



3rd WORLD CONGRESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY



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Omaha in the Anthropocene

Teaching Global Environmental History as Local History

Questions

What role can museums play in connecting global environmental change to local history?
What are the challenges and opportunities of incorporating public history into EH courses?
What can public history teaching projects teach us about global environmental history?

The Project

"Omaha in the Anthropocene" was a collaborative public history project between The Durham Museum and the undergraduate "Global Environmental History" course at Creighton University. Students in EVS/HIS 488 selected objects from the collection and researched their significance in local, global, and environmental history. The project posed three fundamental questions:

- What does evidence of the Anthropocene look like? -
- Where might we find this evidence in Omaha's history? -
- How do material traces of Omaha's past intersect with Anthropocene narratives? -

Physical Exhibit

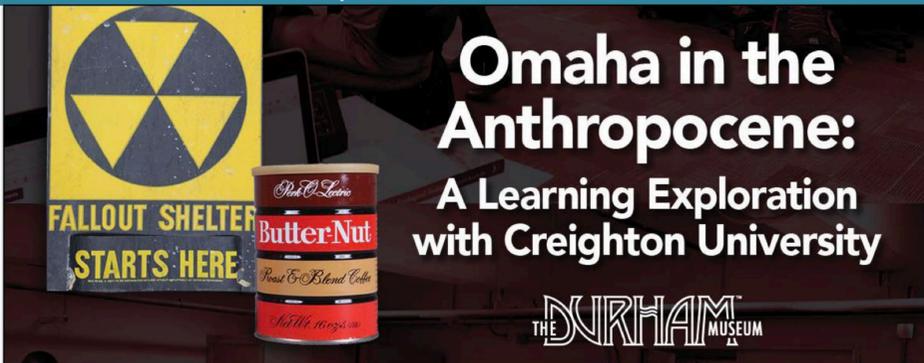


Collaboration

Students worked at and with The Durham Museum. Museum staff visited the classroom and ran a label-writing workshop. Students also visited the Durham Museum to tour their photo archive and collections. Students learned about museum curation and explored the history of Omaha. Students also presented their work at the Durham Museum, including a public lecture and a poster presentation. The physical exhibit was part of the Durham Museum's "Community Classroom Initiative." The Durham Museum was also an active partner in grant-writing and outreach.

The project gave back to the Durham Museum as well. Student researched objects which, in many cases, had no accession information and little provenance. They were objects without stories. Student work lent these objects context - local and global - information now part of the Durham Museum's permanent archive.

GLAMs & The Anthropocene



Benefits

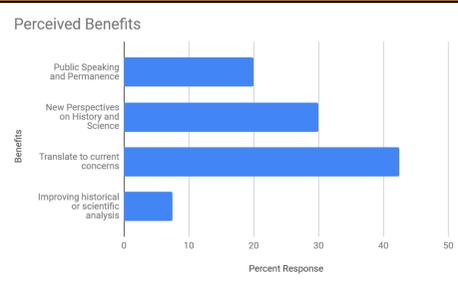
As perceived by project leads:
Emphasizing the mundane
Historicizing lived experience
The global anthropocene
Challenging declensionism

As perceived by students:

Public facing work - Students across all three semesters reflected on the value of public speaking and exhibit building. The diversity of formats (lecture, posters, videos) appealed to a variety of students interests. They valued the permanence of the digital and physical exhibits.
New perspective on history and science - Students frequently commented on the value of its interdisciplinary approach. Few had considered the environmental dimensions of historical changes, and few had framed environmental changes in local or global historical contexts.

Activism - Many students perceived the exhibit to be an activist teaching tool. The project encouraged them to connect historical narratives to ongoing concerns.

Improving historical/scientific analysis - No students entered the class with a background in both history and environmental science (most with neither). Approximately one third of respondents noted that the project left them with a better understanding of scientific and humanistic methods.



Conclusion

Value/challenge for public history - The Anthropocene is an ideal theme to explore environmental history in public context. Approaching it as an historical question depoliticizes themes that might otherwise turn off viewers. This approach can obscure themes from scholarship deemed divisive, however.

