The Routledge Handbook of Environmental History presents a cutting-edge overview of the dynamic and ever-expanding field of environmental history. It addresses recent transformations in the field and responses to shifting scholarly, political, and environmental landscapes.

The Handbook fully and critically engages with recent exciting changes, contextualises them within longer-term shifts in the field, and charts potential new directions for study. It focuses on five key areas:

• Theories and concepts related to changing considerations of social justice, including postcolonial, antiracist, and feminist approaches, and the field’s growing emphasis on multiple human voices and agencies.

• The roles of non-humans and the more-than-human in the telling of environmental histories, from animals and plants to insects as vectors of disease and the influences of water and ice, the changing theoretical approaches and the influence of concepts in related areas such as animal and discard studies.

• How changes in theories and concepts are shaping methods in environmental history and shifting approaches to traditional sources like archives and oral histories as well as experiments by practitioners with new methods and sources.

• Responses to a range of current complex problems, such as climate change, and how environmental historians can best help mitigate and resolve these problems.

• Diverse ways in which environmental historians disseminate their research within and beyond academia, including new modes of research dissemination, teaching, and engagements with stakeholders and the policy arena.

This is an important resource for environmental historians, researchers, and students in the related fields of political ecology, environmental studies, natural resources management, and environmental planning.
Emily O’Gorman is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow and Associate Professor at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Her research is situated within environmental history and the interdisciplinary environmental humanities, and is primarily concerned with contested knowledges within broader cultural framings of authority, expertise, and landscapes.

William San Martín is Assistant Professor of Global Environmental Science, Technology, and Governance at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, USA, and a Research Fellow at the Earth System Governance Project at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. His work examines power disparities across environmental knowledge, technologies, and governance regimes.

Mark Carey is Professor of Environmental Studies and Geography at the University of Oregon, USA. He runs the Glacier Lab for the Study of Ice and Society, collaborating with students and scientists to study environmental history, ice humanities, and climate justice.

Sandra Swart is Professor and Chair of the History Department at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. She studies African socio-environmental history, focusing on human-animal relations.
THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK
OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Edited by Emily O’Gorman, William San Martín, Mark Carey and Sandra Swart
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CONTRIBUTORS

Antoine Acker is an environmental historian and Professor at the University of Geneva’s General History Department, Switzerland. He leads the project “AnthropoSouth: Latin American Oil Revolutions in the Development Century” (Eccellenza grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation), and coordinates a collaborative project funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, on the legacy of urban utopias in the Amazon region.

Aet Annist is Associate Professor in the Ethnology Department at the University of Tartu, Estonia, and Senior Researcher within the Estonian Environmentalisms research group at Tallinn University. Her PhD research (UCL 2007) focussed on post-socialist rural fragmentation and dispossession, which she has later extended to sociality in change, both post- and pre-collapse. The latter is guiding her current fieldwork amongst environmental protest and adaptation groups in Estonia and the UK.

Alessandro Antonello is Senior Research Fellow in History at Flinders University on Kaurna Yerta in Adelaide, Australia. His research investigates the environmental, cultural, and geopolitical histories of Antarctica, oceans, marine environments, the cryosphere, and the global environment more generally in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Marco Armiero is Icrea Research Professor at the Institute of History of Science at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain. He is the elected President of the European Society for Environmental History. With his research, he has contributed to bridging environmental humanities and political ecology.

Javiera Barandiarán is Associate Professor in the Global Studies programme at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA. Her work explores the intersection of science, environment, and development in Latin America. In 2022 she was awarded a Berlin Prize from the American Academy in Berlin for her research on lithium mining. Her research has been awarded support from the National Science Foundation, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, Chile’s National Agency for Science (ANID), and others.
Contributors

Lukas Becker is a PhD researcher at the Department of History, Economics, and Society at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. His PhD thesis, focusing on the role of social and labour movements in the Colombian oil industry as well as the environmental history of oil towns across Latin America, is part of the SNF Eccellenza Project “AnthropoSouth: Latin American Oil Revolutions in the Development Century”.

Michelle K. Berry is Assistant Professor in the Department of History and the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Arizona, USA. Her research explores ecological power, labour, identity, (agri)culture, and storytelling. Her latest work focuses on ecofeminism, environmental justice, and the importance of history in remembering each.

Mattin Biglari is Postdoctoral Fellow at SOAS, University of London, UK. His research focuses on the intersection of labour, infrastructure, and environment, especially in Iran and the Middle East. He is also a member of the Oil Cultures of the Middle East and Latin America (OCMELA) research group.

David Biggs is Professor of History at the University of California at Riverside, USA, and specialises in the environmental history of modern Southeast Asia with a focus on Vietnam. He is currently completing an environmental history survey of Southeast Asia.

Nathalia Capellini is an environmental historian working on energy politics and infrastructures in Latin America, environmental conflict and international circulations of expert knowledge. She is Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, in the SNF-funded Project AnthropoSouth.

Elizabeth Chatterjee is Assistant Professor of Environmental History at the University of Chicago, USA. Her work on energy history and the politics of infrastructure in the Global South has been published in venues including World Development, the Journal of Asian Studies, and the Journal of Global History. She is currently completing a history of electrification in India.

Margaret Cook is an environmental historian and Research Fellow in the Australian Rivers Institute at Griffith University and the Centre for the Study of the Inland at La Trobe University, Australia. Her research interests include natural disasters and water and river histories.

Bruna Luiza Costa Pessoa, or Blue, is a historian and a visual artist who is currently pursuing her master’s degree at the Beaux-Arts de Paris, France. She also holds a degree in History from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil. As an artist, her work explores different mediums, and she is especially interested in the art object and how it intersects with the monument concept and elements of popular culture.

Kairo da Silva Santos is Professor at the State University of Minas Gerais (UEMG), Brazil, working in the field of physical geography. His research interests include historical geography, toponymy, and cartography education, and he has participated in several environmental monitoring and mapping projects.
Contributors

Claiton Marcio da Silva is Associate Professor of History at the Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul (UFFS), Brazil, with a PhD in history of sciences. He has been engaged with peasant social movements looking for alternative paths to social and environmental change, through programmes such as the Soyacene – Social and Environmental Observatory of the Soybean.

Raf De Bont is Professor of History of Science and the Environment at Maastricht University, Netherlands. He is also the PI of the NWO-Vici project “Moving Animals: A History of Science, Media and Policy in the Twentieth Century” (https://moving-animals.nl/).

