

Changing environments: Experiences and knowledges

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Abstract

This special issue delves into the local worlds of Svalbard, Estonia, Slovenia, and Albania and attests to different ways of knowing, experiencing, and living with the changing environments. Unlike many contemporary studies of environmental change, which focus on the realm of the environment undergoing unprecedented changes, this issue focuses on the processes of changes taking place in particular environments. It asks how these changes evolve, what they mean, and how people make sense of them in their daily lives. By exploring their spatial and temporal realms and the different scales at which they proliferate, this issue emphasizes the processes of changes in relation to environments and not just the other way around. Rather than rashly clinging to crisis or apocalyptic scenarios, it is important to pause and rethink the meanings, rhythms, affects, and effects of these changes in particular local worlds.

KEYWORDS: changing environments, experiences, knowledge and knowledge practices, Europe

Today we live in a world where the meaning of change, especially in the context of climate and the environment, is often discussed as accelerating, increasing, and threatening. Over the past decades, with the rise of the scientific, media, and other reports on unprecedented climate and environmental changes across the globe, the process of change rarely seems to be considered as inherent to the environment. However, environments have been continuously changing throughout history (Barnes & Dove, 2015; Vaughn et al., 2021). In the natural sciences, these continuous changes are often synonymous with environmental dynamics and regarded as essential to biodiversity and

rich habitats (Loreau & Mazancourt, 2013). The social sciences and humanities also remind us that environments have never been static, but have always undergone changes in their relations with human, nonhuman, and material domains (Barnes & Dove, 2015). For example, anthropology has been interested in how cultures and societies relate to and adapt to changing environments and vice versa since the early beginnings of the discipline (e.g., Boas, 1940; Steward, 1955; Netting, 1993).

But while we learn that these changes have been gradual throughout history, in recent decades they have become unprecedented, abrupt, and planetary due to increasing human interventions in the environment, leading to a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Despite numerous scholarly debates and dissonances about the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty, 2009, 2018; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Latour, 2017a, 2017b; Moore, 2015; Haraway et al., 2016), it has undoubtedly opened Pandora's box and challenged the dualisms between nature and culture, facts and values, natural law and the laws of nature (Latour, 2017a). To quote Latour, the Anthropocene is a gift to humanity, albeit a "poisonous" one (2017a). On the one hand, it has brought human agency or the "cultural" realm into the "natural" one and vice versa; while on the other, it has placed human agency at the centre of attention (Latour, 2017a). Yet, along with this anthropocentric position, the Anthropocene has also shed light on the moral quest for human responsibility. This has opened up a space to rethink the idea of progress in the modern world as "retrogressing," and discover a different way of experiencing the passage of time (Latour, 2017b, p. 13). Or, as Haraway puts it, it has pointed to "response ability" or the ability to "stay with the trouble" (2016).

But how can one stay with the trouble? How should one respond both locally and globally without seeking the scapegoat(s) for this whole "trouble"? Especially given the circumstances where the geopolitical hierarchies and evolving economic, political, and social differences that permeate our globe cannot be avoided. It is more than clear that there is a vast difference in responsibility between industrialists, financiers, and various transnational entrepreneurs, and Indigenous communities, local people inhabiting river valleys, city outskirts, pastoralists communities, or researchers who monitor, assess, and report on accelerated climate changes.

Climate and environmental changes are indeed existentially urgent (O'Reilly et al., 2020) issues, but they are often perceived and discussed as conceptually abstract problems (Knox, 2020) that relate to scientific measurements, facts, and projections. Indeed, the "environment drives people crazy" (Latour, 2017b, p. 13). And one of the tantalizing questions in this *mess* is how to stay with the trouble without getting caught up in yet

another crisis, which seem to follow one after another: fiscal and economic crises, refugee crises, environmental crises, energy economy crises, and many others to come. Apocalyptic discourses and scenarios, feelings of loss of diversity and biodiversity, species extinction, among other issues, have become common companions of our everyday life, on the one hand nudging people into anxiety, giving rise to feelings of passivity, melancholy and sadness, and, on the other, sounding the “warning sirens” (Latour, 2017b, p. 11) that create the urge to bring things “under control” through monitoring, measurements, and environmental assessments (Haslett et al., 2010).

