

Oslo Center for Environmental Humanities (OCEH)

1. Background

In decades to come, the consequences of the planetary environmental crisis will impact, challenge, and reshape nearly every aspect of human life on Earth. As the HF strategy for 2030 notes, this has profound implications both for the university as an institution and for humanities scholarship; the climate crisis is «a global challenge that HF will contribute to resolving by providing knowledge of the interaction between people, nature and technology». As a success indicator, the white paper presented to the Faculty Board in spring 2023 highlights HF's ability to acquire external funding for research projects relating to sustainability. The aim of the following proposal is to put HF in a better position for achieving both the larger and the more specific goal, by the end of the project period in 2028 and beyond.

On a radically destabilized planet, faced with new and urgent demands, the university must find new grounds for its social contract—and the humanities, faced with the transformation of their object of study into a planetary agent, must follow suit. The critical reflection that is their hallmark remains as crucial as ever (if not more so)—but there is also no longer the luxury of time. Reflection must unfold with (and in) the doing—and it must do so *with others*, alongside and in dialogue, working in common recognition of a shared predicament.

In recognition of this, the Oslo Center for Environmental Humanities (OCEH) proposes, over its initial five-year term, to establish an open, flexible, radically collaborative and community-oriented platform for transdisciplinary, humanities-led environmental research and enquiry: a platform that in years to come will function as a permanent forum connecting environmental teachers, researchers and students at UiO to each other, but also (more importantly) to partners, stakeholders, communities and networks «out there», beyond the university.

We will achieve this through two mechanisms:

- by organising and supporting a series of humanities-led, transdisciplinary research teams, working with partners beyond the university.
- by creating a permanent Environmental Humanities Lab (OCEHlab), at UiO, that will serve as the key node in an ambitious program of collaborative and methodologically innovative research, but also for collaborative public research, events, teaching, dissemination and outreach.

To achieve its goals, the OCEH proposal draws on the knowledge, networks, partnerships, and experience developed over five years within the FP3 initiative Oslo School of Environmental Humanities (2019-2024), and the vibrant, highly successful and internationally recognised research environment that this initiative built up—while also taking this work in new directions, acknowledging limitations and learning from mistakes. This is in line with the call's invitation to «develop and strengthen existing research environments». For this new initiative, our focus is on anchoring Environmental Humanities research in the full span of disciplines hosted at Norway's most comprehensive Humanities Faculty and thus making HF an important contributor to the green transition.

The initiative to establish OCEH as a new platform to host HF's Environmental Humanities research originates with the departments IAKH, IFIKK, and IKOS, but will be available to researchers from all HF departments. The proposal has been developed at IKOS, by a group consisting of Brita Brenna, Andrea Rota, Gabriele Koch, Ursula Münster, Hugo Reinert, and Helge Jordheim (chair).

2. Research Agenda

The Oslo Center for Environmental Humanities (OCEH) proposes to investigate **four linked questions**:

- one, in what ways are the environmental changes of the Anthropocene already impacting on (and transforming) scholarly practice at UiO?
- two, how may these impacts be leveraged for positive effect, to create stronger, better, richer, more resilient, and inclusive institutions and practices?
- three, which specific contributions (in terms of practices, methods, modes of representation, and forms of knowledge) may the humanities offer faced with the immense upheavals that will come as we move further into the Anthropocene?
- four, how may the humanities develop better ways of finding and collaborating with stakeholders and partners struggling to engage the human element (cognition, emotions, affects, experiences, history etc.) in climate change?

During its five-year initial term, the Center will establish itself as a state-of-the-art research platform, infrastructural resource, and community hub—for scholars and students at UiO, and for their partners, stakeholders, collaborators, and friends beyond the University. Placing people together in novel ways, in open, collaborative, and experimental constellations, OCEH will generate new research, new perspectives, and new approaches that engage directly and creatively with the complex, multidimensional problems of the environmental crisis.

3. Excellence and Implementation

OCEH will run in three phases. During each phase, the Center will host **three humanities-led, multi-disciplinary research teams** (nine teams in total, over five years). Each team will focus on a chosen topic or question within the overall remit of the OCEH research agenda. The research activity of the Center will thus be researcher-driven, organised around issues the research community identifies as important and timely.

Each of the nine OCEH teams will comprise tenured researchers from multiple disciplines and at least two UiO departments, led by a permanent member of staff based in one of the seven HF departments, in addition to external partners, collaborators, stakeholders and junior researchers. Each team will be funded for 18 months to work together and address a shared research question connected to the overall research agenda. Research questions, objectives, and deliverables will be selected by the groups and laid out in their proposals to join OCEH. After the funding periods ends groups can remain affiliated with the Center, by acquiring external funding, or in other ways continuing their research on the OCEH topics.

