

Nature Before Resources: Evaluating Nature in Early Modern Empires

What was nature before it became a resource?

Workshop on 15-16th December, 2022

In-person at University of Warwick, MB0.07, Mathematical Sciences Building

Remote audience on Teams

Webpage: <https://warwick.ac.uk/research/priorities/habitability/events/natureresources/>

This workshop addresses a paradox about early modern European imperialism. On the one hand, it is a commonplace that imperial projects in the period from roughly 1500 to 1800 were bound up with the exploitation of natural resources. On the other hand, the phrase “natural resources” did not gain currency until well after 1800 in English and in other European languages.

This raises several questions. What existed in the European imagination before “natural resources” took over as a shorthand for the valuable parts of the natural world? How were these ancestors of “natural resources” bound up with imperial projects, whether of the commercial, territorial, or exploratory kind? How were conceptions of nature’s value shaped by interactions between Europeans and the people they colonized, evangelized, traded with, or otherwise encountered? And to what extent did these encounters create the conditions for the modern concept of natural resources?

Since these questions are about the value of nature, we will focus on early modern means of evaluating the natural world. This includes concepts such as “gift” and “treasury”, techniques such as assaying and surveying, and social roles such as the connoisseur and the inspector. The workshop comes at a time when the concept of natural resources is under pressure from alternatives such as natural capital, natural commons, and legal personhood, and when these rival conceptions of nature’s value are linked to political projects on earth and in space.

Thursday 15th December

3:15 – 3:45pm: Tea and coffee

3:45 – 4:30pm:

Treasuries: An Inquiry on the Nature of Wealth

Samir Boumediene, École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, Centre national de la recherche scientifique

4:30 – 5pm: Discussion

5pm: Festive drinks and nibbles

Friday 16th December

9:30 – 10am: Tea and coffee

10 – 10:15am: Introduction

10:15 – 11am:

Plants, Places and Politics: Ginseng and the Globalization of Botanical Knowledge

Gianamar Giovannetti-Singh, University of Cambridge

11am – 11:45am:

“A Countrey Stored Naturally with Infinities of Mulberry-trees”: European Dreams of American Sericultural Resources (17th-18th centuries)

Jean-Baptiste Vérot, Université d'Avignon / Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier

11:45 – 12pm: Comfort break

12 – 12:45pm:

Curiosity, Useful Knowledge and the Eighteenth-century French Empire

Sarah Easterby-Smith, University of St Andrews

12:45 – 2pm: Catered lunch

2 – 2:45pm:

From Barren to Fertile: Soil Descriptions and Improvement of the Land in Early Colonial Mexico

Antoine Duranton, Centre de recherches historiques, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris

2:45 – 3:30pm:

Finding Common Ground: Turning Precious Stones into Natural Resources in the Seventeenth Century

Claire Sabel, University of Pennsylvania

3:30pm – 4pm: Afternoon tea

4 – 4:45pm:

Natural Resources Law in India: Environment, Natural Resources and Environmental History

Vinita Damodaran, University of Sussex

4:45pm – 5:30pm:

Power, Print and the Empire of Natural Knowledge

Edwin Rose, University of Cambridge