









# Environmental Humanities Switzerland – a decade in retrospect

*Environmental crises confront humanity with challenges that reach into all areas of society – from poverty and exclusion, capitalism and finance, to forced migration, global health, and artificial intelligence. This article traces the history of saguf's working group Environmental Humanities from 2014 to 2025 and reflects on its contributions in Switzerland and beyond.*

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schweizerische akademische  
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For many decades a rich scholarly tradition has sought better ways to understand and begin to resolve environmental problems. While the *environmental sciences* are rooted in the natural sciences, adding humanities and social sciences perspectives broadens the field into *environmental studies*. Under the umbrella of the *environmental humanities (EH)*, environmental studies have gained new momentum by developing richer collaborations among scholars, natural scientists, artists and designers, social activists, and various further knowledge holders rooted in diverse epistemologies (Forêt et al. 2014) for reframing sustainability research (Kueffer et al. 2019). For over a decade, saguf has through one of its working groups helped to strengthen the environmental humanities within and beyond Switzerland. In this article, members of the working group reflect on its history.

## A decade of *Environmental Humanities Switzerland*

During the weekend of 7 to 8 November 2014, nine brave souls of the recently organized *Environmental Humanities Switzerland (EH-CH)* held their first retreat at Brunnen on the shores of the Vierwaldstättersee, fully realizing that here, alongside the Auslandschweizerplatz and opposite to Rütli – memorials to the Swiss living abroad and the Confederation's initial oath-making – was also the place where the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) held their own first meeting in 1947. The conviction there was that Switzerland's significant and varied environmental talents might again be harnessed for knowing the environment and engaging with rapid global change, accelerating environmental crises, and widening political rifts – but by relying more heavily on the insights from the human-

ities and social sciences. The group was composed of historians, cultural studies theorists, literary scholars, ethnologists, artists, designers, photographers, filmmakers, geographers and ecologists.

The environmental humanists' first conference earlier in summer 2014 in Zurich had brought together 50 experts to discuss what they labelled, "preparing for post-collapse." The international symposium was accompanied by a week-long graduate school entitled *Scientists as Humanists, Humanists as Scientists*. In the same year, *Environmental Humanities Switzerland (EH-CH)* was institutionalized as the *Environmental Humanities* working group of saguf with its own webpage<sup>1</sup>. In the following decade, the group's members, collectively or individually, organized workshops, symposia, outreach events, and film festivals, hosted scholars, and produced grant proposals and publications. The thematic of post-collapse was further explored at a second symposium on *Environmental Justice, "Collapse" and the Question of Evidence* (September 2015, Franklin University Switzerland, Lugano), which resulted in a special issue of *Intervalla*<sup>2</sup>. *EH-CH*'s other memorable events have included a semester-long lecture series as part of the interdisciplinary *Ringvorlesung program* at the Uni-

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<sup>1</sup> [www.eh-ch.ch](http://www.eh-ch.ch)

<sup>2</sup> [www.fus.edu/intervalla/volume-3-environmental-justice-collapse-and-the-question-of-evidence](http://www.fus.edu/intervalla/volume-3-environmental-justice-collapse-and-the-question-of-evidence)

versity of Zurich on *Surviving the Anthropocene* (2016), high profile public lectures by Kathrin Yusoff, Naomi Oreskes, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2015, 2017, 2018) among others, and an international symposium connecting the environmental humanities with the UN's *Sustainable Development Goals* (September 2021, Franklin University Lugano; Kueffer and Wiedmer 2022).

In the following paragraphs, some of this work of *Environmental Humanities Switzerland* is presented in greater detail. An important focus of the saguf working group was to encourage more attention to environmental issues by humanists and social scientists with funding from the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW). Indeed, there have since been some important successes at institutionalizing the environmental humanities in Switzerland. In some cases, the label “environmental humanities” is explicitly used (e.g., for a professorship<sup>3</sup> and a research group<sup>4</sup>) while in other cases environmental themes are taken up by individuals within humanities faculties (e.g., Claudia Keller's work at the intersection of literature and biodiversity, Keller 2024). Two examples that were enabled by the saguf's working group and its members are presented in more detail: a professorship at the University of St. Gallen and the new master's program in sustainability and transformation (MAST) at Franklin University Switzerland. *EH-CH* has also collaborated internationally with other environmental humanities organizations, including the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (Munich) and the KTH Environmental Humanities Lab (Stockholm).

