

Insect Histories: Bugs that Made the Modern World

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Abstract

The seminar explores insects as historical actors and their diverse interactions with human societies over time and space. It offers an overview of recent approaches in environmental history and multispecies ethnography while providing an analytical framework to understand global processes of natural resource exploitation, knowledge formation, and imperialism.

Learning objective

The objective is to analyze human-insect interactions by identifying key historical factors (economic, scientific, political). Students will integrate current frameworks in the study of environmental history through the combination of primary sources and interdisciplinary research. They will develop skills rooted in their interest in insects and learn to translate them into feedback to peers.

Content

Scholars typically approach Nature-related histories by focusing on environmental change, the commodification of resources, and the legacy of natural history collections. Examples of this approach include studies on deforestation, dam constructions, the rubber boom, and the colonial history of European museums and collections. In contrast to these commonly explored topics, insects are often underrepresented in historical research, both as living creatures and metaphors. Addressing this gap, the seminar explores human-insect interactions from a global historical perspective between 1600 and 2000. This exploration encompasses a critical and relational understanding of the history of the scientific study of insects (entomology) and the processes of imperial expansion and global territorialization. To achieve this, students will learn how human-insect interactions led to radical transformations in diverse environments, reflecting a particular modern conception of nature influenced by control anxieties related to economic profit and tropical diseases. Moreover, students will examine how ways of knowing about insects and the environment were influenced by broader correlated economic and imperial factors. Focusing on insect (hi)stories, the aim of this seminar is to apply new methodologies for non-human agencies and source analysis on both micro and macro scales in global and environmental histories.

18 Sept	<p>Welcome, Introduction, Organization</p> <p>Onaga, Lisa, and Dominik Huenniger. 2024. 'Introduction: Expanded Perspectives on Tiny Animals as Epistemic Agents'. <i>Isis</i> 115(1): 126–30. https://doi.org/10.1086/728965</p>
25 Sept	<p>THEORIES & CONCEPTS I Multispecies Histories A</p> <p>O’Gorman, Emily, and Andrea Gaynor. 2020. 'More-Than-Human Histories'. <i>Environmental History</i> 25(4): 711–35. https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emma027</p> <p>Paul S. 2007. 'Nature’s Agents or Agents of Empire?: Entomological Workers and Environmental Change during the Construction of the Panama Canal'. <i>Isis</i> 98(4): 724–54. https://doi.org/10.1086/529265</p>
2 Oct	<p>THEORIES & CONCEPTS II</p> <p>Storytelling</p> <p>Raffles, Hugh. 2011. <i>Insectopedia</i>. New York: Vintage Books. (Selection)</p>
9 Oct	<p>THEORIES & CONCEPTS III Multispecies Histories B</p> <p>Haraway, Donna. 2015. 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin'. <i>Environmental Humanities</i> 6(1): 159–65. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934</p> <p>Coen, Deborah R. 2021. 'The Experimental Multispecies Household'. <i>Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences</i> 51(3): 330–78. https://doi.org/10.1525/hsns.2021.51.3.330</p>
16 Oct	<p>HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES I Global Entomologies</p> <p>Melillo, E. D. 2014. 'Global Entomologies: Insects, Empires, and the “Synthetic Age” in World History'. <i>Past & Present</i> 223(1): 233–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24545157.</p> <p>Mavhunga, Clapperton Chakanetsa. 2024. 'Zvipukanana : “Tiny Animals with No Bones”'. <i>Isis</i> 115(1): 141–46. https://doi.org/10.1086/728885</p>
23 Oct	<p>INSECT ETHNOGRAPHIES I ETHZ Collection</p> <p>Huenniger, Dominik, Karina Lucas Silva-Brandão, Christian Reiß, and Xiaoya Zhan. 2024. 'A Collection Ecologies Forum: Reevaluating Insects as Archives'. <i>Isis</i> 115(1): 157–63. https://doi.org/10.1086/728895</p> <p>Van Dooren, Thom, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster. 2016. 'Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness'. <i>Environmental Humanities</i> 8(1): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695</p>

30 Oct	<p>HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES II Insects and Agriculture</p> <p>Wang, Jessica. 2019. 'Plants, Insects, and the Biological Management of American Empire: Tropical Agriculture in Early Twentieth-Century Hawai'i'. <i>History and Technology</i> 35(3): 203–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2019.1680143</p> <p>Chao, Sophie. 2021. 'The Beetle or the Bug? Multispecies Politics in a West Papuan Oil Palm Plantation'. <i>American Anthropologist</i> 123(3): 476–89. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13592</p>
6 Nov	<p>HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES III Insects and Diseases</p> <p>Beisel, Uli, Ann H. Kelly, and Noémi Tousignant. 2013. 'Knowing Insects: Hosts, Vectors and Companions of Science'. <i>Science as Culture</i> 22(1): 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2013.776367</p> <p>Beisel, Uli, and Carsten Wergin. 2021. 'Understanding Multispecies Mobilities'. In <i>Mosquitopia</i>, London: Routledge, 32–46. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003056034-4</p> <p>Reis-Castro, Luísa. 2021. 'Becoming Without: Making Transgenic Mosquitoes and Disease Control in Brazil'. <i>Environmental Humanities</i> 13(2): 323–47. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9320178</p>
13 Nov	<p>INSECT ETHNOGRAPHIES II Invasive Species. Date changes to 12 Nov.</p> <p>Elton, Charles S. 2020. <i>The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants</i>. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34721-5</p> <p>Ritvo, Harriet. 2017. 'Invasion/Invasive'. <i>Environmental Humanities</i> 9(1): 171–74. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3829190</p> <p>Davis, Mark A., Matthew K. Chew, Richard J. Hobbs, Ariel E. Lugo, John J. Ewel, Geerat J. Vermeij, James H. Brown, et al. 2011. 'Don't Judge Species on Their Origins'. <i>Nature</i> 474(7350): 153–54. https://doi.org/10.1038/474153a</p>
20 Nov	<p>[No meeting]</p>
27 Nov	<p>Date changes to XX Nov.</p>
4 Dec	<p>HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES IV Insecticides: From DDT to Silent Spring</p> <p>Dunlap, Thomas R., ed. 2008. <i>DDT, Silent Spring, and the Rise of Environmentalism: Classic Texts</i>. Seattle: University of Washington Press.</p> <p>Davis, Frederick Rowe. 2019. 'Pesticides and the Perils of Synecdoche in the History of Science and Environmental History'. <i>History of Science</i> 57(4): 469–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/0073275319848964</p>

<p>11 Dec</p>	<p>INSECT ETHNOGRAPHIES III Agriculture</p> <p>Shanahan, Maggie. 2022. 'Honey Bees and Industrial Agriculture: What Researchers Are Missing, and Why It's a Problem' ed. Hongmei Li-Byarlay. <i>Journal of Insect Science</i> 22(1): 14. https://doi.org/10.1093/jisesa/ieab090</p> <p>Phillips, Catherine. 2014. 'Following Beekeeping: More-than-Human Practice in Agrifood'. <i>Journal of Rural Studies</i> 36: 149–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.06.013</p>
<p>18 Dec</p>	<p>Final Discussion</p>