284 Ecologies of collecting. Natural history and environmental history

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Abstract

Both environmental history as well as the history of natural history collections and collecting have gained much momentum and public attention in recent years. However, the productive potential of exploring both in conjunction has not yet been fully realized, especially in relation to how collections developed and still function as sites of entanglement across continents, species, societies, and bodies. In three panels (284, 294, 303) we want to re-assess the value of scientific collections for multidisciplinary research in the light of environmental issues and the need for sustainable action both in museums and at universities. We want to explore how historical ecology approaches can be used to analyse the past of collections and how (historical) collections may provide important answers for current ecological issues now and in the future. From an environmental history perspective - informed by a decolonial approach -, we would like to explore the circumstances and environments in which organisms and objects were found and created for collections. A wide variety of people and infrastructures were necessary to identify, locate and acquire objects and make them usable for a multitude of interests and interested parties. This has important ramifications for rethinking provenance research ecologically.

The panel “Ecologies of collecting. Natural history and environmental history” will not only focus on the environments in which collecting took place but also highlight ecological knowledge created by collecting as well as the opportunities for collecting created by environmental crises. Like in all sections of the “collection ecologies” panels, marginalized human actors and groups as well as non-human organisms and formations take central stage.

Dr. Patrick Anthony (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany and University of Cambridge, United Kingdom):

The World in a Workshop: Village Naturalists and the Economy of Earthly Objects

This talk explores a system of knowledge production generated by upland village communities, from the Bernese Oberland to the Julian Alps, the Harz to Tyrol. Animated by global studies of knowledge circulation and “small-space” geographies, this talk centers on an artisan family in the Franconian Alps (of southern Germany) whose mountain-guiding and naturalia-collecting business spanned three generations. Wainwrights and tanners by trade, the family Wunder also belongs to another unrecognized social group: the hunters, shepherds, tavern owners and other rural actors who built and sustained the spatial infrastructures that underpinned modern natural sciences. Taken together, I describe these actors as nature’s keepers, a term that draws upon the monikers used by contemporaries. The Wunders in particular were variously titled “warden,” “castellan,” “inspector,” “guide,” “cicerone,” and very rarely as Naturforscher. Traditionally, natural history cabinets expressed the universalizing ambition of affluent gentleman to possess the manifold curiosities of the natural world. In the Wunder workshop we encounter a social inversion of this received history: their modest “Kabinettchen” produced its own world of “exotic” earthly things, which were posted at least as far St. Petersburg and Oxford. This talk thus pursues a historical geography and historical ecology of village science, using the family Wunder to show how rural actors significantly shaped a global commerce of plants and fossils.
Dr. Apurba Chatterjee (University of Reading, United Kingdom):

Nature, Image and Empire: Natural History Illustrations in Early British India

Nature was an indispensable part of British efforts to dominate the world. This paper looks at natural history illustrations produced, and commissioned from native artists by the British in India between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, the zest and curiosity to understand nature was accompanied by a tendency to tame the wilderness of the exotica in order for making it useful for Britain’s economic interests. Using images of Indian flora and fauna as historical evidence, this paper explores how the British visualised the natural environment, and how these visualisations rendered its material extraction possible and simultaneously fed into the wider connotations of Indian life and society. Such a study of visual representations helps us understand the complexities of Britain’s imperial encounters as determined by nature, but also redirects enquiries into the cultures of collection and display thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of larger ideas like identity, gender, nationhood, imperialism, aesthetics, and power in the British world. The majority of natural history artists were Indian; thus, this paper will be an addition to the increasing acknowledgement of non-European agency and contribution in the European sciences. Finally, this paper will provide grounds for the rethinking of human relationship with the natural world in the British Empire.

Dr. Catarina Madruga (Humanities of Nature, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, Germany):

Big game hunting and collecting in colonial Cameroon. Perceptions on extinction and conservation during the expansion of the mammal collections in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, 1888-1918

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the increase of colonial zoological specimens in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, led to debates on the makeup of colonial hunting laws, considering reflections on extinction, scientific research with specimens, and on what constituted adequate conservation measures. This paper focuses on specific shipments from Cameroon to underline different cultures of collecting from the perspective of the museum work and from the perspective of collectors on the fieldwork. By looking at the contexts of the provenance of shipments as well as at the processes of evaluation and use of the specimens once they entered the collection, I propose an emphasis on the tensions between preservation versus extinction. This paper contributes to reflect on the place of colonial hunting practices within emerging ecological thought under imperialist paradigms of conquest and subjugation.

Dr. Andreas Weber (University of Twente, Enschede, Netherlands):

Crocodiles of Empire: A Collection Ecology of False Gharials from Borneo

Natural history museums in the Global North owe much of their authority to animals collected in the Global South. This unequal distribution of the planet’s natural heritage is the historical result of intimate and often invisible linkages between natural history repositories and evolving schemes of colonial exploitation and coercion. At the centre stage of this paper, is research into the provenance of a series of false gharials (Tomistoma schlegelii) collected by the German naturalist Salomon Müller in Borneo in the early nineteenth century. The collection is now stored in the Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden which houses one of the world’s largest collections of plants, animals and minerals from colonial Southeast Asia. By reconstructing the collection circumstances of the false gharials, this paper reflects upon the role of local crocodile hunters (pangererans), their perception of nature, and the societal function of crocodile hunting in the early nineteenth century Dutch empire in Southeast Asia. Taken together this essay argues that natural history collections should not only be read as biodiversity heritage, but rather as the historical product of a process in which different notions of ‘the environment’ got inextricably entangled.
Format
In person
Online