

Prosjekt: Oslo Environmental Humanities

Fagmiljø: IKOS; kunsthistorie

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Oslo Environmental Humanities Oslo Miljøhumaniora

In brief

We propose the establishment of Oslo Environmental Humanities (Oslo Miljøhumaniora, OEH) as a new and experimental interdisciplinary initiative at HF.¹ While open to all scholars and students, OEH is hosted by the Department of Culture and Oriental Studies (IKOS) in close collaboration with the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas (IFIKK) and Department of Archeology, Conservation and History (IAKH). It is organized with the aim of promoting research on environment and climate change that is historically, culturally and philosophically grounded. Several groups at HF, within a wide range of disciplines, are already doing research in this field and have strong international networks. However, we have by no means realized the full potential of the humanities at UiO. OEH will build stronger research ties between the humanities, the natural sciences and the social sciences in the field of climate and environmental research. We will experiment with new interdisciplinary courses in Environmental Humanities at Master's and Bachelor's levels, and we will put HF on the map as the centre for Norway's first organized Environmental Humanities initiative.

Participants – current and potential

In November 2016, a group of scholars at IKOS took the initiative to organize an initial meeting and two larger seminars about Environmental Humanities. The last seminar was held on May 23 and more than 40 scholars, most of them from HF, signed up and participated together with two invited guest speakers, Karen Thornber, professor of comparative literature and director of Harvard University's Environmental Humanities Initiative, and Bryan Til, professor of anthropology and involved in Oregon State University's long-term development of environmental humanities.

The basis for these early initiatives were three established research groups working on issues related to environment and climate change from interdisciplinary and humanistic perspectives at IKOS. The projects [Geological Times](#), [GreenMENA](#) and [Airborne](#) all include PhD, postdoctoral and senior scholars, and two of the projects have received considerable financial support from, among others, the Norwegian Research Council. This spring IKOS announced three positions for PhDs and PDs connected to these three projects. Similar initiatives are taking place at IFIKK, for instance in the project *Back to the Sustainable Future* and other research groups connected to art history and philosophy; and at IAKH, exemplified by the project on historical ecology and state formation in Africa, and by the department's recent announcement of a professorship in Environmental History. Scholars from other HF departments, for instance, in the disciplines of Nordic literature (ILN), musicology (IMV), and media science (IMK) have also expressed strong interest in the initiative. At the seminar in May there were participants from the HF departments of IMK, IMV, ILN, IFIKK, IAKH and IKOS.

In connection with the three open environmental humanities seminars mentioned above, 21 tenured scholars (FVA) from the disciplines of art history, philosophy, Asia and Middle East area studies,

¹ The specific name of the initiative is still open for discussion and we are open for suggestions.

history, archeology, cultural history, religious science, and media science, explicitly expressed their interest in the topic and supported the idea of developing Environmental Humanities further into a larger HF initiative. These include:

IKOS: Anna Ahlers, Mette Halskov Hansen, Hanna Havnevik, Albrecht Hofheinz, Helge Jordheim, Brynjar Lia, Aike Rots, Rune Svarverud, Koen Wellens.

FIKK: Øyvind Storm Bjerke, Ina Blom, Kjetil Fallan, Espen Johnsen, Alejandra Mancilla, Pasi Väliäho, Aron Vinegar.

IAKH: Per Ditlef Frederiksen, Einar Lie.

IMK: Øyvind Ihlen.

ILN: Sissel Furuseth, Gitte Mose.

In addition, a considerable number of PhD and postdoctoral researchers have shown interest for this field, and we have good reason to believe that it will be of interest also to students at Master and Bachelor levels.

OEH is meant to be for the entire HF – not merely the three organizing departments – and the hope is that more HF scholars will eventually become interested in directing their research towards the environmental humanities and contribute to the cooperation across disciplines within and beyond the humanities.