Diogo de Carvalho Cabral is Assistant Professor of Environmental History at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. He is the author of Na Presença da Floresta: Mata Atlântica e História Colonial (Rio de Janeiro, 2014) and co-edited Metamorfoses Florestais: Culturas, Ecologias e as Transformações Históricas da Mata Atlântica (Curitiba, 2016) with Ana Bustamante. He is currently co-editing a collection on the more-than-human histories of Latin America (to be published by the University of London Press) with André Vital and Margarita Gascón.

Joana Gaspar de Freitas is Principal Investigator of DUNES’ Sea, Sand and People, an ERC Starting Grant-funded project. She works at the History Centre of the University of Lisbon, Portugal. She is co-editor of the journal Coastal Studies and Society and a former Rachel Carson Center Fellow and Linda Hall Library Fellow. Her research focuses on coastal zones, communities, risk and vulnerability, and adaptation.

Jessica M. DeWitt is an environmental historian of Canada and the United States. She is the Editor-in-Chief and Social Media Editor for the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), as well as a member of the International Consortium for Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO) media and communications team. An independent scholar, she works with academic institutions and scholars, public history and heritage organisations, and other groups to develop digital techniques for communicating academic knowledge to the public.

Elijah Doro is Research Fellow at the University of Agder, Norway, and a member of the Deadly Dreams research group working on the social and cultural history of poisons. He is also an African environmental historian. His research interests are on the chemical violence of colonial encounters in Africa, toxic legacies, and how these intersect with postcolonial discourses.

Stefan Dorondel is an environmental anthropologist/environmental historian interested in rivers and their islands, wetlands, marshes, and their inhabitants. He is also interested in infrastructures and environmental change in Eastern Europe.

Regina Horta Duarte is Professor at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil. She is a founding member of the Latin American and Caribbean Society of Environmental History (SOLCHA). She researches zoos in Latin America and produces the YouTube channel As 4 Estações UFMG (The Four Seasons, UFMG). She also coordinates the Center of Animal History (CEA, UFMG), founded in 2020.

Aragorn Eloff is a PhD student in philosophy at North-West University, South Africa. His research focuses on Earth and animal and human liberation, drawing on fields like anarchism,
psychedelics research, and critical algorithm studies. He also works in the field of exploratory
music, where he incorporates elements like data sonification, generative composition, ges-
tural mapping, mathematically chaotic systems, plant biodynamics, and atmospheric varia-
tions into an open-ended practice of sonic assemblage building.

**Lucas Erichsen** is Researcher at the National Institute of the Atlantic Forest (INMA-Brazil).
He is an Early Career Member of the Royal Historical Society and a SHOT International
Scholar. His interests include environmental history, history of technology, digital history,
history of computing, and animal history.

**Lyle Fearnley** is Associate Professor and Associate Head of Cluster (Curriculum) in the
Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Cluster at Singapore University of Technology and
Design. Fearnley is trained as a medical anthropologist.

**Emil Flatø** is a historian of science at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental
Language, University of Oslo, Norway. His dissertation—*When Science Could Not Wait:
Climate, Experts, and the Times of Anthropogenic Change, 1949–1975*—considers how a
motley circle of atmospheric modellers, science policy entrepreneurs, and cybernetic man-
agement experts made a future of anthropogenic change into an object of scientific
knowledge.

**Heather Goodall** is Professor Emerita of History at the University of Technology Sydney,
Australia, and has researched with Australian Indigenous people on land rights in eastern
Australia under continuing colonialism and with the Pitjantjatjara Council, Central Australia,
for the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Testing. Heather has published on urban
environmental campaigns by Indigenous Australians and by Arabic-speaking, Vietnamese,
and Anglo-Irish Australian communities, most recently about resident action defending
saline estuarine wetlands.

**Katie Holmes** is Professor of History at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Her work
integrates environmental, gender, oral, and cultural history and she has a particular interest
in the interplay between an individual, their culture, and environment.

**Shen Hou** is Professor of Environmental History in the History Department at Peking
University, Beijing, China. Her research is currently focused on Boston’s environmental his-
tory, and coastal cities.

**Erik Isberg** is a PhD student at the Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment
at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden. Drawing on the theory of his-
tory as well as environmental history, his doctoral research concerns the rise of paleoclima-
tology and how the environmental sciences have produced and conceptualised time.

**Liisi Jääts** is Curator at the Estonian National Museum. She has published on the topics of
environmental history, perception of cultural landscapes, and cultural heritage. She was
coordinator of the environmental history team for the exhibition “People and the Environment”
in the Estonian National Museum.
Contributors

**Dolly Jørgensen** is Professor of History at the University of Stavanger, Norway. She is co-editor-in-chief of the journal *Environmental Humanities* and co-directs the Greenhouse Center for Environmental Humanities at UiS. Her current research agenda focuses on cultural histories of animal extinction, particularly the implications of extinction for cultural heritage and museum practices.

**Bryan Umaru Kauma** is an Assistant Professor in the History Department at Southwestern University, USA. He uses food and indigenous African crop histories to retell the embedded story of Africans’ past and social, economic, and cultural everyday experiences with inter alia, colonial, ecological, and political change. His work has also appeared in the *South African Historical Journal* as well as *Critical African Studies*.

**Luke Keogh** was Lead Curator on the exhibition *On the Land* (2021) at the National Wool Museum in Geelong, Australia. He is Senior Fellow in Australian garden history at the National Museum of Australia and is Lecturer in History at Deakin University, Australia.

**Katrin Kleemann** is Postdoctoral Researcher at the German Maritime Museum/Leibniz Institute for Maritime History, Germany. She is an environmental historian and historian of science working on volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, climate, and ocean history. Her work has appeared in *Nature*, *Global Environment*, *Climate of the Past*, and *WIREs: Climate Change*.

**Nicolo Paolo Ludovice** is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Division of Public Policy at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China. He also lectures in the Department of History at the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include animal history, the history of science, technology, and medicine, food history, and health-environmental humanities, with the Philippines as his geographical focus.

**Heta Lähdesmäki** is a historian specialising in wildlife conflicts and conservation. She completed a PhD in cultural history in 2020 at the University of Turku, studying human-wolf relations in 20th-century Finland. Currently, she is doing her postdoctoral research at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She is part of the Helsinki Urban Rat Project and studies the history of bird feeding and rat conflicts in Helsinki city.

