

What are the environmental humanities? And what is the secret of their appeal?



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This focus of *GAIA* is dedicated to the environmental humanities (EH) – a new field of research that has developed enormous and lively appeal over the last two decades. What are the EH? And what is the secret of their appeal?

The main reason for the rise of this new field lies in the environmental challenges humankind is facing around the globe: humanities scholars have noted the need for radically new approaches in view of the unprecedented destruction of the planet, its natural resources, and its species. The rise of the EH is a response by the academy to this insight. In Germany, for instance, the Wissenschaftszentrum Umwelt at the University of Augsburg¹ and the Rachel Carson Center at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (LMU)² have formed an EH alliance, while scholars in Freiburg and Cottbus are establishing new research foci in this emerging field. In addition, the EH have their roots in a strong concern for the environment from students, including the *Fridays for Future* movement. What brings scholars and students together is an interest in confronting environmental change as both a natural *and* a cultural phenomenon, and an intent to inhabit, in the words of eco-critic Ursula Heise³, a “space of simultaneous critique and action” – something that lies beyond the university’s traditional structure.

Personally, I have been fascinated by the field because it recognizes the limitations of individual scholarship and particular disciplines. It encourages us to explore areas beyond our own expertise and produce work that is genuinely collaborative. Importantly, the field also integrates a variety of impulses from outside academia: from conservationists and bureaucrats to politicians and activists. My own favorite activities in the EH are field seminars that bring together experts from diverse disciplines: ecologists and ethicists, geologists and cultural historians, anthropologists and foresters. Other exciting forms of engagement use innovative tools and approaches to reach out to a broader public – through social media, art, digital publications, and exhibitions. A recent seminar at LMU, titled *Ecopolis Munich*, resulted in an exhibition based on multidisciplinary student research. It demonstrated how much natural factors affect the everyday urban reality. It also revealed the ways that human planning and politics determine how cities function, and to what degree (and for whom) they provide socially just and sustainable living conditions. The project reminds us that a good and responsible life in an urban setting can only be accomplished with the help of creative visions and a view to the future.

Scientists who work on big data and computer modelling can tell us something quantitatively about where we are heading; biotechnologists and engineers who plan interventions in natural processes and earth systems have grand plans to move us forward. But they cannot give us a true sense and understanding of where we are coming from as humans and where we should be heading. The EH provide us with a wealth of reflection and perspective – they make us think creatively about the role of humans in shaping the future of planet Earth.

¹ www.uni-augsburg.de/de/forschung/einrichtungen/institute/wzu
² www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de
³ www.uheise.net

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