

The radical reorganization of knowledge

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This book provides an introduction to Environmental Humanities (hereafter EH), a relatively new, yet rapidly changing field of scholarship.

This *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* is the joint work of two authors, John C. Ryan and Andrew J. Hubbell. John C. Ryan is Adjunct Associate Professor at Southern Cross University, Australia, and Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Nulungu Institute, Notre Dame University, Australia. His interests include contemporary poetry, Indigenous Australian and Southeast Asian literature, postcolonial literary criticism, ecomedia studies, and critical plant studies.¹ He also examines recurrent questions of nationalism through a distinctly global approach that considers factors of language, ethnicity, identity, justice, ethics, globalisation, environment, and postcolonialism.² Andrew J. Hubbell is Associate Professor of English at Susquehanna University, USA, and Adjunct Researcher at the University of Western Australia. His interests include nineteenth-century British literature, literary theory, climate narratives, empirical humanities, and new social movements. His main interest is in literature that represents human-nature relationships, and he specializes in British Romanticism and Ecocriticism.³ As part of his university work, he has co-created a new Environmental Studies program. It certainly inspired him to write this book.

EH is the product of the 21st century, of an age in which it is no longer possible to grasp and manage environmental problems from a single viewpoint. This is also true of the scientific approach to such problems. Although it is fundamentally important for the understanding of ecological issues and climatic changes, scientific knowledge alone cannot provide adequate answers to the complex phenomenon that is the cause and consequence of the environmental challenges of our century. This is why traditional

- 1 Ryan, "Plants". Ryan and Chen, "Australian Wetland Cultures". McDougall, "Postcolonial literatures"
- 2 Biswas et alii, "Global Perspectives".
- 3 Hubbell, "Plants in Contemporary Poetry".

humanities such as philosophy, aesthetics, literary and religious studies, history and linguistics are combined with natural and social sciences and arts in an interdisciplinary formation in an attempt to understand the antecedents, current forms, and future trajectories of the contemporary environmental crisis, and find possible answers to it. This formation is EH.

The natural sciences have revealed climatic, hydrological and ecological correlations that have radically changed, or will change, the entire world, encompassing human and non-human life alike. The majority society has been unaware of it, or is reluctant to notice it, but the pandemic and the environmental disasters of the 2020s have made it clear that it is no longer possible to evade these problems. “Therefore, the morally legitimate and scientifically established question is not whether we are in trouble – but how we should cope with this situation, how great the trouble is, what work it imposes on us humans and more closely, on us researchers.”⁴ In the words of the philosopher Roger Gottlieb: “What morality has had to face the banality of evil in which the most common everyday actions (driving an automobile, putting fertilizer on the lawn [but I may also add our morning coffee and croissant, or our bathroom routine] could contribute to devastating effects on future generations or people at the other ends of the world?”⁵ Compared to earlier environmental problems, our problems today have stepped over a threshold: humankind has managed to turn the sunrays so vital for life into a serious hazard, or – as the quotation above notes – we may jeopardize the lives of people living thousands of kilometres away from us simply by following our daily routine.

The “tangible” cause of these environmental problems – and of the closely connected economic and social problems – is the incredibly fast growth of the Earth’s global population with the corollary consumption and over-consumption, overuse and depletion of natural resources, the depletion of fossil fuels, and the emergence of diverse forms of environmental destruction. Underlying all this, however, is a world view that evolved gradually in Europe and became prevalent in modernity.

This world view – which has both religious and philosophical roots – removed the human being from the rest of the world, created the dichotomy between nature and society, interpreted the human being as the absolute master and exploiter of nature, and foregrounded economic rationality. At the same time, it laid the foundations for the sep-

4 Mészáros, ‘Kié az antropocén?’, 144.

5 Gottlieb, ‘Introduction’, x.

aration of the natural sciences from the humanities and social sciences and subordinated all scholarship to the former.