According to Anna L. Tsing et al. (2020), climate and environmental changes are planetary phenomena that are largely monitored and measured by natural scientists, while the task of anthropologists is to analyze and describe the ways in which people in particular locations experience and live with these phenomena. This special issue delves into local stories and vocalizes people’s experiences, knowledges and practices in relation to the changing environments in Europe, such as Svalbard, Estonia, Slovenia, and Albania. Unlike many contemporary studies of environmental change, which focus on the environments undergoing unprecedented changes this issue addresses the changing environments themselves, highlighting the processes of change and exploring their spatial and temporal domains and the various scales at which they evolve. The focus is on what these changes mean in the particular environments—of the Rižana River in Slovenia, the Vjosa River in Albania; Svalbard in the High Arctic; the informal green areas of Tallinn, Estonia; and the pastures of Solčavsko, Slovenia—and whether and how they relate to planetary issues. Moreover, this special issue questions how people in these locations experience, perceive, and conceive of their changing environments, and how they make sense of them in their daily lives.

Change, however, is a constant and universal phenomenon that takes place in both time and space and proliferates at different scales (Brightman, 2022). It is generated and driven by various rhythms, such as continuous, intermittent, accelerating, and gradual. Much of the scholarly work on environmental anthropology or anthropology of the environment addresses the various changes that permeate different environments by exploring local communities and associated adaptations (Steward, 1955; Orlove, 2009; Barnes & Dove, 2015); or focussing on disasters (Dirks, 1980; Oliver Smith, 2009); scientific and local knowledge (Ingold, 2002; Cruikshank, 2007; Latour, 2007; O’Reilly, 2017; Vaughn, 2017; Orlove et al. 2019; Knox, 2020); adaptation and resilience (Nelson et al., 2009; Morita & Suzuki, 2019; O’Reilly et al., 2020); uncertainties (Ojala et al., 2021);

more-than-human realms (Haraway, 2016; Tsing et al., 2020); and the multispecies saloon (Kirksey, 2014) in different parts of the world.

There is no doubt that the contemporary world is repeatedly witnessing a global intensification of water-related changes (Bruun Jensen, 2017). Thus three of the five contributions focus on experiences and knowledges of changing water-related phenomena. Melting glaciers, sodden landscapes, vanishing rivers, or accelerated floodings are topics addressed by Sokoličková et al., Rogelja Caf, and Gregorič Bon et al. Whereas Rogelja Caf, and Gregorič Bon et al. delve into the riverine environments of the Rižana and Vjosa Rivers, Sokoličková et al. explore various forms and processes associated with water in the rapidly changing environments of “melting” Svalbard.

Changing environments proliferate through different and sometimes incommensurable scales. The study of these changes often calls for different “registers of knowledge” that talk “across disciplinary boundaries” (Hastrup, 2013, p. 2). The four contributions in this special issue apprehend changing environments by widening the methodological strands of anthropology. Rogelja Caf develops an experiential methodology of walking along and writing about the river; Gregorič Bon et al. combine big, remote sensing and thick, ethnographic analysis to approach the continuous changes of the riverine environment; Sokoličková et al. use an interdisciplinary approach to explore different realms of knowing and experiencing the changing water in Svalbard; and Vabson et al. apply netography, a method that examines the social media that are part of the contemporary life-worlds of inhabitants of the Talinn suburb.

While the processes of changing environments in the global North and South, as well as in Western Europe, have been studied in depth for several decades, studies related to Southeastern Europe have appeared only in the last few years. Departing from different theoretical strands, these studies explore water worlds (Petrović-Šteger, 2016) and related extractivism (Rajković, 2020, 2022; Gregorič Bon, 2021; Kutović, 2022); beekeeping and eco-spirituality (Jašarević, 2023); fisheries (Janko Spreizer & Rogelja Caf, 2017); and wildlife and protected species (Kozorog, 2021) in the postsocialist context. This special issue focusses largely on changing postsocialist environments, where geophysical and social changes, among others, are induced and generated by the socialist and postsocialist contexts. Although these contexts are not the primary focus of the articles collected in this issue, they all indirectly point to historical, political, and economic realms that generate the changes in the geophysical and social environments. Specifically, the individual articles explain how the socialist and postsocialist urban and rural management reconfigured the landscape structure in the Vjosa Valley (Albania), in Solčavsko and Rižana

(Slovenia), and in suburbs of Talinn (Estonia). Thus, in many of the areas listed, people do not experience their changing environment in the context of climate and environmental changes; rather they see it as related to the social, political, and economic issues that have, due to the project of socialist modernization or postsocialist transformation, induced such changes in the landscapes.

