

The Best Ideas? Natures, Nations, and Collective Memory

Call for Papers

Date: 1-3 December 2016

Venue: German Historical Institute London

Conveners: Andreas Gestrich (German Historical Institute London), Frank Uekötter (University of Birmingham)

Deadline: 13.05.2016

In 1872, Yellowstone became the first national park in the world. Forty years later, with similar parks existing all over the world, James Bryce declared that the national parks were "the best idea America ever had". The remark became legendary and stands as a fine example of post-colonial humour, as Bryce was the British ambassador to the United States. It raises interesting questions about the nationalisation of nature and the naturalization of nations.

Nature has served as a resource for nation-building, and the reverse is no less true: nations and nationalisms have framed the appreciation of the natural environment. Sometimes a historic first captured the collective imagination. For example, England has claimed a special attachment to animals ever since the foundation of the world's first society for animal protection in 1824. In other cases, the link grew out of a peculiar endowment of nature such as the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, tigers in India, or panda bears in China. Sometimes a disaster left its mark in national identity; Chernobyl and Bhopal may serve as examples. The meaning of environmental icons can be positive as well as negative, and places such as the silver mines of Potosí occupy an ambiguous place somewhere in between.

Both nature and nations came across with a whiff of eternity, but recent scholarship offers a different perspective: it views nations as imagined communities and nature as a cultural construction. Furthermore, nations were never homogeneous in their appreciation of nature, and the dividing lines shed revealing lights on societies, identities, and changes in the land. Memory studies have stressed the pivotal role of groups with specific interests and mindsets in the shaping of collective memory. For example, icons of nature were important commercial assets for hotel owners and tourist managers. Scholars have also shown how the construction of national identities was tied to processes of exclusion and inclusion. Environmental historians have recognized that human interventions in nature mirrored and created social inequalities. In short, both nations and natures show an enormous dynamism over time, and yet societies displayed a remarkable inclination to depict them as permanent and immutable - all the more reason to discuss the intended and unintended changes over time.

Events and objects of nature could gain iconic status in many different ways, and this conference explores these paths in transnational perspective. When and how did they achieve iconic status? What were the original motives, and how did they relate to interests and identities?

Can we identify certain groups that typically played key roles in the making of these myths? When and how did icons advance beyond national borders, and can we identify a divergence between national and international tropes? Can we identify differences in the construction of identities in Western countries and the colonial and post-colonial world? And how did all this change over time? With these questions, the workshop explores paths towards what one might call an environmental history of nationalism.

We particularly invite paper proposals that address one or several of the following issues:

- Landscapes and Cultures: how did nations come to perceive certain landscapes as iconic, and what did this mean for these environments and their human inhabitants?
- Nations and Disasters: how did catastrophic events shape national identities, and how did that influence political and social responses to these disasters?
- Iconic Species: why did some animals achieve iconic status, and what were the consequences for species, humans, and the environments in which they both lived?
- Identity as a Business Model: what was the role of economic interests (broadly conceived) in the construction and change of environmental icons?

Discussions during the conference will be based on precirculated papers that will be due no later than 15 October 2016. The conference will take place in London on 1-3 December 2016. We intend to publish selected papers in an appropriate venue.

Please send paper proposals of up to 500 words to Frank Uekötter at f.uekoetter@bham.ac.uk. The deadline for proposals is 13 May 2016.