**Marina Miraglia** is Professor in Environmental History and Geographic Information Systems and Researcher on topics related to the territorial applications of geographic information systems. She is also Coordinator of the Area of Geographic Information Technologies and Spatial Analysis and Director of the Specialization in Thematic Cartography applied to Spatial Analysis at the National University of General Sarmiento, Argentina.

**Veronica Mitroi-Tisseyre** is an environmental sociologist and Researcher Fellow at Cirad – French International Center for Agricultural Research and Development, G’EAU research unit. She specialises in the study of the complex relationships between human societies and aquatic ecosystems. Her research work focuses on the co-production of water indicators and narratives at the crossroads of ecological, hydrological, and sociological knowledges about uses, practices, and representations of water.
Contributors

Nina Möllers is Head of BIOTOPIA Lab and Events at BIOTOPIA, a new innovative museum on life and environmental sciences currently being planned in Munich, Germany. She has curated exhibitions at the Deutsches Museum, including the world’s first large exhibition on the Anthropocene, and published widely on topics around the cultural history of technology, environmental history, museum studies, and the history of exhibitions.

Madhuri Mondal is Senior Programme Officer at the Dakshin Foundation, India. She works with multiple actors in the Andaman Islands to improve the health of coastal ecosystems and well-being of coastal communities. Her research focuses on understanding resource use and governance in fisheries and coastal socio-ecological systems.

Ruth A. Morgan is Director of the Centre for Environmental History at the Australian National University in Canberra. Focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries, Ruth’s work considers the shifting experiences and understandings of climate and climate change.

Admire Mseba is Assistant Professor in the Van Hunnick Department of History at the University of Southern California, USA. His research interests are in the social, environmental, and economic histories of precolonial and colonial Zimbabwe and the wider Southern African region. His work has appeared in the Journal of Southern African Studies, The International Journal of African Historical Studies, and African Economic History as well as several edited collections.

Jenia Mukherjee is Associate Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kharagpur, India. She specialises in urban environmental history, urban political ecology, and transdisciplinary waters. She received the Carson Writing Fellowship (2018–19) from the Rachel Carson Center, Munich for Blue Infrastructures. She received the Salzburg Global and Nippon Foundation Fellowship (2020) to work with transdisciplinary urbanists. Jenia is investigating several global partnership projects, exploring (urban) deltas of South and South-East Asia.

Olisa Godson Muojama is Associate Professor at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His research cuts across global history, economic history and war studies. He is a Fellow of the Munich Centre for Global History, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany and of the African Humanities Program (AHP), the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS).

Meera Anna Oommen is a trustee of the Dakshin Foundation and the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, India. Her work focuses on incorporating multi-disciplinary insights to understand conflict with species such as elephants and wild pigs in the Western Ghats, and with saltwater crocodiles in the Andaman Islands. Meera’s research is located at the interface of environmental history, anthropology, and ecology, especially in the context of human-animal interactions such as hunting.

Ricardo Oyarzún is Professor at the Mines Engineering Department at the University of La Serena, Chile, Associate Researcher at the Center for Advanced Studies in Arid Zones (CEAZA), and the Center for Water Resources for Agriculture and Mining (CRHIAM). Agronomist (U. La Serena). Ricardo’s research interests and scientific work are in watershed
hydrology, watershed management, water isotope hydrogeochemistry, and environmental sciences and management.

**Jonatan Palmblad** is an interdisciplinary researcher from Sweden interested in the role of ideas, cognition, and technology in human–environment interactions. He is an Editor at the Rachel Carson Center and a Communicator for the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) and the International Consortium for Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO). He is also a fellow at the Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research.

**Ignacio García Pereda** is Researcher at CIUHCT–Interuniversity Center for the History of Science and Technology in the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. He holds a master’s degree in forestry from the École Nationale du Génie Rural, des Eaux et des Forêts (France), a PhD in history of science from the Universidade de Évora (Portugal), and a PhD in forestry from the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Spain).

**Jayson Maurice Porter** is Voss Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society and Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA. He specialises in environmental politics, science and technology studies, food systems, agrochemicals, and racial ecologies in Mexico and the Americas. He is an editorial board member of the North American Congress for Latin America (NACLA) and *Plant Perspectives: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

**Miles Powell** is Associate Professor of History at NTU-Singapore, where he studies marine and global environmental history and heads the university’s Green Humanities Research Cluster. His previous work used discourses of extinction to explore connections between racial attitudes and environmental thought in late-19th and early-20th-century America. He is currently researching the global environmental history of human interactions with sharks.

**Inês Macamo Raimundo** is Associate Professor and Senior Researcher at the Department of Geography and the Centre for Policy Analysis, Eduardo Mondlane University, Mozambique. Raimundo focuses on population mobility, forced migration and internal displacement, urbanisation, climate change, and food security.

**Harriet Ritvo** is the Arthur J. Conner Professor of History Emeritus at MIT, USA. Her research has focused on the history of science, especially natural history, and environmental history. Her current research engages issues of wildness and domestication.

**Libby Robin** is an independent environmental historian and curator-at-large. She has published widely and is Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University, as well as Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities.

**Melissa Salm** is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University, USA. Her research into global health governance and zoonotic diseases in Peru has been funded by the NIH-Fogarty International Center. Dr. Salm currently works with virologists, bioethicists, and synthetic biologists on developing biorisk governance frameworks for research with dangerous pathogens.
Contributors

Dissanayake Mudiyanselage Ruwan Sampath is Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Centre of History of the University of Lisbon, Portugal. He holds a BSc in civil engineering and an MSc in environmental and water engineering from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. He completed a joint MSc in water and coastal management at the University of Plymouth, UK, and the University of Algarve, Portugal. He holds a PhD in marine, earth and environmental sciences from the University of the Algarve.

Simone Schleper is Assistant Professor in the History Department and the Globalisation, Transnationalism and Development research program at Maastricht University, Netherlands. She works on the intersections of environmental history, the history of science, and STS. Between 2019 and 2021, she was Postdoctoral Researcher in the NWO-Vici project “Moving Animals”.

Veronika Settele is Lecturer of Modern History at University of Bremen, Germany. She seeks to understand how humans and animals interacted practically, economically, and psychologically by studying farming techniques, food infrastructures, and the politics of international trade. She was the winner of the Volkswagen Foundation’s Opus Primum Prize, the German Thesis Award, and the Friedrich Meinecke Prize.