The articles in this issue approach changing environments primarily by delving into various social and individual knowledge, knowledge practices, and experiences. In this vein, Sokolíčková et al. explore the different nuances of the scientific knowledge of researchers, technicians, and tourist guides in Svalbard that generate and are generated by their intimate experiences with the melting landscapes which are transforming before their eyes. By immersing in the experiential worlds of measuring, monitoring, and assessing Svalbard's changing environment, the authors explore the multitude of entanglements between learned scientific knowledge and embodied experiences. Similar interrelation is discussed by Vršnik, who examines the intimate relationship between the intergenerational knowledge practices of pastoral families and their perceptions of the changing alpine pastures in Solčavsko. Knowledge and experience of changing environments are entangled processes, Vršnik argues, as both shape the meaning of change in a particular social and cultural context. In the same way, Gregorič Bon et al. explain how dynamic environments of the Vjosa River, where the meanings of continuous changes are experienced as part of the river's wilderness, are integral to the local way of dwelling. The ever-changing riverine environments are conceived by scientists to be biodiversity hotspots. These dynamics could be eradicated by any kind of abrupt interruption or termination of the constant but gradual changes, which often seems to be one of the main goals of the neoliberal quest for control and fixity. Inhabitants of informal green spaces in suburban Talinn experience a similar risk of abrupt changes as described by Vabson et al. Various administrative policies seek to curate and transform informal green spaces in the post-socialist city, while local inhabitants advocate for environmental justice that the authors suggest would ensure a more diverse ecosystem. In contrast, Rogelja Caf looks at the highly managed riverine environment of the Rižana River, whose 14-kilometer-long course has been "squished between railways and roads" through various infrastructural interventions, making it almost invisible. Rogelja Caf poses the question of how to stay closer to the Rižana River and "decentre the human in the 'Age of the Humans'" by engaging experiential approach of walking and writing to examine the changes in Rižana riverine environments.

This issue explains how people in different parts of Europe, such as Svalbard, the suburbs of Tallinn, on the Ržana, and Vjosa Rivers, and Solčavsko perceive changes in their environments according to their mental worlds or the social and cultural environments in which they live and dwell (Petrović-Šteger, 2016). By delving into the local worlds of Svalbard, Estonia, Slovenia, and Albania, the contributions attest to different ways of knowing, experiencing, and living with changing environments. As the articles explain, changes in environments can take place in different locales (local and planetary), evolve with different rhythms (continuous, gradual, rapturous, accelerated) and temporalities (past, present future, long- and short-term), and proliferate through several, sometimes incommensurable scales (scientific, economic, political, social, etc.). They can represent either continuous, dynamic, and reassuring biodiversity and rich habitat; or as ruptured and unexpected, bringing uncertainty and trouble. This issue shows that in today's world, where, as Latour argues, "environment drives people crazy," or rather the other way around, it is important to give more attention and emphasis to the process of changes in relation to environments not just environments in relation to changes. Rather than rashly clinging to crisis or apocalyptic scenarios, it is important to pause and rethink the meanings, rhythms, affects, and effects of these changes in particular local worlds. With this in mind, this special issue seeks to explore, document, and translate various local (and planetary) stories that bring into focus the multitude of entanglements, disentanglements, and transformations between and within different scales. Climate and environmental changes are part of society, and the tantalizing question to answer is how to engage with the current situation and stay with the trouble, paying more attention to both the local and planetary scales. Exploring and rethinking these entanglements, disentanglements, and transformations between different realms might be a way to stay tuned or to "retrogress" and try to grasp the passage of time in a different way.

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Figure 1: Organizers and participants to the Experiencing Climate and Environmental Changes in and beyond Europe Symposium.

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Povzetek

Tematska številka raziskuje in uglaša izkušnje, vedenja in prakse, ki so povezane s spreminjanjem krajin na otoku Svalbard, v Estoniji, Sloveniji in Albaniji. V množtvu sodobnih študij, ki obravnavajo klimatske in okoljske spremembe ter opozarjajo na njihovo hitrost, pereče globalne kot tudi lokalne učinke, se tematska številka osredinja na pomen in vlogo sprememb v zgoraj omenjenih okoljih severne in jugovzhodne Evrope. Izpostavlja časovne in prostorske pomene sprememb in njihova raznolika merila, skozi in preko katerih se odražajo, razvijajo in ponotranjajo. Eno od temeljnih vprašanj je, kaj te spremembe pomenijo in kako jih posamezniki osmišljajo v svojem vsakdanu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: spreminjajoča okolja, doživljanja, klimatske in okoljske spremembe, vedenja in prakse, Evropa

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