Aim of UiO: Environmental Humanities

The humanities study the human: Interactions, communication, agency, esthetics, intentions, experiences, values, sensibilities, dreams, and uncertainties. In the future, the study of the human will increasingly encompass what we have come to call “the environment”, and vice versa. Because of the extent to which humans have altered the earth’s ecosystems, it has become more and more clear that the dichotomy between nature and culture that for long has informed the humanities and natural sciences is not viable. It is often difficult to see where nature ends and culture begins. Environmental humanities is per definition transdisciplinary and multiperspectival. It is inclusive, in the sense that it brings the humanities into closer dialogue with other sciences while maintaining a firm grounding in cultural, philosophical or historical interpretations of climate and environmental change and resilience.

The aim of OEH is to develop ways for the humanities to better engage with researchers in the natural sciences in order to produce vital knowledge about the entanglements of humans and environment, in past, present, and future. OEH builds on three assertions. Firstly, that the field of climate and environmental research is suffering from the lack of a consolidated and sustained engagement from humanities researchers. The humanities need, for instance, to play a more active role in critically evaluating and interpreting the ways in which big data is developed and used in climate sciences. They have the potential to generate new insights into how humans have made sense of and dealt with environments in different times and spaces, and they can, for instance, contribute with knowledge of how technological shifts generate new relationships with, and understandings of, the environment. The possibilities are endless, but require incentives and structures promoting this kind of collaboration. In this regard, our initiative is supported by the Norwegian government’s recent white paper about the role of the humanities (“Humaniorameldingen”). The paper leaves no doubt that society expects the humanities to take a more active role in the generation of new research questions and themes, not least in the field of environment and climate change. Such a turn in the humanities might help bring new methodological and theoretical inspiration to the already established humanistic disciplines and, not least, it might help develop better solutions. As Ghassan Hage writes, “The [environmental] crisis makes of the planet a sinking ship. It becomes futile and even obscurantist to study anything aboard

the ship on its own, as if the ship is not sinking. Likewise, it becomes equally imperative to show in what way what one is studying can help stop the sinking process”.²

Our second assertion is that scholars from the humanities to a larger extent than now need to take the lead in developing new research questions, planning for cooperation across academic disciplines, and participating in interdisciplinary applications for external research funding. This requires more than good intentions or normative encouragements. It requires organization and a different institutional order of knowledge. Here it is helpful to look to other parts of Europe, and to Australia and the US where a growing number of universities are now experimenting with different ways of setting up and structuring research and teaching in the Environmental Humanities. Environmental Humanities is a burgeoning and therefore also quite open and undefined field where different universities have somewhat different approaches. If OEH is established, we at HF will need to develop our own form and content, our own environmental humanities identity. We suggest an experimental model that encourages leadership by humanities scholars in interdisciplinary projects, opens up for closer integration of research and education, and has a strong emphasis on societal outreach and dialogue. We also propose to collaborate with Harvard University’s Environmental Humanities Initiative whose director, Prof. Karen Thornber, we are already in close contact with, and with the Environmental Humanities initiative at Oregon State University where we also have close research networks.

Our third assertion concerns our proposal to put HF on the map as Norway’s first centre for organizing environmental humanities. As the largest humanities faculty in Norway, HF should take the lead in organizing Environmental Humanities and we suggest that UiO supports the initiative by making OEH a central component of its [UiO:Energy program and the UiO: Life Science program](#). By doing so, HF and UiO would:

- a) Create a platform for collaboration between human and natural sciences with a firm basis in the humanities. This kind of collaboration still has difficult conditions in the present institutional order and funding schemes.
- b) Help strengthen UiO:Energy and UiO: Life Science, and secure more research funding also to the humanities aspects of energy/environmental research;
- c) Send a clear response to the Norwegian government regarding its white paper call for more humanities research on the largest global challenges of our times.
- d) Hopefully.... help us, just a little bit, to better deal with the global environmental crisis by unpacking the innovative, self-reflexive, critical, methodologically skeptical and historically conscious voices of the humanities in the field of environment and climate change.