Matthew Shutzer is Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies and Assistant Professor of Environmental History at Duke University, USA. He is currently researching the environmental history of fossil fuels in South Asia since the 19th century.

Cristián Simonetti is Associate Professor in Anthropology at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. His work has concentrated on notions of time, history and change in science. More recently he has engaged in collaborations across the sciences, arts, and humanities to explore the properties of materials relevant to the Anthropocene, such as glacial ice, soil and concrete.

Youssoupha Tall is Post-Doctoral Fellow at the IRD within the UMR G-Eau, France. He wrote a thesis in environmental sociology on the governance of water resources around Lake Guiers in Senegal. He is interested in the production and circulation of sociotechnical and hydro-climatic knowledge, in “border crossers” and in the dialogue between science and society within the framework of the Water Cycle and Climate Change (WC-CC) project.

Sangay Tamang is Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India. His research focuses on issues of environment, development, and ethnicity, particularly in the highland South Asia. He has published in journals such as Economic and Political Weekly and Indian Anthropologist.

Hedley Twiddle is Associate Professor in English Literary Studies at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. He specialises in 20th-century, southern African and world literatures, as well as creative non-fiction and the environmental humanities.
Contributors

**Jessica Urwin** is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Centre for Environmental History at the Australian National University. Her award-winning research explores the historical relationship between colonialism and the nuclear order in Australia since the turn of the 20th century. She has expertise in the histories of nuclear weapons testing, radium and uranium mining, and nuclear waste disposal in Australia and has published widely on these subjects.

**Cintia Velázquez-Marroni** is an award-winning Associate Lecturer at Mexico’s National School of Conservation, Restoration and Museography “Manuel del Castillo Negrete” of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. Originally trained as a historian, her academic interests cross an interdisciplinary field including critical heritage studies, museology, and environmental humanities. She is Principal Researcher of *Objects in dialogue*, a project to explore, document and share best practice mainly in Latin American museums (http://objetosendialogo.mx).

**René Véron** is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, with primary interests in the fields of development studies and political ecology. His current research addresses issues of urban environmental governance with a regional emphasis on South Asia.

**Emily Wakild** is the Cecil D. Andrus Endowed Chair for the Environment and Public Lands at Boise State University in Idaho, USA. She’s currently thinking about her class on beavers and process-based ecological restoration and writing about the llama diaspora.

**Rebecca Woods** is Associate Professor jointly appointed to the Department of History and the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology at the University of Toronto, Canada. An environmental historian and historian of science, her current research focuses on the history of frozen mammoths in the circumpolar north since 1800.
Preparing for the call?

Consider the following two episodes of experts and policymaking from recent Australian history:

In July 2021, the Australian historian Warwick Anderson received an email from the Australian army general who was coordinating the nation’s Covid-19 vaccination program. The general asked Anderson, a prominent historian of medicine and the environment, on the “lessons of history” and “what might be learned from earlier efforts to control epidemic disease”. Anderson prepared for a short phone call with the general, brushing up on various historic vaccination and public health campaigns, noting how nearly all such efforts required “patient and painstaking engagement with communities” and “infinite sensitivity, sympathy and flexibility”. Knowing he was speaking to a military man, Anderson framed this as a “practice of pacification and counterinsurgency”. In the end, Anderson spoke with the general for more than 30 minutes, although Anderson “got the impression [he] was mostly confirming what [the general] already knew or had heard before” (Anderson 2021).

In December 2021, the Australia Institute, a prominent independent think tank, released a report questioning claims made by Santos, a major Australian natural gas producer, about the potential of carbon capture and storage at one of its gas fields. The Australia Institute drew attention to Santos’s activities within the context of an Australian government policy around emissions reductions – policies which did nothing to reduce emissions. Using Australia’s freedom of information laws, the Institute sought access to documents within the Department of Industry to see how the department responded to the report. A member of the climate change policy section of the department wrote: “Crickey [sic] – that TAI report is 21 pages long. I’ll stick with the summary thanks😊”.1

In these two moments, we might either draw hope or feed our cynicism around policymaking today. We live in hope that some people with power wish to draw on expertise and evidence, including historical expertise and evidence, to shape important policies and to improve people’s lives. We also live with the knowledge that bureaucracies and policymaking capacities in many countries have been utterly politicised and hollowed out by neoliberal cost-cutting. Scientists working in government and industry routinely have their scientific
results or publications suppressed (Driscoll et al. 2021). We worry that no amount of evidence, however compelling, will sway policy- and decision-makers. We worry that even a mere 20-page, evidence-rich document will be blithely cast aside.

This chapter explores how environmental historians might interact with, and have interacted with, policymaking and the broader suite of environmental governance that is now in place at all scales, from the local, through the regional and national, to the international and global. At this time of planetary challenges, interactions with policymaking might seem a tinkering approach to environmental problems, both local and global. “Can environmental history save the world?” asked a group of Australian environmental historians in 2008 (Brown et al. 2008). That was a mostly tongue-in-cheek question, and the answers each of them gave explored locally relevant examples in which historians had made important if modest contributions. Other noteworthy environmental scholars have rather more radical answers to questions of world saving – for example, blowing up pipelines (Malm 2021).

Environmental historians should not wait by the phone. If they want to contribute to policymaking, they need both conceptual frameworks and rich case studies as examples to guide their actions. This chapter offers some frameworks and examples for the environmental historian’s toolbox. Drawing on policy and political science literatures, it examines the nature of environmental policy and governance. The chapter also looks to the larger literature and experiences of “history and policy” as an area of practice and concern. For environmental historians specifically, we consider a range of important policy issues around data and information, rights and justice, deliberation and community engagement, and communities of practice. All this, we hope, might help an environmental historian who wants to take their research to policymakers.

The scope of “policy”

“We need to protect this river” and “We need to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions” are fundamentally sound and important goals, but they don’t quite cut it as “policy”. If a historian wants to effect change in governance or regulation, we must start by asking what policy is and what it means for a historian to participate in policymaking; when, where, and with whom can historians influence policy? There is a many-decades old body of critical policy scholarship from which we can draw to assist how we approach the “policy interface”. There is an especially rich literature on the “science-policy interface” – which broadly emphasises the limits of the “linear model” of advice, often critiques of the “interface” concept itself, and covers all areas of public policy from health and social policy to environmental and sustainability policies (Bednarek et al. 2018; Palmer et al. 2018; Pielke 2007; Wesselink et al. 2013).

