



## Environmental History and Public History

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Picture it: high tea at the elegant Empress Hotel in Victoria, British Columbia. Over crumpets and cups of Ceylon in this evocative early 20th-century building, environmental and public historians converse about past and present. ASEH's next annual meeting, a joint conference with the National Council on Public History (NCPH), will offer this opportunity. The conference is scheduled for March 31– April 4, 2004.

The similarities between these two organizations are numerous. Both are now in their third decade, each attracts a modestly growing and ever-diversifying membership, and each has its own quarterly journal – respectively, *Environmental History* and *The Public Historian*. Combining these two groups promises a conference of optimal size and thematic diversity. As ASEH members have come to expect from our annual meetings, this joint gathering will be large enough to guarantee contact with new colleagues and new intellectual pursuits, yet small enough to allow for catching up with longtime friends and associates.

Public history employs the high standards, sources, and methods of academic historical research, applying the resulting historical data, analyses, and interpretation to a gamut of non-academic situations. Environmental history functions as public history in multiple applications and venues, many of which fit within the “cultural spaces and natural places” theme of the Victoria conference. Environmental historians, variously employed at universities, government agencies, museums, and private firms, aspire to reach an audience beyond other historians and beyond the academy. Many of this conference's sessions, field trips, and informal discussions will investigate how historians engage the public on a wide variety of environmental history topics, among them water politics, marine policy, fish and wildlife issues, energy development, environmental justice, public health policy, and mining and reclamation.

In addition to the similarities in their organizations, environmental and public historians generally share a common individual trait: a desire to produce work that will prove useful not only in understanding the past but also in addressing the problems of the present and affecting the future. Fittingly, the conference plenary, on Wednesday evening, March 31, focuses on the nexus between environmental and public history, offering some new takes on questions already familiar to ASEH members, such as the “uses” of environmental history.<sup>1</sup> The Wednesday night plenary will feature authors from a forthcoming book on environmental and public history, edited by Martin Melosi and Phil Scarpino.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, William Cronon, “The Uses of Environmental History,” *Environmental History Review* 17 (Fall 1993).

The plenary will also feature contributors to the special environmental history issue of *The Public Historian* (forthcoming, winter 2004). This special issue of the NCPH journal focuses on environmental history's intersections with public history, particularly on how history can be deployed in ongoing policy debates. It explores ways historians can engage in discussions about environmental issues with non-historians, including policy makers, engineers, scientists, activists, attorneys, energy industry executives, and the general public. Each author is an environmental historian who works with the public in some capacity, and the articles take care to address their personal experiences.

This ASEH-NCPH joint meeting will provide outstanding opportunities to continue to discuss over tea, cocktails, or a conference table the professional experiences in environmental and public history and their utility for understanding the past and affecting future environment-related policy and practice.

A selected bibliography is presented below. For more information on the Victoria conference and NCPH, see pages 4 and 5.

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### ASEH's Membership

September's ASEH membership statistics brought encouraging news. Our membership is officially 1,023, not counting those of you who have not yet had the time to send in your renewals. The library count is 507, up from 499 in April on the heels of the RoweCom bankruptcy, but still below the 544 libraries that subscribed to *Environmental History* (with society membership) in 1998. If you have time, please check to see whether your home library, or even municipal library, subscribes, and, in case they do not, please consider a gentle request to your acquisitions librarian. And while your attention is focused on how you might help your favorite academic society, please also give thought to encouraging those you know to include the ASEH in bequests. As the economy founders, directed giving may be our best hope for endowing an Executive Director position.

From the administration's "Healthy Forests Initiative" to the IBM ethylene glycol story, not to mention the North Korean atomic weapons program, the Arizona oil pipeline break, farm subsidies and Cancún, global warming, Nicholas Kristof's reporting from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and the Middle East, environmental issues are far from going away. We are telling the crucial stories of our age. Politicians, academic administrators, journalists – are you listening?

Douglas Weiner, ASEH President