

Irish Environmental Humanities Workshop: An Interdisciplinary Conversation

Report from IHA Environmental Humanities Working Group

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Irish Humanities Alliance



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On 30 May 2024, the Environmental Humanities Working Group of the IHA hosted an interdisciplinary workshop at the Royal Irish Academy, to discuss the role of the Arts and Humanities in shaping research, teaching, and public policy in relation to the climate and environmental emergencies of our times.

We organised the workshop around four themes: Teaching and Pedagogical Practice, Decolonisation and Environmental Sustainability, Methods and Disciplines, and Irish Environmental Futures ([agenda](#)). We were joined by almost thirty researchers, scholars and educators working across the island of Ireland in many of the several fields gathered under the environmental humanities.

We divided the workshop into four themed sessions of thirty minutes each, consisting of a brief introduction by an EHWG member and twenty minutes of discussion. The participants were invited to join one of six tables and were asked to keep notes summarising the discussion. These notes were then gathered and form the basis for the comments below concerning each theme.

Theme 1: Teaching and Pedagogical Practice

It was agreed that an inter-disciplinary perspective is critical while it was acknowledged that often a particular disciplinary allegiance and expertise is required in terms of academic career progression. Nonetheless, creativity is often nourished and sustained on an inter-disciplinary basis. In terms of pedagogy, it was agreed that too much information and data is off-putting for contemporary students. It is vital to get students talking about environmental issues – such conversations are key in terms of learning and learning outcomes. The current age is hyper-visual, and this dimension needs to be considered as well as the impact of AI. It was argued that a feminist perspective should inform environmental humanities.

It is vital but difficult to teach our students the complexity of the environmental crisis we face whilst encouraging optimism. How might we balance the familiar role of 'the one supposed to know' with the more recent role of 'the one supposed to know *how to act*'? To answer such questions, there needs to be more extensive sharing of pedagogies among arts and humanities scholars.

There was also some discussion of how environmental humanities might contribute to a mandatory climate change module in Irish universities, especially as the debate (detailing problems and solutions) has been dominated by the sciences and business. Among many other things, the arts and humanities can show students that our present predicament (our landscapes, our legal frameworks, our ideas of a good life, and so on) is the result of past decisions and actions, helping those students to manage that legacy and to make much better informed and responsible decisions about the future. That future looms large over our students' lives. How can we introduce students to historical futures?

Arguably, the arts and humanities are also better placed to enable students to debate the images and stories that sustain our decisions and actions, for better or worse.

Theme 2: Decolonisation and Environmental Stability

That same concern with the legacy of past decisions, which cut to the heart of our sense of identity and of place, orients the arts and humanities toward those problems of climate justice and decolonisation that are crucial to any truly sustainable solutions to climate change. The arts and humanities have the potential to enable the 'hard disciplines' or STEM to understand the critical importance of a historical and cultural perspective when studying environmental change over decades and centuries. STEM disciplines sometimes lack such a dimension because of their future-focused applications.

Moreover, arts and humanities can bring our attention to the political economy of sustainable development in the past and at present. A great deal of damage has been done in the past under the name of sustainable development, as noted in recent Indigenous critiques of planetary "housekeeping" and of further plans for "terraforming" (Escobar, 2018; Krenak, 2024).

A further value of arts and humanities in this regard is the analysis of place. In Ireland, for example, that might concern how the history of colonisation has shaped the land and the built environment as much as different forms of cultural expression, but it might also concern how the experience and understanding of climate change translates from one place to another and from one culture to another. Recent geographies of climate science, for example, have challenged its "homogenising eye" and have sought out knowledge and experience of climate change that might be subversive to the wider project of planetary governance (Mahony and Randall, 2020).

Their ability to connect scholarship to the histories and cultures of specific places makes the arts and humanities vital in attempts to work with communities in tackling the consequences of a critically changing climate, so that solutions are bottom-up and grounded.

Theme 3: Methods and Disciplines

The arts and humanities are well-positioned to develop place-based learning, which would connect climate knowledge and action to local cultures. Specific histories and environments are important platforms for learning in a community setting. [X-Po](#) at Kilnaboy in Co. Clare was discussed as an example of such a learning ecology. Here, a process of community mapping entails consideration of questions of topography, folklore, *seanchas* and local family history.

Could this mapping, led by the arts and humanities, form the basis for a revised approach to conservation, which would value a combined natural, built, and cultural heritage. Among other things, this approach might uncover the importance of past sustainable practices, which could be reworked for the present.

Such multi-scalar, interdisciplinary thinking, however difficult it might be within and outwith the current university structures, is vital to tackling the climate emergency.

Plus, perhaps the arts and humanities are especially attuned to understanding our emotional attachment to the natural world and our cultural relations with a broader ecology.

Finally, there was much discussion about how the arts and humanities might work with a broad range of partners outside the university, such as Extinction Rebellion; Met Éireann; UNESCO; Burren Beo;

Education and Training Boards; National Landscape Alliance; Irish Peatland Conservation Council; Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, and many others.

Theme 4: Irish Environmental Futures and the Humanities

How to connect the study of the past to a future that threatens to be without precedent for human life on earth is a major challenge today. The arts and humanities do not have all the answers to this challenge, but they can assist in helping us to imagine a future of flourishing within planetary boundaries rather than preparing for resilience within a dangerously volatile 'Hothouse Earth'. They help us to learn from past examples, from alternative cultures, and, in some cases, from ancestral futures.

The environmental humanities can foster regenerative thinking and creative place-making and can offer a space for thinking and for collaborating, as again we try to connect knowledge to place and to action.

A final item for discussion was the need to work toward enshrining the rights of nature within the Irish Constitution. Such rights are not only a matter for legal scholars but would be a way to debate what we value about our environments and ecosystems beyond the realm of human interests.

The EHWG would like to express its sincere gratitude to all who attended this workshop. Your thoughts and experiences are vital to the continuing growth and expansion of the environmental humanities across the island of Ireland. We hope you will join us for future events.

We would also like to thank the IHA, especially its Coordinator, Prof. Sonja Tiernan, and the RIA for their generosity and their support for our endeavours.

References

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Further information

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