What is policy? In other words, how should environmental historians think about policy? Stephen Dovers and Karen Hussey define policies as “positions taken and communicated by governments – ‘avowals of intent’ that recognise a problem and in general terms state what will be done about it. Policies are produced through multi-component and variable policy processes that combine government and non-government players”. A policy- or decision-maker is someone “with legal competence and responsibility in the relevant jurisdiction to do things” (Dovers and Hussey 2013: 14–15, emphasis in original). Policies are enacted with instruments, tools to achieve desired outcomes. Processes are central: problems are framed and recognised; options for solutions are developed and explored; solutions are chosen; decisions are made and implemented; and outcomes are monitored and
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evaluated (broadly drawn from Dovers and Hussey 2013; see also Cairney 2020; Howlett et al. 2020). Historians thus face a variegated terrain of actors and processes when approaching policymaking.

While governments are still central to policymaking, the rise of “governance” and a wider array of actors over the past three or four decades, has enlarged and added a level of complexity to policy processes. There are many sites at which historians might intervene to effect change. “Governance” – often seen as a combined result of neoliberalism, economic globalisation, and the influence of international institutions like the OECD or World Bank – includes not only governments, but also communities, businesses, and non-governmental organisations, and is shaped by political, market, and community concerns embodied in a variety of institutions and ideas across scales (Lemos and Agrawal 2006; Newell et al. 2012). A major example in global environmental governance would include the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Its very structure combines states with non-state actors across every scale, and its expert commissions, committees, and communities are rich sites of policy development, which can have significant influence across the world (Schleper 2019). In another example, companies, both local and multinational, value legitimacy and social license for their work – primarily as a way of building their wealth. The rise of environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) has allowed a range of policy actors to influence business activities, thus potentially achieving certain environmental outcomes. Certification schemes – such as the Marine Stewardship Council or Forest Stewardship Council – have also emerged in recent decades at the intersection of non-governmental action and governmental policy as ways for corporations to sell products and consumers to buy products with certain bits of information (Abrams et al. 2018; Auld 2014). These sites and nodes of governance, sometimes falling outside government processes, are all potential sites for historians to introduce historical expertise and evidence to achieve just and sustainable outcomes for peoples and environments.

Historians and policy

Before further considering the case of environmental historians, it is worth understanding some of the contours and contexts of the contemporary push for historians to be active within policymaking. In many countries, some historians have pushed for the standing and presence of historical knowledge in policy debates and governance frameworks. While many historians are of course concerned to make substantial contributions to, and improvements in, public policy, there is nevertheless an inescapable element of the bureaucratisation of research and universities in many countries to contend with and to keep critically in mind. Historians seeking funding from public bodies are enjoined to predict and aim for “impact pathways” in which their new knowledge – however esoteric, pure, or distant from pressing concerns – is made to connect with some aspect of public policy or community need.

While there are examples of historians engaging in policy development and government from earlier points in history (for some British examples, see Green 2016), perhaps the earliest influential exploration of “history and policy” arose under political scientist Richard Neustadt and historian Ernest May at Harvard University. In the 1970s they began teaching a course on the “uses of history” to their students, many of whom had jobs in government or the military. This led to their 1986 book Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers. Their aim was to create “‘mini-’ or ‘small-m’ methods” for use by decision makers, a “checklist of questions to be asked early instead of late”, either during crises or in
policy development (Neustadt and May 1986: xvi). Several assumptions guided their work, two of which are worth mentioning here. Neustadt and May insisted that government or policy actors “actually used history in their decisions … whether they knew any or not” (Neustadt and May 1986: xii). One task of the historian was to offer good histories. Another assumption that guided their work was that “Marginal improvement in [policy or decision-making] performance was worth seeking” (Neustadt and May 1986: xvii; see also Cox 2013: 136–7). Neustadt and May’s conceptual framework and mini-methods remain valuable.

More recent critical reflection and on-the-ground practice have further elaborated the promises and challenges of “history and policy”. Important work has emerged from the United Kingdom, where the History & Policy organisation and web platform is well-advanced in its work (Delap et al. 2014). Historians who have led or been involved in these developments have reflected on their experiences to suggest ways forward for others, including in the following areas.

Following Neustadt and May, it remains crucial to recognise that politicians and policy makers often invoke and deploy history “in an ad hoc way, mostly without the involvement of historians” (Berridge 2008: 323). This opens a space, as Alix Green has suggested, for emphasising history as a disciplined analytical labour that everyone can undertake rather than merely as a source of facts; processes might be more influential than content. Historians should thus de-emphasise “the tangible products of historical research” and consider how simple participation in policy processes, including conversations with influential actors, can be useful and meaningful (Green 2016: 115).

If encouraging historical thinking is an important aim, which part of policymaking structures and processes should that thinking be encouraged in? As Dovers and Hussey outline – as detailed in the previous section – there is a complex terrain of actors and processes. Not all actors and processes can be simultaneously engaged with and successfully influenced. Virginia Berridge’s experience strongly suggested that historians had to be aware of existing alliances and networks of actors which they might connect into (Berridge 2008, 2018). One way of assessing which alliance, network, or process might be worth engaging with is to remember, as Berridge puts it, that “timing is key” (Berridge 2018: 377). Not all moments in policy development are equally amenable to outside influence or new data or conceptual input. Berridge’s in situ work showed that “Particular points in the policy-making cycle were also more ‘open’ [to the insertion of history] than others” (Berridge 2008: 316). In her policy-engaged work on youth crime and child protection, the historian Pamela Cox has similarly emphasised the necessity of knowing the best moments to intervene (Cox 2013).

As the literature makes clear, these potential interventions and actions are labour intensive and time consuming. Networks and alliances must be recognised and joined, and participation maintained to build trust and understanding; sometimes networks and alliances have to be built. Contributions and changes in policy may only ultimately be marginal or modest.

Environmental historians and policy

Across the wide, diverse, and now enormous literature that constitutes environmental history, there are very few explicit or programmatic considerations of “environmental historians and policy”. Certainly, there have been semi-regular reflections on how environmental historians have engaged with broader publics. And there have been moments in which prominent voices have argued that perhaps the field has lost its earlier impulses for advocacy and
public orientation as it has professionalised and grown within the academy. John McNeill, in a highly-cited 2003 overview of the field, argued that “political engagement seems to have declined sharply in the U.S. and Europe, while still surviving in India and Latin America”, although he couldn’t offer an argument as to why (McNeill 2003: 34). In more recent reflections, he suggests that he has probably had greater influence on solving environmental problems through the thousands of students he has taught than in the few engagements with policymaking into which he was drawn (McNeill 2017). To be sure, public environmental history has a rich body of practice and writing, especially in the United States, where historians often work in government agencies (Madison 2004; Shull and Pitcaithley 2004). A general impression, though, of the contents of one of the field’s major journals, *Environmental History*, suggests that explicit explorations and reflections of environmental historians’ participation in policy development are quite rare. Interdisciplinarity is more invoked than policy engagement.