Organization of OEH

OEH is organized as a collaboration between IKOS, IFIKK and IAKH, but it is open to all scholars at HF and encouraging cooperations with researchers from other faculties and universities. It will have a director (possibly a vice-director) and a physical meeting place where workshops, seminars, and meetings will take place. It will run its own website, organize different teams and activities as outlined in more detail below, and be accountable to the organizing departments through a council of representatives from IKOS, IFIKK and IAKH and, possibly, the faculty level, UiO:Energy and UiO: Life Sciences. OEH will initiate cooperation with the relevant Master programs as outlined below (*Education activities*).

Research initiatives

The aim is to strengthen the position of the humanistic disciplines in research related to environment and climate change, and to promote new interdisciplinary forms of research where the humanities play a central role in developing the questions asked. OEH will concretely:

² Ghassan Hage, *Is racism an environmental threat?*, Polity Press, 2017, p. 2.

- Experiment with “Question-labs” where HF scholars get support for organizing workshops developing new research *questions* in cooperation with scholars from other disciplines than their own, preferably from the natural sciences. In a research process, the stage where research questions and hypotheses are developed is crucial. In order for the humanities to take a more proactive role in climate and environmental research, it is necessary to establish fora where groups are encouraged to develop joint methodological and theoretical understandings at an early stage. The “Question-labs” will facilitate this.
- Engage internationally profiled scholars in the field of Environmental Humanities in Professor II positions. Three professor IIs will be hired to help in building, inspiring and supporting new research projects and to contribute to teaching at a high international level in the proposed courses at the Masters’ level.
- Connect and support PhD and Postdoctoral scholars working on Environmental Humanities related topics, through workshops, PhD courses, and seminars.
- Establish an “Environmental Humanities support team” that offers assistance to HF scholars and groups planning to apply for external funding for Environmental Humanities projects. Organize guest lectures and workshops with the aim of strengthening HF’s competence in the field and inspire young scholars and Master level students.
- Cooperate with the Natural Science Library to establish a new platform for curiosity-driven explorations across disciplinary borders.
- Organize key researchers connected to OEH as teachers and co-teachers in the master’s level courses developed (*see below*).

Educational initiatives

All educational activities will draw on the research collaborations and activities outlined above. The aim is to strengthen students’ interdisciplinary knowledge and competence in Environmental Humanities *without* weakening their own academic discipline. Instead of establishing yet another full study programme (such as a master programme in environmental humanities), we suggest to bring environmental humanities into existing master programs, making it possible for students to draw on methodologies and theories from their own disciplines to study topics concerning environment or climate change. At the same time, students will encounter teachers from other disciplines working on environmental humanities, and they will benefit from the new methodological and theoretical platforms developed through OEH’s research collaborations. OEH will organize team-teaching with teachers from several disciplines teaching and working together with the master’s level students, and the courses will necessarily take an experimental form, something which is meant to also inspire and engage students who come together from different humanities disciplines.

Furthermore, OEH will support both students who wish to do internships in relation to their study within the environmental humanities, and students who wish to pursue an academic career within the environmental humanities. This again requires close cooperation between OEH and existing master programs. This organization may, in some respects, prove to be more challenging than establishing an entirely new master program dedicated exclusively to environmental humanities, because it necessitates close cooperation with teachers/supervisors connected to the existing study programs. However, we believe that this is a better way to set out, because students need a solid theoretical and methodological base in an academic discipline, and because we are yet uncertain about the job possibilities following a “pure” environmental humanities masters’ program. OEH will concretely:

- Establish a package of 30 sp courses in Environmental Humanities aimed at students in existing HF master programmes. The “Environmental Humanities Course Package” is interdisciplinary, limited to 20-25 students based on motivation and qualifications, has an

international profile, will be taught in English, is project-based, and has close follow-up of students. It supports students in *their own disciplines* while giving them academic guidance to pursue the study of EH topics. We will establish interdisciplinary pilot-classes with team-teaching, and we will draw on existing master courses, for instance, in environmental archeology at IAKH and from SUM's master programme in sustainability and development.

