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Introduction

By Lars Marée, Carla Schmidt, Sarah Wulbrecht, and Zou Junhan

Environmental history is on the rise. Rather than taking the human as its centre, environmental historians have shifted their focus, among other themes, to environmental destruction, colonial plantation building, and conflicting ideas of the human's position in its natural environment. This issue aims to join this innovative group of historians who attempt to shine a new light on histories already written from human-centred perspectives. The articles are ordered both chronologically and thematically as "the human" is increasingly decentred.

Three themes form a red thread through the following articles. Firstly, to different extents, the papers nuance the human-centredness of history writing. Influential academics who similarly decentred the human were Maan Barua and Kathleen Morrison.[1] The second theme encompasses a criticism of the productivising of Nature within the human-dominated systems of colonialism and capitalism. Texts by Jason W. Moore and Corey Ross inspired our research on this critique.[2] Lastly, the convergence of empire and science is central in our analyses of human-Nature relationships in history.

In her article, Carla Schmidt looks at the Acclimatisation Society in Berlin. Part of an international movement of acclimatisation societies, it was founded in the second half of the nineteenth century to introduce new plants and animals to Prussia. The article analyses the Prussian understanding and practices of acclimatisation. Schmidt argues that the society took a practical approach to acclimatisation. It understood it to be a process, a method, and a science. Further, the society's aims should be seen as a quest for Cheap Nature. Through acclimatisation, the society tried to appropriate extra-human labour to feed a growing population and increase the nation's wealth. Despite its nationalist aims, the society engaged in an international scientific exchange network connected to colonialism.

In the second article, Lars Marée applies the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics to a discussion of more-than-human actors on Ceylon's coffee plantations in the nineteenth century. As a result of profit-oriented cultivation

1 Maan Barua, *Plantation Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2004); Maan Barua, "Plantationocene: A Vegetal Geography," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 113, no. 1 (2023): 13–29; Kathleen D. Morrison, "Provincializing the Anthropocene: Eurocentrism in the Earth System," in *At Nature's Edge: The Global Present and Long-term History*, ed. Gunnel Cederlöf and Mahesh Rangarajan (Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–18.

2 Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (Verso, 2015); Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

techniques, the *Hemileia vastatrix* fungus spread on Ceylon's plantations, leading to their sudden downfall. Marée shows how colonial science, with its human-centred mindset, thoroughly impacted the life cycle of plants and fungi on plantation sites. Marée illustrates the active role of more-than-human organisms in Ceylon's plantation history. In his contribution, the author uses colonial agriculture manuals to describe the process of plantation building. Moreover, through a set of thematic maps, he highlights the environmental change that Ceylon faced during the fungus epidemic.

Thirdly, Zou Junhan examines how the lalang (*Imperata cylindrica*) shaped rubber cultivation and plantation management in early twentieth-century British Malaya. Following the "plant turn" in environmental history, the article shows the demonisation of lalang alongside Chinese and Malay labourers. Lalang symbolised disorder and unruliness and was used to justify colonial exploitation of human and more-than-human bodies. The author addresses the shifting practices of lalang eradication, revealing the dependency of commercial rubber cultivation on regulations of human and vegetal labour. Lastly, the article explores the construction of categories like "weeds." Lalang became reimagined as a commercial resource and a useful deterrent against fungal and other invasive threats. Drawing on scientific journals and newspapers, the article foregrounds lalang as an active agent, as its vegetal agency complicated empire-making and narratives of productivity and labour governance.

Finally, Sarah Wulbrecht explores how Rights of Nature discourse was utilized by the Whanganui Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand to fight for the sovereignty of their ancestral river, ultimately succeeding in winning it legal personhood—the first river in the world to be awarded this legal status. However, concepts originating in one context, such as Rights of Nature, do not remain static. As an idea travels, it encounters friction, a simultaneously propulsive and impedimental force that fundamentally changes the idea. Wulbrecht uses this conceptualization of friction, first put forth by Anna Tsing,[3] and the legal battles spearheaded by the Whanganui Māori to argue for a more "pluriversal politics,"[4] a way forward that decentres dominant narratives and makes space for many cosmologies and lifeways.

This gathering of research is a result of the seminars Decolonizing Anthropocene Origins: Empire, Environment, and the "Invention of Nature" and Empire and Environment: The Origins of the Anthropocene in Global Colonial History by Dr. Frederik Schröer at the Freie Universität Berlin. We are very

3 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton Paperbacks, 2005).

4 Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Duke University Press, 2020).

grateful for the insights provided by Dr. Schröer that broadened our horizons of what constitutes environmental history. We greatly value his continued assistance and encouragement during the publication process. Lastly, we would like to thank the *Global Histories* team for making this publication possible and providing us with the opportunity to share our thoughts and ideas within this expanding field.