Let us consider the reflections of three environmental historians in relation to policy:

In 2000, the Australian environmental scholar Stephen Dovers offered substantial thoughts on how environmental history could contribute to policymaking. He suggested “three categories of relevance” for environmental history: “general historical perspectives, human and ecological baselines, and policy and institutional lessons”. While general historical perspectives are useful, Dovers suggests, “there are unlikely to be operational policy suggestions arising”; he does, however, note that history’s synthesising and integrative approaches can be helpful for a difficult policy area like sustainability. On establishing baselines, Dovers feels that the potential contribution of historians is self-evident and important. Knowledge of previous states is essential, but he also cautions that this baseline work is fundamentally interdisciplinary (Dovers 2000a: 137–9) – and indeed, in the case of oyster reef restoration in South Australia, the establishing of baselines by historically minded marine scientists doing historical research suggests the transformative effects of actually establishing baselines, both for engaging policymakers and establishing legitimacy with the public (McAfee et al. 2020). On policy and institutional lessons, he also sees a specific instance of how historians can help: keeping and disseminating the detailed knowledge of previous actions, and “being reminded of what we have forgotten”. On this latter point, Dovers appears profoundly pessimistic, since he considered that (at least in late 1990s Australia, although arguably in most contexts), “‘policy amnesia’ is endemic” (Dovers 2000a: 139–40). Like many other historians working in the policy field, Dovers cautions that, in terms of policymaking, historians and policymakers alike, “should not expect too much from history” (Dovers 2000b: 6).

In Britain, Paul Warde has also articulated environmental historians’ potential contributions. He suggests that historicising policy processes and central concepts in environmental policy is critical (Warde 2015). With colleagues, Warde has suggested three main forms of historians’ policy-relevant evidence: in providing analogues (both true and false analogies); providing direct evidence of past circumstances (which includes baselines); and providing a historical mode of thought, which is integrative and synthesising (Delap et al. 2014: 100) – broadly reaffirming Dovers’s points. On contributing evidence, for him, the work of historians – such as reconstructing past environments – will always be “very partial, and becomes far more convincing when allied with sources of information drawn on by scientists … or an understanding of the biological and ecological functioning”. But, he adds, historians can help to strengthen the data collected by scientists by using their traditional historical methods (Warde 2015: 150; see also Delap et al. 2014).
Finally, the Canadian historian Dean Bavington has taken a much more critical approach. While he appreciates the potential contributions historians might make to policymaking, he strikes a wary (even weary) note about the instrumentalisation of knowledge, especially within universities. The task of the historian in relation to policy processes for Bavington is more fundamentally about “reimagining eco-social relationships and the industrial mindset that produced the Anthropocene” (Bavington 2011: 4). Bavington wants historians to help with a move away from “control-oriented” policy to a policy that helps communities deal with uncertainty and complexity. Like others, Bavington also demands that we historians critique the violence of abstractions and conceptualisations of nature as “resource” (Bavington 2011).

Many other disciplines concerned with good, ecologically sound, and sustainable policymaking – like conservation biology and environmental management – have also developed their own literatures around “policy engagement”. On-the-ground practice in feeding scientifically sound and community-relevant evidence and knowledge into environmental and conservation decision-making is globalised, if uneven, and scholarship and literature analysing and reflecting on those practices is extensive and always growing. Environmental historians seriously considering engaging with policy processes should build awareness of these practices and literatures. The general tendency of this contemporary literature is to recognise that good environmental and conservation decision-making must be built on diverse knowledges and through engagement with varied stakeholders, at all stages of policymaking. Knowledge and evidence should be co-produced with stakeholders and, as David Rose and colleagues summarise, “common principles of effective engagement include trust, reciprocity, respect, transparency, clear benefits to participants, co-learning and identifying all necessary decision-makers”. Furthermore, “It cannot be assumed that good practice for working with one type of decision-maker is transferable to working with another” (Rose et al. 2020: 164). But persistence, too, is crucial. From their work on oyster reef restoration in South Australia, Dominic McAfee and other historically minded marine scientists found that “persistent socialization” and normalising of the historical baselines and narratives among government officials and the public was also crucial to leading to policy action, in the form of oyster reef restoration (McAfee et al. 2020).

Data and information, rights and justice

Soon after Donald Trump was inaugurated as president of the United States, climate data seemed to be disappearing from US government websites. If the data itself was not likely to have been destroyed, removing easy public access was taken as a symbol of Trump’s hatred of environmental protections. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), one of the oldest such agencies in the world, seemed also to be under attack, with Trump appointing the climate-denier and fossil fuel champion Scott Pruitt to be its head.

At such a moment of full-throated political attack on the institutions of environmental protection, what is a historian to do? The policy processes described earlier – such as framing and recognising problems or exploring and developing solutions – can work only if institutions are legitimately constituted and operated, and with quality and accessible data. One pre-emptive response to Trump’s attack on data and the EPA was the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative (EDGI), formed in November 2016 after his election. Historians joined other social and physical scientists to keep a keen eye on the US government’s websites, to ensure that data sets remained accessible (Vera et al. 2018). Trump’s
attack also underscored that, even in earlier times, environmental data was widely dispersed across the government and not especially accessible. In the early Trump era, a range of data activism activities emerged to help preserve environmental data and make it more accessible, including using vital web resources like the Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive.  

As EDGI has developed, historians and historical thinking have increasingly been added to its work. An early, significant piece of EDGI work that was informed by historians’ sensibilities was its contemporaneous archiving and public historical work with EPA employees at the moment of Trump’s attacks on the agency. This involved confidential oral histories with long-term EPA employees (Sellers et al. 2017; Sullivan et al. 2021). Such work, which seeks to actively keep a variety of records and sources on central environmental policy institutions, is an excellent example of a range of ways that environmental historians can help with environmental policy. Not only is it embodied in deeply researched, evidence-based reports, but also in stand-alone, accessible websites such as “A People’s EPA”.  