- Engage Prof. II (see *Research initiatives*) to assist teaching in the Master's Package (above).
- Establish an "Environmental Humanities supervision team" that offers co-supervision to students from the Package who wish to write their thesis in an environmental humanities related topic.
- Experiment with "Team Teaching" with teachers working together across disciplines in the Environmental Humanities Package. The Team will also offer co-supervision for students interested in writing on a topic related to environmental humanities for their Bachelor's thesis.
- Consider the establishment of a Bachelor course in English on Environmental Humanities. This may have the potential of drawing international students to HF, while strengthening the interest in the topic among Norwegian bachelor students.
- After three years: Establish "Environmental Humanities Alumni" to build networks and share experiences among and with "EH package" graduates.

Outreach and dialogue

OEH will try to build better communication between humanities and various actors in society working with issues of environment and climate change, including NGOs, local and national government, the education sector, and the private sector. OEH will:

- Start "Forum for Miljøhumaniora" which will be a Norwegian meeting place at HF for discussions, presentations, dialogues related to environmental humanities research and education.
- Establish a website for "Oslo Miljøhumaniora" / "Oslo Environmental Humanities".

Potentials for collaborations within and beyond HF

Oslo Environmental Humanities offers a new way of organizing collaborations across HF's departments and beyond in the field of environment and climate research. A sufficient number of scholars from different disciplines and departments at HF have shown interest in the development of OEH to secure cooperation across the faculty where OEH is established. Internally at UiO there is also great potential for working more closely with natural scientists and researchers from the social sciences, for instance those connected to the centrally supported programs UiO:Energy and UiO: Life Sciences. Furthermore, the Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM) has a small (around seven) group of tenured staff, and a larger group of PhD and Postdoctoral scholars working with different aspects related to development and/or environmental studies. SUM has a strong research history in environmental philosophy and anthropological environmental research, but relatively few scholars from other humanistic sciences have been engaged in the research at SUM. OEH is an entirely different organization than SUM, in that it is established as an initiative by and for the humanities, and with a specific focus on environmental *humanities*. Nevertheless, there is an obvious and positive potential for collaboration with SUM, both with regard to the development of new research projects and, not least, concerning OEH's plan for developing a package of relevant humanities oriented courses at the Master's Level.

With regard to international cooperation, we are, as mentioned above, already in close contact with scholars who are in charge of, or working closely with, their own university's environmental humanities initiatives. In addition to Karen Thornber from Harvard's program and Bryan Tilt from Oregon State University, we wish to mention Professor Prasenjit Duara who is heading Duke University's new Global Asia Initiative, which has become an important hub for

environmental humanities at Duke. Professor Duara will be appointed Honorary Doctor at UiO in September 2017. In addition, we have contacts with colleagues in Aarhus University where a center for environmental humanities has recently been started, and there are several other Nordic institutions which are relevant if OEH is accepted. Finally, since several scholars from Asia and Middle East area studies are engaged in the development of OEH we will draw on their contacts in, e.g. China and the United Arab Emirates, to build networks also with relevant research environments there.

External funding

It is always difficult to predict levels of external funding. However, the issue of how humans in different parts of the world and in different times of history deal with climate change, pollution, and various forms of socio-environmental disruptions is explicitly calling for more engagement from the humanities. There is also reason to believe that both the Norwegian Research Council and the EU funding schemes are in the process of adapting to this call. With the Norwegian government's recent white paper on the humanities, we do have a momentum for ensuring that humanities scholars to a larger degree are included when new research program are developed and new questions formulated. It is likely that more calls for thematic research will open up to humanities perspectives, especially when integrated with natural science research. We need to seize this opportunity and develop new forms of organization better adapted to these knowledge needs.

Rough budget outline

See attached Excel-file for calculation of costs

| Activity | Period |
|---|---|
| Prof. II X 3 (hired by IKOS, IFIKK and IAKH respectively) | 3 years each, some overlap |
| Director(s) (frikjøp and later possibly full position) | Internal HF director and vice-director for the first 2 years, then possibly hire an external director. Full position "forfinansiert" by HF |
| Education activities: "EH Course Package" 30 sp + Alumni + frikjøp teachers | full period |
| Administration | full period |
| "Forum for Miljøhumaniora", workshops, guest lectures, meetings | full period |
| "Question-labs" + research support/development | full period |