To be eligible for funding, each team must include members from at least two UiO departments, as well as

- at least one **non-academic partner** organisation, network, institution, or other body that will be actively involved in the project. This is to stimulate longer-term and permanent collaborations at the institutional (rather than individual) level.
- non-tenured **junior and early career researchers**; this may also include graduate students. To be eligible for funding, teams must present a concrete and meaningful plan of activity for these junior researchers, including specific activities they will manage and be responsible for.

In joining the Center, each team commits itself to an agreed program of research activities and deliverables, which **must include** both academic and non-academic targets. Relevant deliverables will vary from team to team, but may include: research articles, funding proposals, syllabi and teaching

materials, textbooks, manuals, reports, policy briefs and recommendations, documentary films, trade or creative publications, artworks or other relevant outputs (such as for example soundwalks), public events, roundtables, festivals or interventions media appearances—and so on. These are intended as examples, not an exhaustive list. The deliverables will be spelled out in the research proposal submitted by the group, on the basis of which they will be selected to join the platform.

Individual research teams will remain based in their home departments but have full use of the platform infrastructure, most importantly the OCEH Lab. In addition, they will have the possibility to apply for a 2-8 week stay at the Sustainability Hub (or any other office facility made available before the Hub is opened and able to offer sufficient space for OCEH), to complete specific parts of the project (“samlokalisering”).

4. Innovation and Added Value: OCEH Lab

The heart of OCEH will be an experimental collaborative research and event space that we propose to establish in the new Sustainability Hub. OCEH Lab will provide an open and accessible space for hosting public events, workshops and seminars, guest lectures, meetings and consultations, doctoral training courses, career fairs, reading groups, installations, documentary film screenings and other research experiments, as well as for activities organised by the various research groups. The research teams will have full access to the lab and will be invited to organize both experimental workshops and more outward-facing events. As a permanent space, OCEH Lab will include an environmental research library, a place to share physical copies of published research and monographs, as well as co-working spaces and desks or offices for visiting researchers. It will serve as a vibrant hub for the environmental humanities community at UiO and beyond, and a common space for junior and early career researchers affiliated with the center. Most importantly, the lab will be a space for innovation, where new research and outreach practices are developed, with dedicated staff and ambitions for developing new research methods.

As an institutional home for the expanding environmental humanities community at UiO, OCEH Lab will also serve as a hub for bringing together teachers and students in different departments, linked to the various environmental teaching initiatives currently being developed at HF. Teachers and students based in separate departments will benefit enormously from an actual, physical space in which to meet, socialise, interact and collaborate: a space with which they can identify, intellectually and socially. As an integral part of the research environment at OCEH, this dual function of the Lab (as a teaching space) also expresses a fundamental commitment to teaching and research as intimately connected activities.

Another aspect of OCEH’s work to bring together teaching and research involve the PhDs. One of the central features of the platform will consist in PhD training courses and research seminars offered to PhD-fellows across UiO, although targeting HF students especially and coordinated with HF’s PhD program. To support and promote early-career scholars, beyond their inclusion as a mandatory element of research teams, part of the OCEH budget is also set aside for smaller «collaboratories» to be run by junior scholars, up to three per phase (nine in total). Early career researchers may apply for these funds to support research activities leading to specified deliverables (e.g. workshops or talk series, collaborative field research, non-academic publications). Beyond this, OCEH will also offer affiliation to doctoral and early career researchers, both at UiO and beyond. Junior environmental researchers in the humanities are often dispersed, isolated and in need of connection: providing these researchers with a community is an urgent need, but also a powerful and cost-effective strategy for building the field.

5. Structure and Timeline

OCEH will be run from IKOS, with a permanent faculty member from IKOS serving as its academic director. IKOS successfully hosted the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities for five years and has substantial institutional experience in handling the many and complex challenges a project such as this throws up. The director will be supported by a steering committee made up by heads of department from the initiating departments as well as two representatives from other HF departments active in OCEH and one external representative. The steering committee will convene regularly to assess applications and evaluate the progress and direction of OCEH.

The day-to-day running of OCEH will be the task of the director in close cooperation with a full-time coordinator, hired in an administrative position as manager of the OCEH Lab. A group consisting of the PIs of the three research teams will assist the director in planning and coordinating the activities of each cycle. To make sure that the PIs are able to lead their teams as well as to contribute to other platform activities, OCEH will ask their departments for a buy-out (10-20%) for the period they are part of the Center.

A full-time lab manager will be in charge of running the lab, organising events, coordinating the research teams, and managing budgets, as well as tasks such as liaising with external partners, stakeholders and institutions, disseminating findings and results, and (ideally) developing a research and publication agenda connected to the activities of the lab. This administrative position will ideally be filled by a candidate with a hybrid academic-administrative skillset. Recruitment should begin immediately, to have a lab manager in place by Spring 2024.