Subsequent developments include the Environmental Historians Action Collaborative, a group within EDGI, many of whose original members had participated in writing an amicus brief for a major youth climate case presented to the US Supreme Court.  

The protection of specific data sets or retaining certain bits of information ties into a broader development around environmental rights in recent decades. Historians’ engagements with policy processes should not only be targeted to achieve specific policies around ecosystems or sustainability, but should also broadly support principles and processes. Data and information are essential for all peoples to participate in decisions affecting them and their environments. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development states that “Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens” and that nations should ensure that individuals “shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities … and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes”. States should ensure that information is “widely available”.  

This broad principle on access to data and information, which nearly all states are signatories to, has been given additional legal teeth in subsequent regional agreements. In Europe, the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the Aarhus Convention) was signed by 47 countries within the UN’s Economic Commission for Europe in 1998 and came into force in 2001. This treaty pushed forward international environmental law by instituting obligations of states towards individuals in any state; it pushed forward a vision of environmental democracy (Barritt 2020). In 2018, the members of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean signed the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (the Escazú Agreement) that, although it has differences to the Aarhus Convention, similarly pushes towards forms of environmental democracy and rights to healthy environments (Stec and Jendroška 2019).

Helping deliberation

With so many pressing and obvious environmental problems, encouraging more deliberation and discussion among peoples and institutions might seem like dangerous delay. However, as much recent literature and practice in public policy suggests, processes are
essential to policy success and outcomes, especially in the problem and solution-framing phases of policymaking. This is both as a matter of principle – democratic decision-making that is open to peoples at relevant scales is crucial – and as a matter of efficacy and legitimacy.

A noteworthy approach here is “co-design”. In recent decades, a concern with ensuring good policy has led policymakers and policy scholars to embrace processes that more actively include the people who might be affected by policies. In one definition, “co-design … [is] a design-led process, involving creative and participatory principles and tools to engage different kinds of people and knowledge in public problem solving”. The process holds that “lived experience” is a crucial domain of expertise. It uses “practical tools … to access, generate, and test experiences and ideas”, including a range of creative and other approaches which allow people – not just individually, but in a group through deliberative encounters – to tell their stories and to make and test potential solutions (Blomkamp 2018: 731–3).

Historians can be part of this deliberative or co-design process. In February 2003, Marsha Weisiger, then a tenure-track assistant professor at New Mexico State University, wanted to contribute to the question of Mexican wolf reintroductions in the American southwest. She thought that reasoned, open, and respectful discussion among wolf experts, ranchers, environmental activists, interested members of the public, and historians, could bring nuance and light into the debate around the wolf’s apparent conflict with livestock, which was being grazed on federal public lands. The symposium was titled “Leopold Forum: El Lobo” as a tribute (and wry, karmic backhand) to the great American conservationist Aldo Leopold, whose “land ethic” has been so influential yet whose early career contributed to the extirpation of wolves in the southwest. Weisiger believed that wolves and ranchers somehow had to inhabit the same landscape, “however difficult that proposition might be”. Also, as a beginning proposition, she thought that “science does not offer unambiguous answers to environmental questions”, and thus, adding historical, social, and political nuance and complexity to the public discussion might assist in the important task of reintroducing these predators into the southwest rangeland ecosystem (Weisiger 2004: 125–6).

Weisiger took on the enormous task of convening a major two-day symposium that would hopefully foster interactions between conflicting sides of a tense policy issue. Here, the environmental historian was acting as a mediator to allow multiple competing public policy positions to be enacted, ranging from a species reintroduction plan under the US Endangered Species Act, as well as the continued commercial use of public lands to raise beef for sale and consumption. Weisiger asks: “Did adding history into the discussion make any difference?” Her frank answer was “It’s hard to say”. Certainly, it did not bridge the immense divide between the pro- and anti-wolf positions. But what it did reveal to Weisiger was the kinds of history that were important in these policy discussions. Ironically, it was not the deeply researched and sophisticated histories of her and her academic colleagues that seemed to be most important. It was, rather, following Carl Becker’s famous insight, that “everyman” (and every person) was their own historian (Weisiger 2004: 143). That in the deliberative process around wolf policy, the participants found it validating and important to talk of their own histories. A great validation indeed for public history, but perhaps deflating for scholars.

Arranging this deliberation was not easy. As Weisiger says, “Organizing public conversations about contentious environmental issues is not for the faint-hearted” (Weisiger 2004: 144), taking over two years, which included grant writing and the whole coordinating effort, on top of Weisiger’s regular teaching commitments. The grants and funding were required – to
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the tune of over US$32,000 – to ensure a free event that included a wide range of speakers (Weisiger 2004: 133). Importantly, Weisiger was also conscious about her own limits and those of history. Anticipating conflict, Weisiger drew on her experience and contacts in a conflict mediation course she had taken as a fellow of the Environmental Leadership Program, to plan a “private breakfast” following the main public program, which a skilled conflict negotiator chaired and facilitated (Weisiger 2004: 135). As with many cases of public and policy engagement, Weisiger’s openness and ethical dealings with people who held opposing opinions and positions to hers were also important to the process; it embodied what a great deal of positive examples from conservation biology and management say is essential about effective engagement with communities (Rose et al. 2020).

Communities of practice for environmental resilience

Building societal resilience in relation to Earth’s natural processes has been a central task of modern states for centuries. In the face of climate change, which increases the intensity and frequency of “natural” disasters, building that resilience is as crucial as ever. Although predominantly considered the purview of technical experts, in recent decades, some historians have engaged with these resilience policy areas and tried to inject historical evidence and historical thinking into the mix (Lakhani and de Smalen 2018). One notable area has been around fire. Stephen Pyne’s historical scholarship has investigated fire globally, but he has also engaged directly with wildfire management in the United States (Pyne 2009). In Australia, too, historians like Tom Griffiths and Daniel May have, in parts of their research, directly addressed the place of history in fire policies (Griffiths 2009; May 2020).