### Migrant trees, rights of nature, and an Anthropocene Slam

The public art events conceived by *EH-CH* addressed some of the most pertinent questions of our time in imaginative and poetic styles. Human relationships to trees inspired two of these events: *Tree stories* (2017 and 2023)<sup>5</sup> invited Zurich citizens who hailed from elsewhere to engage and perform a story, song or dance with a locally growing tree native to their homeland. Combining botany and sense of place, we

#### BOX 1: Inside Sustainability Interfaces – the saguf podcast

saguf now has its own podcast channel. *Inside Sustainability Interfaces* offers reflections on sustainability, transformation and the role of science in society by members of saguf. In the first episode, *Between activism and analysis: perspectives on science, sustainability, and academia*, Sarah Helena Keller (University of Zurich) presents findings from the “young generation” project.

We invite you to listen, subscribe, share, and send us feedback. We are also looking for interested members who would like to create an audio contribution. Please get in touch – we are happy to support you.

#### MORE INFORMATION:

<https://inside-sustainability-interfaces.podigee.io>

aimed to enrich the public's awareness of the truly global nature of Zurich's surroundings, while catalyzing dialogue about the meanings and metaphors of terms such as “alien” and “invasive”. Memorable examples are the folk song under a giant sequoia, an aikido demonstration with Japanese oak sticks and a poem inspired by an Indian creation myth. The second tree exploration, *Marry your beloved tree*, focused on the rights of nature. In a speculative act, participants were invited to marry or adopt a tree for which they of course received the appropriate certificate. At the 2024 event, *Dominique Strebel*, a lawyer and editor of the magazine *Beobachter*, talked about the legal connotations of these liaisons of humans and trees.

In an *Anthropocene Slam* (2015)<sup>6</sup>, slammers engaged with questions about the future of our society in an era of limits to growth, climate change, and over-exploitation of ecosystems. Short entertaining presentations paired with music showed how physical objects reflected our own times and what these might mean for contributing to a possible “survival kit for an uncertain environmental future.” Environmental historian *Marcus Hall* spoke about coprolites (petrified feces), while artists *Jeremy Bolen* and *Emily Scott* presented plastiglomerates, the hybrid “rock” comprised of ocean-deposited plastic trash and natural sediments. Physicist *Michael Dittmar* waxed pessimistically about the

immanence of peak(ed)-oil, while systems ecologist *Andreas Fischlin* viewed climate change as threatening human life as well as the possibility of humane existence.

### Global Science Film Festival

Recognizing a growing demand for captivating science films, *Samer Angelone* began organizing workshops in which young academics could learn the basic skills of filmmaking: storytelling, storyboarding, filming and editing. Such workshops have now become popular and take place at eleven Swiss universities and research centers while being incorporated in prestigious film festivals in Locarno, Nyon, and Geneva, where film students meet with established filmmakers.

Since the initiation of the *Science Film-making Marathon* in 2016<sup>7</sup>, young scholars and scientists produce their own short films, which created the need for a public venue to show and discuss them. At the *Global Science Film Festival*, first aired in Zurich in 2017<sup>8</sup>, these short films are presented together with professional full-length and short films (both fiction and documentaries) on social and natural science topics. With the motto “the shortest distance between science and society is cinema,” this film festival is now a regular event in Zurich, Basel, Lugano, and Bern. The vision of all of these activities is to create a new generation of scientists-as-filmmakers (Angelone 2019).