The initial five-year term for OCEH has three phases:

Phase 1 (Jan 2024 to Aug 2025): In order to seize the momentum created by OSEH and the HF initiatives, and also to be able to support the work to develop new teaching programs, the Center plans to kick off already in January 2024. To facilitate a rapid launch in Phase 1, we have identified three well-established, cross-cutting research areas at UiO, and formed teams led by experienced scholars with substantial experience working in and across the environmental humanities. For Phase 1, OCEH will consist of the following teams:

EcoLit (PI: Michael Lundblad, ILOS) is dedicated to exploring how literary and cultural texts situated in different contexts can make important contributions and interventions in relation to environmental problems and aspirations. EcoLit brings together researchers across various departments and career stages, at ILOS, ILN, and IKOS (for a full list of participants, see: <https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/groups/ecolitt/index.html>). The EcoLit network provides fertile grounds for future targeted research projects cultivated by various members of the group, including new possibilities such as Eco-emotions (a proposal for separate funding to be submitted by ILN), as well as others, such as a new initiative being developed, LICHEN: Literature in Changing Environments. EcoLit will partner with external organizations such as Litteraturhuset and Deichmann Library in order to produce both socially engaged activities and cutting-edge scholarly deliverables, including academic publications and external research grant possibilities.

Multispecies Landscapes Lab (PI: Johanna Conterio, IAKH) brings together humanities scholars to re-conceptualise landscapes as historically situated, more-than-human assemblages that require an interdisciplinary approach. Combining approaches from environmental and medical history with those from philosophy, literature, anthropology, archaeology, and cultural history, the lab aims to reach a new understanding of landscapes that focuses on the processes, enactments, interdependencies, and practices that shape how landscapes are known, enacted, built in, shaped, conserved, and dwelled in by humans together with other species. The research team includes Ada Arendt, IAKH; Wanda Marcussen, IAKH; Alejandra Mancilla, IFIKK; Ursula Münster, Aike Peter Rots, Hugo Reinert, Florence Durney, and Pierre de Plessis, all IKOS. Research activities will include a

series of events and workshops, leading to publications, third-party grant applications, and public presentations. The lab will also work with multispecies-oriented organizations in the Oslo area (for example, La Humla Suse) to develop forms of collaborative research and public engagement, and to inform teaching.

Environmental Art (PIs: Kjetil Fallan, IFIKK, and Kyle Devine, IMV) explores the ecological entanglements of artistic practices and cultures broadly defined to include music, visual arts, design, architecture, landscape architecture, and more in a multidisciplinary context. The team includes Ingrid Halland, IKOS; Anna Grasskamp, IFIKK; Sadie Menicanin, Kristina Klungnes, both IMV. Research activities will include a series of workshops and public presentations bringing together the environmental humanities and environmental artworks in order to strengthen the bonds between theory and practice in engaging the human element (consciousness, cognition, experience) in climate crisis. Other deliverables will include an anthology developed out of the research team's collaborations as well as a museum exhibition exploring the mutual constitution of the arts and the environment. Potential partners include Norsk Teknisk Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in Dundee, Scotland.

For Phase 2 and 3, there will be open calls and an application process. **Phase 2** (August 2025 to December 2027) will invite proposals teams that involve substantial and innovative collaborations with non-university partners (e.g. green start-ups, cultural institutions, third sector organisations). For this phase, we also want to recruit PhDs with EH-relevant projects at department level, who will have a close affiliation with the OCEH for their PhD period. We will also explore the possibility of recruiting Industrial PhDs ("nærings-phd") linked to the Phase 2-research teams.

Finally, for **Phase 3** (January 2028 to August 2029) we will identify emerging research teams that have a particularly strong potential for and ambition to secure external funding (NFR, ERC, other international foundations), and thus should be able to take OCEH into its next stage, where it will not be dependent on HF funding but exist as a self-financing platform for EH work at UiO.

6. Long-term Impacts

At the end of its initial five-year term, OCEH will have established itself as:

- a permanent community resource and center of competence for environmental research and teaching—at UiO, nationally and internationally.
- a vibrant social and academic hub for the environmental humanities community at UiO, enmeshed in a network of collaborations with external partners—across the greater Oslo area, nationally and internationally.
- a vital point of contact for external stakeholders, organisations and potential collaborators wanting to connect with the environmental humanities research community at UiO.

7. Budget

In sum, the proposed budget for the project thus covers:

- Personnel - one full-time lab manager position over five years and 25% teaching assistant, five years
- Operating costs - funding for the research teams and laboratories; funding for center-level activities - including OCEHlab, events, workshops and invited speakers; funding for PhD courses and student activities; funding for open access for center publications.

From the participating departments at HF, OCEH will ask for the following allocation of time resources: 50% for the academic director (from IKOS), 10-20% for each research team leader.