plateau shoes, wearing a figure-fitted, floral dress and brightly coloured stockings speaks from a podium in a university lecture hall and questions naturalness as an un-reflected paradigm for protection of nature and of species. She casually remarks that her presence at this stage were a case in point for her argument. Brigitte Luis Guillermo Baptiste, professor, researcher, author, transgender and conservation activist, since January 2011 Director General of the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Research on Biological Resources, member of the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel of the Intergovernmental Science and Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) knows what she is talking about. The internationally esteemed biologist looks rather like an artist than like a scientist and will hardly go unnoticed. She is known for heavy make-up with matching dress and hair. The rather exuberant style contrasts her calm and sobering tone. Her voice as well as her features have remained masculine; while she has undergone breast

surgery, she has not taken hormones. Her two tattoos, however, are signs of femininity: a mermaid on her left arm and Botticelli's Birth of Venus on her shoulder. Her life defies labels; her identity is chatoyant, but her dedication to conservation is steadfast. According to media reports about her, she sees being transgender as a balance between the feminine and the masculine without having to assume a particular gender, a sign of freedom. Freedom, in particular freedom of research and of speech also matter for conservation. In her keynote, Brigitte Baptiste connected biodiversity and sexual diversity, transgressing any fixed boundary between the natural and the un-natural. In addition to offering her own identity as a queer biologist as a frame of reference, Baptiste showed her audience impressive images of what she calls “a transitional world” in which humans have substantially transformed nature both in and outside of their bodies. The plenary made historians think about their role in a future dominated by such hybrids.

The plenary roundtables are less easy to summarize. They were fantastic, offering insights into Brazil's troubled environmental history by those who know most about it. The roundtables showcased yet another reward of the conference: Getting to know a particular place's environmental history with the best experts as cicerones. The fieldtrips added to this category of conference-related rewards, allowing glimpses into unique ecosystems and hearing about the challenges they face from guides with expert knowledge.

Another reward that merits mention is the opportunity for global comparative panels that such a congress offers, in particular when they are inspired by the host countries specific situation. Brazil is one of the main producers of soybean, a global player. Several high-profile presentations were devoted to the history and future of soybean cultivation and its social and environmental consequences. To give but one example, my Austrian colleague Ernst Langthaler compared soy production in Chinese Manchuria, the USA and Brazil in the 20th century. He showed how “commodity frontiers” moved, how the frontiers of natural resource exploitation in these three countries were pushed into more and more remote places and yet, how different the three situations were. Such frontiers continue to shift into areas that have not yet been exploited, as the search for materials to supply the countries at the centre of the

world economy extends to the remotest corners of the world. This is partly due to the fact that the most accessible deposits, mostly in the south of the globe, are exhausted, but also partly due to increasing demand in the rich north. In Brazil, land is still so cheap that it is cheaper to convert large areas of semi-natural landscapes in the savannah of the Cerrado and in the primeval forests of the state into agricultural land than to intensify production on land already in agricultural use. In the process, biodiversity is irretrievably lost and small farming families are displaced, but profits are increasing.

The conference aptly themed “Convergences: The Global South and the Global North in the Era of Great Acceleration” reminded environmental historians about their role in the larger context of the sustainability sciences and the environmental humanities. Many issues of international interdependence, including fishing or the future of Antarctica, were discussed at the conference. But not just the thematic diversity was a lasting intellectual legacy, the diversity of sources used, methods employed and concepts applied was breath-taking. The intellectual stimulation was as great as the overall feeling of friendship and the international and inter-generational openness and intellectual rigor.

We must be conscious about our environmental footprint. Security issues, too, abound. Less resource-intensive ways of scholarly co-operation are needed. But all the video streaming tools of the world cannot make up for the feeling of togetherness and community that such conferences bring about. It is a great challenge for environmental historians to find a way to combine the better of two worlds. The experience of the Florianópolis Congress was rewarding, and continues to be inspiring to the community. New pathways for scholarly communication will have been found but hopefully, the community spirit will not be lost. *Muito obrigado* to all who made the congress possible and so rewarding!

Una Experiencia Gratificante en Muchos Sentidos: El 3° Congreso Mundial de Historia Ambiental

RESUMEN

El 3° Congreso Mundial de Historia Ambiental, llevado a cabo en Florianópolis, Brasil tuvo como tema convocante: “Convergencias: el Sur Global y el Norte Global en la Era de la Gran Aceleración”. Este breve documento ofrece una visión general de los beneficios que pueden aportar dichos congresos. Se ocupa específicamente de las charlas plenarias de Robert Billot y Brigitte Baptiste, destaca el papel de la cooperación académica y destaca la oportunidad que ofrecen dichos congresos para revisar el medio ambiente del país anfitrión, para lo cual son ejemplo, las mesas redondas plenarias, las excursiones, salidas de campo y los paneles comparativos. Los congresos mundiales pueden tener un costo ambiental, pero brindan oportunidades únicas para el intercambio académico, en términos de temas, métodos, enfoques conceptuales y fuentes utilizadas. Comportarse de manera respetuosa con el medio ambiente pero al mismo tiempo permitir y fomentar el intercambio internacional e intergeneracional es un desafío que tendrá que afrontar en el futuro.

Palabras Clave: Historia Ambiental; Florianópolis; Convergencias.

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