

The Voice of Nature

Veranstalter: Liesbeth V.D. Grift / Wim Van Meurs, Nijmegen

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On the 23rd and 24th of April Liesbeth V.D. Grift (Nijmegen) and Wim Van Meurs (Nijmegen) organized a workshop named 'The Voice of Nature', at the conference venue Soeterbeeck.¹ The meeting, attended by historians as well as biologists, ecologists, philosophers and geographers, aimed to bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars whose work is related to the theme of environmentalism and nature. Organized in preparation of a larger research project, the workshop further sought to lay the foundations for a new, non-partisan approach to the politicized, multi-layered history of environmental activism and policy.

Although many scholars are working on issues of environment and environmental activism, these efforts are fragmented and dispersed over a wide variety of faculties and universities. Consequently, scholars are often oblivious of 'what is going on' in other departments, while actually there is much overlap between their approaches. The idea of this workshop was that it is this middle ground which holds the potential for fruitful and interdisciplinary research: And indeed, while the four panels and keynote speech in those two days covered different themes, there was a marked overlap and coherence between speakers and views.

In the first panel, *Protecting Nature*, environmental diplomacy was the central theme. Independent researcher ANNA-KATHARINA WÖBSE (Bremen) showed how the Wadden Sea came to be an area of international power-plays, where different national political interests and attitudes vis-à-vis the protection of nature were exposed in the struggle for the protection of this unique landscape. The entrance of environmental issues in the political arena was also obvious in this panel's second presentation by

FRANK UEKÖTTER (Birmingham). Uekötter, in agreement with Wöbse, asserted that framing 'the greens' as a constant enemy of the state is an unwarranted simplification of complex historical dynamics. As his case-study of Germany showed, shifting conditions and rationales have at times even resulted in a merger of interests, and a mutually enforcing interaction between state and activists.

The second panel, *Managing Nature*, provided a philosophical approach to environmental issues, focusing on perceptions of nature. CLEMENS DRIESSEN (Wageningen), whose research lies somewhere in between philosophy and geography, discussed the politics of 'back-breeding' in the Third Reich, and resulting perceptions of the so-called 'Nazi' Heck cattle. Colleague philosopher MARTIN DRENTHE (Nijmegen) dealt with environmental ethics and the 'reading of nature' – contrary perhaps to what one might think, a no less contested or politicized issue than the German cows.

Zooming in on the role of experts in environmental issues, the third panel, *Nature's Experts*, formed the stage for three speakers: Historian RAF DE BONT (Maastricht) presented his research on the shifting role of scientific experts in international organizations for the protection of nature, using data- and network analysis to map out the key players in this field. Ecologist LEON LAMERS (Nijmegen), the second speaker in this panel, may be seen as an example of a contemporary environmental expert. He showed how the management of ecosystems is intimately intertwined with politics, and at the same time questioned his own role in determining such policies. The role of experts and institutions was finally taken up by BERNARD SLAA (Groningen), whose Master Thesis provides insight in the important, yet ambivalent position of zoos in the conservation of, and education about, animals and environment.

The second day was opened with in-depth discussion of the hypotheses and methodology of the envisaged research project - for

¹ This conference report appeared in a similar version on historici.nl: Verslag: Workshop 'The Voice of Nature', 2.5.2014, <<http://www.historici.nl/nieuws/verslag-workshop-%E2%80%9898-voice-nature%E2%80%9999>> (9.6.2014).

which this workshop formed a preparatory exploration. By approaching issues of nature and environment from a political-historical perspective, the project *The Voice of Nature*, seeks to form an interdisciplinary and non-partisan understanding of the history of environmental activism and policy. Given the fact that nature cannot speak for itself, key question is who in history has laid claim on best representing its voice. What powers and parties have tried to define the shape of our environment? And how can shifts, and national differences in such power-plays be explained?

After a round of questions and comments on the proposed project, Keynote speaker JOZEF KEULARTZ (Wageningen), managed to bring together the core issues that had been discussed over the course of the workshop: By reflecting on the legitimacy of nature conservation policy, Keulartz connected the dots between politics, ecology, philosophy and history; thereby confirming the validity and importance of an interdisciplinary approach to environmental activity and policy.

The last panel of this workshop, *Nature's Advocates*, was a final reminder of how environmental issues are connected to politics, but more importantly, how such issues are determined by their historical and national context. Historian ASTRID KIRCHHOF (Berlin) challenged prevalent Cold-War narratives which claimed that socialist governments had no interest in the protection of nature, by looking at the Nature Conservation Policy of the GDR from 1945 to 1990. Finally, comparing Dutch and American developments, ecologist HENNY VAN DER WINDT (Groningen) showed how interests and initiatives in nature-conservation have shifted over the course of the past two centuries.

The workshop in Soeterbeeck has yielded promising results: After two days the 'overlapping ground' that this meeting set out to define, has begun to take shape, as attendants returned home with a better idea of 'what is being done' in other departments. After two days it has become increasingly clear that environmental issues are, and have always been, inextricably connected to politics. Yet, while this entanglement is undeniable, many questions have yet to be answered: Questions that require more research and will allow scholars

to go beyond the boundaries of both their nations and disciplines.

Conference Overview:

Panel I: Protecting Nature

chair: Liesbeth vd Grift (Radboud University Nijmegen)

Anna Katharina Wöbse (independent researcher, Umwelthistorische Recherche), *The Late Career of a Dreary Land: A Transnational History of the Wadden Sea*

Frank Uekötter (University of Birmingham), *The Friendly Leviathan. Environmentalism and the State*

Panel II: Managing Nature

chair: Stefan Couperus (Utrecht University)

Clemens Driessen (Utrecht University, Wageningen University), *Wild Experiments at the Oostvaardersplassen. Rethinking Environmentalism in the Anthropocene*

Martin Drenthen (Radboud University Nijmegen), *Reading the Landscape: A Hermeneutic Approach to Environmental Ethics*

Panel III: Nature's Experts

chair: Vincent Lagendijk (Maastricht University)

Raf de Bont (Maastricht University), *Nature's Diplomats. Ecological Experts and the Conservation of International Organisations (1920-2000)*

Leon Lamers (Radboud University Nijmegen), *Nature Policy and Environmental Management*

Bernard Slaa (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen), *A Paradoxical Nature – Zoos and Their Historical Relation with Exotic and Endangered Animals (1800-2000)*

Discussion: Research program, 'The Voice of Nature'

chair: Stefan Couperus

Commentators: Frank Uekötter and Jozef Keulartz

Keynote Speech

Jozef Keulartz (Wageningen University), *From Government to Governance: The*

Legitimacy of Nature Conservation Policy

Panel IV: Nature's Advocates

chair: Wim van Meurs

Astrid Mignon Kirchhof (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), The Nature of the Cold War. GDR Nature Conservation Policy during the East-West Conflict from 1945 to 1990

Henny van der Windt (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen), Nature Conservation in the Netherlands

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