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3 [www.unifr.ch/env/en](http://www.unifr.ch/env/en)

4 [www.unil.ch/figd/fr/home/menuinst/recherche/humanites-environnementales.html](http://www.unil.ch/figd/fr/home/menuinst/recherche/humanites-environnementales.html)

5 <https://environmentalhumanities.ch/tree-stories>

[www.abenteuer-stadtnatur.ch/2023-baumgeschichten-tree-stories](http://www.abenteuer-stadtnatur.ch/2023-baumgeschichten-tree-stories)

6 <https://ethz.ch/en/news-and-events/eth-news/news/2015/07/narrating-the-anthropocene.html>

7 [www.sciencefilm.ch/filmmaking-marathon](http://www.sciencefilm.ch/filmmaking-marathon)

8 [www.sciencefilm.ch](http://www.sciencefilm.ch)

### Promoting the environmental humanities

An important aim of *Environmental Humanities Switzerland* has been to promote a stronger environmental voice from humanists and social scientists. With funding from the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, the group surveyed existing initiatives and scholars within Switzerland (Kueffer et al. 2015, Hall et al. 2015), with the findings being covered, for example, by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (*Umweltprobleme gehen nicht nur Naturwissenschaftler etwas an*, NZZ, 2. Februar 2015). A follow-up report proposed a ten-step action plan to strengthen the environmental humanities and their relevance for policy-makers and practitioners (Kueffer et al. 2017)<sup>9</sup>. Results from these studies were disseminated in various SAGW publications (e.g., *Bulletin SAGW*

research projects and initiatives such as the platform *Unruly Natures*<sup>10</sup> (developed in collaboration with several *EH-CH* members and a growing network of international scholars) and the research project *A River-centred Approach: Designing a Framework for Ecosocial Transitions* (in collaboration with Arturo Escobar, as well as activists and institutions in Cali, Colombia). There have also been international conferences (e.g., *Politics of Nature*, 2018), publications (e.g., Guaraldo 2023), and public talks.

### Master of Arts in Sustainability and Transformation

The undergraduate major in *Social Justice and Sustainability*, developed in 2015 at Franklin University, goes back to an early collaboration with *EH-CH*. The Master of Arts in *Sustainability and Transformation*

### Outlook

In 2014 we defined the environmental humanities: “As a metadiscipline that brings into conversation several subfields, *EH* seeks to offer new and more synthetic insights into cultural, historical and ethical dimensions of our most intractable environmental problems” (Forêt et al. 2014). A decade later we are more convinced than ever in the importance of such wide-ranging intellectual exchanges and we hope that the field will continue to reframe sustainability sciences and environmental policies so that they become more effective and inclusive. Our vision is to help form a new generation of scholars that bring together competences and sensibilities of humanists, scientists, artists, activists, practitioners and citizens rooted in diverse cultures and epistemologies.

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4/2014 or *Swiss Academies Communications* 18/5, 2023) and discussed at workshops such as the *Sustainability Science Forum 2022 (Paradigmen für den gesellschaftlichen Wandel neu denken)*, jointly organized and moderated with *Markus Zürcher*, secretary general of SAGW).

### Faculty of Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities, University of St. Gallen

Since 2018, the Faculty of Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities at the University of St. Gallen, led by Federico Luisetti, has been actively contributing to a vibrant discourse in the environmental humanities by bridging debates in the humanities, social sciences, political ecology, and the arts. Highlights include long-term

(*MAST*), which will launch in 2026, builds on the broad interdisciplinary foundation of the liberal arts and the hands-on learning offered through partnerships with organizations that model sustainability in practice. Students explore how sustainability is understood across economics, science, communication, and the environmental humanities; they learn to assess, map, and transform systems, and to study effective real-world sustainability strategies and apply their own insights firsthand. The overarching aim of *MAST* is to teach students to reimagine unsustainable systems. The focus, design, and aim of the Master incorporate many of the principles *Environmental Humanities Switzerland* has been exploring and debating now for over a decade.

9 <https://i2insights.org/2018/09/11/strengthening-environmental-humanities>

10 <https://unrulynatures.ch>