

# The Uses of Environmental Humanities

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Series, Uses of Environmental Humanities

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Years ago, when I began the daunting task of deciding what to study university, it seemed that everyone around me was warning against the frivolity of a humanities degree. If I wanted to go down that route, I'd become a penniless writer, an actor down on her luck, or join the ranks of unemployable historians, anthropologists, or sociologists milling idly about. What exactly did such people *do*? How did they live? Without a business degree, I was told, my future looked grim. Those same people would likely have scoffed upon even hearing the term "Environmental Humanities," never mind discovering that it is an actual field of study in which one can obtain a degree. Big environmental problems needed scientists and engineers to solve them. What could the Environmental Humanities possibly be good for? As it turns out, rather a lot.

The Environmental Humanities show us that issues of gender, social justice, politics, and power are bound up with environmental issues in profound and inextricable ways. Many people are starting to realize that environmental problems cannot simply be left to scientists and engineers to solve; that they have a stake in the future of their world and have the right—and a responsibility—to be involved in decision-making processes. They are recognizing the importance of listening to vulnerable and marginalized communities, and pushing for systematic changes that will work towards global justice. For instance, by using trans-border litigation to ensure that corporations and governments are held accountable for the toxic legacies they have left behind, and by recognizing the rights of the natural world in law. People are turning to history and literature and film, to stories from the past and imaginations of the future, to highlight alternative ways of living on the planet. Artists and activists are finding new ways to render visible the damage done to the oceans by plastic waste, creating different and valuable affective responses alongside the data of marine scientists.

Here at the Rachel Carson Center, we have created a hub where different kinds of researchers in the Environmental Humanities can meet and share their insights with each other, with students in our graduate programs, and with our many **partners** and **collaborators** outside the university. Part of the work of the RCC involves finding ways to communicate the research and ideas that come out of our hub, and this is where my personal career in humanities has found a home. As a translator and editor, I have the opportunity to engage with researchers and research from a range of backgrounds and disciplines. My job is to understand, firstly, where this research is coming from, and then to find ways of making it resonate with a wide community. Editing research papers for readers across academia, showcasing the work of the RCC and its scholars on our blog, and writing about RCC events on social media are all part of the job—in the process contributing to a wide-ranging, dynamic, and growing discourse of human concern for a changing world.

Environmental Humanities is becoming a success story. Of the many milestones we have achieved in promoting and developing Environmental Humanities in Germany—including establishing both **master's** and **doctoral programs** at LMU Munich—a high point last year was the **first-ever Environmental Humanities Summit**, which saw EH scholars, institutions, and organizations from all over the world gather to discuss the future of the field. To celebrate the diversity, creativity, and energy in Environmental Humanities, we have decided to launch this new blog series and reflect on what the field can do for us, now and in the future. “The Uses of Environmental Humanities” focuses on the applications and impacts of Environmental Humanities, both on an individual and a societal and environmental level.

Having spent the last year putting this series together with an excellent group of contributors, I’m delighted to see it published at last. It’s fitting, I think, to wrap up my time at the Rachel Carson Center with a series that brings together everything I love about the work I do: the community, the sharing of ideas, the creativity. For me, at least, choosing to do a humanities degree has turned out to be not just a route to a satisfying career, but an encounter with a diverse community in an exciting, important, and relevant field of study. In translation, I discovered the tools to transform texts; in the Environmental Humanities, I have found a field of study that might just have the potential to change the world.