Flooding is an environmental event with a long, often disastrous, history, but which also requires ongoing policy adaptations and considerations. Historian Margaret Cook reflects on her experiences as part of a “community of practice” trying to shape flood and water policy in the Australian state of Queensland, especially Brisbane, its largest city and capital:

Following publication of A River with a City Problem: A History of Brisbane River Floods (Cook 2019), I deliberately sought opportunities to work with flood policy makers. A Queensland-based group calling themselves the Flood Community of Practice invited me to speak on my new book soon after its release, following which I fully joined the Community’s work. It was established by Dr Piet Filet in 2014 as a cross-disciplinary network of 550 practitioners and scholars from the private, government, university and community sectors involved in various aspects of flood risk management. Communities of practice have existed for 30 years as a way of sharing knowledge and lived practice as means of collaborative learning about a “real-life problem” (Pyrko et al. 2017; Wenger 2010). While Brisbane-based, it has national and international links (particularly with the Netherlands and Britain) and holds regular, interactive, face-to-face, and online workshops to share and build knowledge among members, aiming to be a voice for proactive and holistic approaches to developing flood resilience. Most members are engineers, hydrologists, scientists, and architects who actively work in disaster management. Although I am the only historian in their cohort, Piet Filet maintains that my “research has proved to be a fresh and alternative way to look at past management choices”. My involvement is valued by members who have told me that I bring new knowledge and historical depth to members’ discussions and work practices that informs contemporary planning and flood responses.

In the field of flood management, there are rich opportunities to work with town planners, engineers, and architects – those who determine policies that shape our cities.
Each discipline has its own worldview, a way of framing or analysing problems, and the discipline of history can offer new perspectives on old problems. Through archival research and oral histories, historians uncover hydrological and socio-political complexities, reveal the conflicting narratives and disparate voices, and add the human and non-human dimensions to an event. Scientific and policy documents can be selective in fact, or, as Ian Townsend’s research on the 1889 Cyclone Mahina in north Queensland uncovered, can recycle scientific “facts” based on erroneous accounts of the events that question the validity of the regions’ cyclone modelling (Townsend 2020). Similarly, Tom Griffiths argues that Victoria’s “stay or go” policy on bushfires, responsible for many deaths, relied on bad history that pursued “historical evidence that supported their preferred management policy” (Griffiths 2009). Flood histories can change dominant narratives, dispel myths about flood prevention, or challenge political and administrative processes. The prevalence of myths – think “dams will save us”, “floods come every hundred years” – can be disproven through historical accounts. Policies are cultural; historical accounts reveal the socio-economic and political factors that shape the decisions behind them. Cumulative actions can “lock in” policies, creating a path dependency that limits the range of decisions made in the future and, with the costs of reversal high, make policy change less likely (Gaynor et al. 2022). Historicising past policymaking can help to nudge future policies in new directions, away from path-dependent ones.

The Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry held after the state’s 2011 floods recommended local authorities revise their flood management policies (Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry 2012: 46–7). In 2020 the Ipswich City Council, in southeast Queensland, rewrote its flood management policies, drawing on my flood history work. The Council’s Emergency Management and Sustainability Manager told me that my research stimulated “evidence-backed discussion that allowed examination and validation of our thinking”, equipped the Council officers with “historical context to explain current decisions” and “provided an authoritative, non-government view of the complexities of flooding to point to and encourage people to explore these issues themselves”. Drawing on history, officers were able to contextualise past policies and explain the need for change at a series of public forums.

My sustained engagement with government agencies and flood practitioners – both during formal policy processes and in more informal ways – has developed trusting relationships, bringing with it further opportunities to engage with various stakeholders and policymakers. Since the February 2022 floods, my voice had value as a conduit between technicians and the wider public. Disaster managers identify community knowledge of hazards as a tool in increasing community resilience, a key to sustainability (Handmer and Dovers 2007; Krüger et al. 2015). With a wet summer predicted for the end of 2022, Ipswich City Council engaged me to conduct a community forum on flood preparedness based on historical precedents, and I have worked with Seqwater (the authority responsible for managing the region’s flood mitigation dams) on a series of educational flood videos for wide dissemination. Memories of floods can increase community preparedness and aid the recovery, but scholars have found that flood memories in Australia can fade during periods of drought (Colten and Sumpter 2009; Garde-Hansen et al. 2017; McEwen et al. 2017). Recording the events is an important part the historian can play in assisting flood policy, building community knowledge through narrative. The value of recording stories and providing historical insight was recognised by the Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management. In July 2021 it held the inaugural Queensland
Disaster Management Research Forum, where six academic historians presented papers on histories of disasters and three contributed to an interdisciplinary discussion panel. The event was live-streamed to 300 participants globally. The historians provided temporal depth to the discussions and reminded participants of the importance of social and cultural factors when determining policy and the need to consider the human, non-human, and environmental impacts of solutions in the rush to restore the *status quo ante*. Historians can bridge divides, and in 2022 I chaired a roundtable of disaster managers at the second Queensland Disaster Management Research Forum to discuss community involvement in flood resilience.

Policies can create a world without humans, politics, cultural values, and economics – an unreality that ignores the cultural dimensions of science (Carey 2014). As social scientists, one role for historians may be to historicise policy, to put a human face to the consequences of past poor decisions or adherence to path-dependent practices to remind policymakers to draw on collective insights and disciplines to strive for the best possible outcomes. Floods are a hybrid of human and nature’s actions and the creation of false dichotomies in flood management policy based on predictions of nature’s actions can perpetuate environmental ignorance or cultural blindness that can be fatal.

Conclusion

The efforts of many environmental history colleagues to contribute actively to environmental policymaking are inspirational. Their labours are often hidden out of sight of the peer-reviewed literature that our disciplines, jobs, and funders demand. But it helps to consider these cases alongside the significant and carefully conceptualised policy studies scholarship, too, since the challenges of working at the policy interface are many and substantial, even forbidding – this policy scholarship is a valuable tool for environmental historians. The literature cited in this chapter is clear about the promises and challenges; it is difficult to make one-off contributions to policy. However, within the constraints of policy frameworks and processes, there are opportunities to build working relationships with stakeholders. While historians are rarely the policymakers, our scholarship has the potential to stimulate change. Often it is just as important to concentrate on processes as much as policy substance. Sustained engagement and public activities make the chances for success and influence higher. Patience is key, since frustration is a central experience, and policy “successes” might sometimes (even usually) only be marginal corrections and improvements. As the environmental scholars David Rose and colleagues put it: “Don’t give up!” (Rose et al. 2020: 176).

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Notes

The University of Pennsylvania’s Program in Environmental Humanities also contributed to this data rescue: https://ppeh.sas.upenn.edu/historical-page-get-involved
3 https://www.apeoplesepa.org/
5 UN General Assembly, A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. 1).
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