The practitioners of EH, however, believe that the global environmental crisis requires new modes of thinking, new communities, and new forms of knowledge. They are convinced that this crisis cannot be solved solely with technological means which are simply “allocated” to passive consumers. For cultural and political reasons, even the best technologies, those that could most effectively mitigate the environmental problems are rejected. Unsustainable practices require cultural interpretation, just as the possibility of introducing good practices does. Knowledge is needed “that is affective, or emotionally potent, in order to be effective, or capable of mobilizing social adaptation”,⁶ and which is capable of overriding the logic of economic gain.⁷ EH claims that this goal demands inter- and transdisciplinary approaches for which the humanities are indispensable. What EH does is actually *translation*: it transforms scientific and technological results into texts and sociocultural discourses which can capture the attention of both the public and the political and economic actors more than scientific reports can. Oppermann and Iovino conclude that EH is an ethical and pedagogical project with the help of which the above goals can be achieved.⁸

Accordingly, EH is not a new academic discipline, but a *field of research* that highlights the relationship between the human being and nature, and is engaged with environmental questions. It is also a *world view* that rejects the interpretation of the human being as the absolute lord and legitimate exploiter of nature. EH strives to understand the intricate relations between the human beings and society and nature, integrating all the disciplines that scrutinize these problems. At the same time it is a *method* that wishes to transgress disciplinary boundaries and the limits of creating theories and descriptions, and in addition to the customary frames of knowledge transmission, it also draws closer to applicability and activism. This is not to say that each EH scholar is at the same time an activist. As the authors Hubbell and Ryan put it: it does not mean “that you will have to chain yourself to a bulldozer in an old-grown forest threatened by logging.”⁹ It is more accurate to say that by virtue of its worldview and its fundamental issues, EH is inevitably an applied field of scholarship.

6 Emmett and Nye, ‘The Environmental Humanities’, 8.

7 Belfiore and Upchurch, “Introduction: Reframing”

8 Oppermann and Iovino, “Introduction:”, 1–6.

9 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, 10.

The first chapter of the book (Introduction to EH: history and theory) surveys EH as a whole: it reviews the variety of new approaches to the relationship between nature and culture, presents how EH integrates dialogues between the humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences and reflects on its origins in the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This is followed by two chapters that present the essential knowledge in the science of climate change and the Anthropocene: 2. Climate change: the great disrupter; 3. The Anthropocene: a superhero species comes of age. The authors then present the key themes of EH and its key disciplinary orientations in 10 chapters. These are as follows: 4. Indigenous cultures and nature: past, present, and future; 5. Environmental anthropology, cultural geography, and the geohumanities: space and place; 6. Environmental history: the story of coevolution; 7. Environmental philosophy: thinking about nature; 8. Ecological religious studies: faith in nature; 9. Environmental art: creativity, activism, and sustainability; 10. Ecological literary studies: imagining nature; 11. Environmental theatre: performing nature; 12. Environmental film: projecting nature; 13. Environmental journalism: mediating ecological issues. These 10 chapters are closely related to the individual disciplines upon which this discipline-crossing field is built. As the authors suggest: “Our position, as authors, is that a good understanding of disciplines is a cornerstone to appreciating environmental interdisciplinarity and its raucous relatives. Your trans-, inter-, and multidisciplinary will be more productive with a solid grounding in the core disciplines.”¹⁰ The final chapter (14. Conclusion: back to the future EH) reviews the latest developments in Environmental Humanities and how EH inspires positive ecological change and imagines sustainable societies. Although the authors typically organized the chapters around certain disciplines when structuring their book,¹¹ the chapters also deal with the main issues such as climate change, sustainability, biodiversity, extinction, energy policy, the Anthropocene, environmental activism and justice, indigenous studies, inter- and transdisciplinarity, and the role played by the arts and humanities in the future of the planet. In addition, the book introduces readers to seminal texts, artworks, events, movements, ideas, legislation, and organizations “to provide global literacy on environmental problems, actions, and solutions.”¹²

10 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, 1.

11 Others, such as Emmett and Nye, have taken a thematic approach, organizing chapters around topics such as ecotourism or cities. (Emmett and Nye „The Environmental”).

12 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, x.