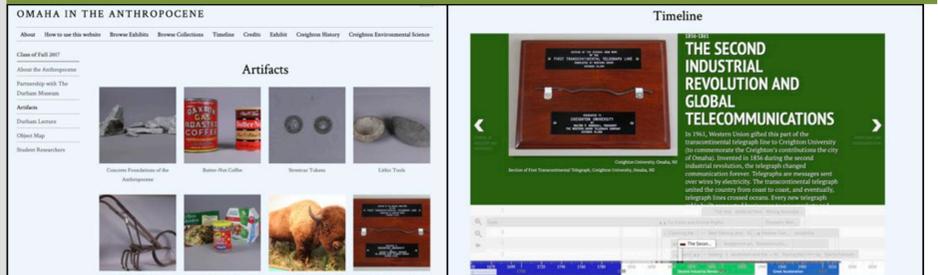
Value/challenge for pedagogy - Building a public history project is time intensive, costly, and requires coordination with students and other institutions. Its public, lasting format may engage students otherwise ambivalent about environmental history and unexposed to its methods or themes. The value as perceived by students may be different from instructors.

Value/challenge for scholarship - Public history projects can reinforce the materiality of environmental history; foreground the lived experience of environmental agency; ground global narratives in local history; subvert declensionism; and problematize assumptions and contradictions of the Anthropocene discourse. Projects must balance demand for linear storytelling with the complexity of subject matter.

Public Outreach



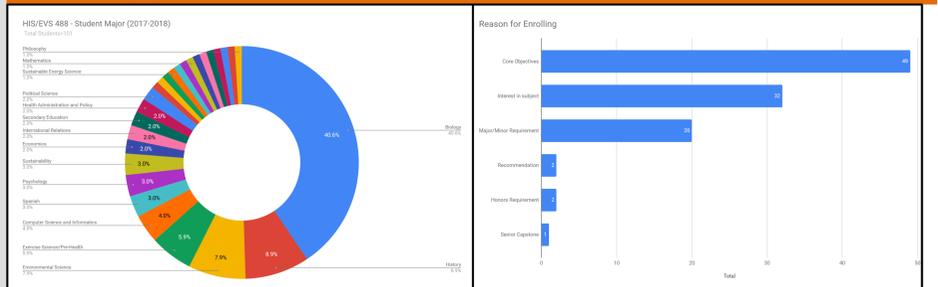
Digital Exhibit



The past five years have seen a remarkable increase in the number and visibility of environmental and public history projects on the Anthropocene. Historical partnerships with galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) have pushed the discourse in new directions. Several of the earliest "Anthropocene Exhibits" featured contributions from environmental historians. Each explored the underlying meaning of the concept and the different ways of knowing, evaluating, and connecting to the Anthropocene. These programs, installations, and exhibits have drawn the Anthropocene out of cloistered academic debates into broader public discussion.

Museums are ideal spaces to explore the humanistic implications of the Anthropocene. They work as conversational spaces open to diverse, intergenerational publics. They encourage play, "mash up," and collaboration. Museums present complex, contentious issues as "slow media," increasing accessibility and potential for engagement. (Leinfelder, Robin, and Trischler)
Few exhibitions explicitly link global phenomena with specific localities or rely on undergraduate research. None have dealt with Nebraskan history or Omaha specifically. This project offers a unique opportunity for students and the public to experience their local history in a global context. Students employed diverse sources to reveal the motivation, meaning, and significance of natural/cultural interactions. This project afforded equal weight to objects as evidence. This encouraged students and the public to see The Durham Museum collections as important material sources of these historical changes.

Challenges



Diversity of majors - Students had varying degrees of comfort reading scientific literature and historical methods. Considerable time in and outside class was required to bring students up to the level required for the project.

Reason for enrolling - Less than one third of the students enrolled because of their interest in the subject.

Producing museum-quality work - The exhibit demanded high-level scholarship from every student. This required multiple drafts of labels and coordination across two institutions. Funding - The physical exhibit required multiple small grants and donated support from Creighton and Durham staff. The Durham also donated one year of exhibit space.

Politicization - Many students included critiques of capitalism in their work and framed their work in the context of climate change activism. The Durham requested that any subjects explicitly politicized in public discourse be omitted. This required considerable creativity and careful word choice on the part of the students.

Researching local history - The greatest unforeseen challenge was students' inattention to the local dimension of their stories. The reasons were varied, but the most common was their unfamiliarity with primary source research. The instructor needed familiarize himself with local historical literature, archives, and historical institutions.



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