

Environmental humanities: objectives and potentials

An introduction to the focus

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The contributions on environmental humanities (EH) collected in this special focus of *GAIA* have one assumption in common: that speaking, thinking and telling stories about nature is closely linked with the activities of human collectives, which, in turn, transforms nature. Various methodological approaches have emerged around this assumption. American studies and ancient history specialist **Christopher Schliephake** (2020a, in this issue) focuses on ecological narratives, especially mythical ones, from Antiquity. In his contribution, Schliephake investigates a more geographical story, namely Pausanias' *Description of Greece*. As in his previous works (Schliephake 2020b), he demonstrates that classical texts can be reinterpreted productively if ecological insights and, as in this case, insights from landscape ecology are used. In a sense, ecology is thereby turned into an auxiliary science to classical studies, allowing for this field to be developed in an innovative manner.

Kirsten Twelbeck (2020, in this issue) brings us back to the present with her contribution: She approaches her topic from a cultural studies angle, examining the history of wheat in the United States. Lately, plants (Waltenberger 2020) as well as substances have received an increasing amount of attention through the lens of cultural studies.¹ Twelbeck's examination reveals that the instruments of the humanities enable a clear and transparent analysis of the cultural functions and the cultural – or rather cultural-political – significance of wheat within Western culture, and in the United States in particular. She combines her analysis with the technical and economic handling, as well as the biological and ecological handling, of this landscape-transforming grain. In a broad sense, both her contribution and that of Schliephake fit in the field of cultural ecology (Zapf 2016), with tie-ins to material histories.

Andreas Benz (2020, in this issue) takes a political ecology perspective (Schmidt 2020). His contribution closely examines nature discourse in socialist Cuba. He demonstrates that the analysis of

speech and storytelling about nature – present in the field of EH – often includes an informed and constructive critique of the current state of affairs. It is not merely a question of description. The tension between scientifically oriented ecology and a cultural studies analysis, typical of EH, can give rise to alternative perspectives for action.

This is also emphasized by the editorial (Mauch 2020, in this issue) and by the contribution by **Schmidt et al.** (2020, in this issue), who demonstrate the potential of EH. Of course, the studies presented here can only showcase a few examples from this field of research that is currently experiencing a very lively presence around the world. The examples chosen, however, make clear that when working on environmental problems, it is greatly beneficial to include expertise from the humanities and social studies. Conversely, we hope to demonstrate that natural science expertise – and ecological expertise in particular – brings with it a fresh perspective to tradition-steeped topics from the humanities and social studies.

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¹ Cf. such as the *Stoffgeschichten* network of the German Research Foundation (DFG), www.stoffgeschichte.org.