The individual chapters each follow a clear and uniform structure: they start with a case study that provokes the questions and methods of environmental humanists. Case studies, Reflections and Waypoints, placed in boxes, help and supplement the overview of the given topic. They offer definitions and examples, consider current events and ethical questions, and rehearse debates on complex problems. At the end of the chapters, the authors suggest exercises and projects to motivate the reader to do their own work and to do small scale research, to think about some of the problems independently. The authors try to resolve the contradiction between the extreme breadth of the topic and the limitations of the book by providing an annotated bibliography and weblinks for further reading at the end of each chapter.

As for the territorial area covered by this volume, the main quoted fields of the book are from the US and Canada and from European, Australian and New Zealand contexts,¹³ although it also provides numerous examples from Africa, Asia, South America, and Antarctica. In terms of the time frame: EH itself started in the 1990s and developed further in the 2000s, but the events that led to its formation happened in the post-WWII period. That was the time of a dramatic and global environmentalist turn, when scholars realised that we need radical a new approach to understand and give an adequate answer to the complex phenomenon of contemporary ecological crises. At the same time, the book inevitably goes back and forth to previous events, which are essential for an understanding of the contemporary world. “This historical context shaped the specific disciplinary debates out of which current practices in the EH emerged.”¹⁴

In the preface of their book the authors define more precisely what the essence of EH is for them: the radical recreation of knowledge. As they put it: “EH is both a product and an agent in the radical reorganization of knowledge”¹⁵ They believe that the global environmental crisis demands new directions in thought. This crisis was caused in no small part by the knowledge-power divisions fomented since the Enlightenment, therefore it cannot be solved by simply offering technological innovations; unsustainable practices and maladaptive reactions require cultural interpretations as does the introduc-

13 The start of EH is prominently tied to research in Australia: in the 1990s, historian Tom Griffith and law scholar Tim Bonyhady founded the *National Working Group on the Ecological Humanities*, then the new approach and method we term EH began to be called ecological humanities at the Australian National University and the University of New South Wales.

14 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, x.

15 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, ix.

tion of good practices. This needs an inter- and transdisciplinary approach with cannot succeed without the help of the humanities.

In addition to doing research in EH, the authors are also active in introducing this field to universities. This book also serves this purpose: it offers a practical, grounded, and accessible guide to the field designed for university students. The authors are acutely aware, however, that students and teachers in academia are still “enmeshed in this old knowledge order”,¹⁶ with its disciplines, departments, silos, and specializations. They believe that when teaching EH (and presenting it to the general public), we must be aware of this. Moreover, “historicizing the field will enable students to understand why our intertwined Anthropocene crises have required environmental humanists to develop inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary approaches.”¹⁷

I agree with the authors that the: “relatively short chapters [of the book] can also be used to create part-term modules on the EH or supplement advanced courses within a wide range of disciplines and programs, from business and the social sciences to English, art history, and international studies.”¹⁸ The potential role of this work in education is facilitated by the fact that the book does not require more thorough prior knowledge about the field. It gives a detailed overview of the key terms, concepts, theorists, and debates within the field. Moreover, I am convinced that besides its utility for university courses the book will also be useful for researchers and general readers.¹⁹

In the Introduction to the book, the authors themselves challenge the reader to supplement their work, noting that: “Considerations of space limited our focus to disciplines that we consider integral to EH, but we hope that, after reading this, you’ll be inspired to challenge us—what do you think we should have included?”²⁰ Considering the thoroughness and broad perspective of the book, this is a rather difficult task. Nevertheless, I believe that urban studies deserve a separate chapter, and psychology and environmental pedagogy can also play an important role in EH.

16 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, ix.

17 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, 1.

18 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, x.

19 , and Adapted for Hungarian readers the book *Environmental questions – Community answers. Environmental Humanities Reader* (Farkas 2023, under publication) was written with a similar aim. Hubbell and Ryan’s book was admittedly a great source of inspiration for this book.

20 Hubbell and Ryan, “Introduction to the Environmental Humanities”, 1.

EH is also developing and spreading in Hungary. While currently only a single research group that includes EH explicitly in its name (the EH Research Group at Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Pécs),²¹ the number of research groups and institutions acting in the spirit of EH is increasing.²² Furthermore, my teaching experiences at the university show that students are open to taking an inter-and transdisciplinary approach to human–nature related topics. My undisclosed goal with this book review is to arouse interest in EH, for which the book reviewed here is perfectly suited.

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