

The WZU Hosts a Two-Day Hybrid Workshop on “Theorising Uncharismatic Species in Environmental History”

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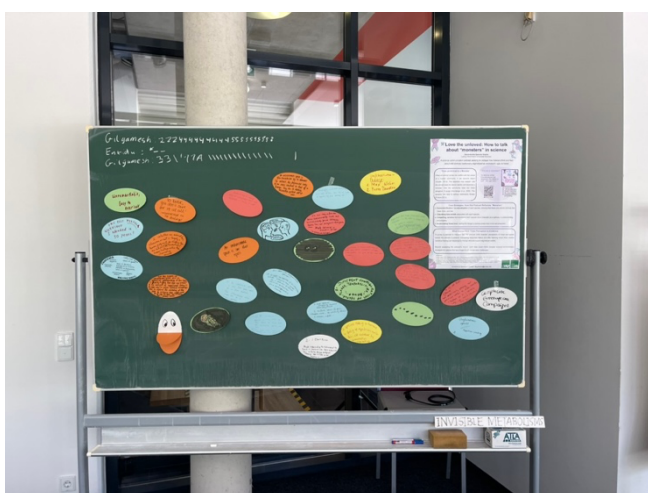
Early on the morning of Thursday, 4 September, an unlikely assembly of international scholars waddled into the WZU to share their thoughts on uncharismatic species. They stayed all day long, and returned early the next day to continue the conversation. A dedicated few even braved Saturday morning’s drizzle to attend a field trip through the Augsburger Stadtwald, expertly guided by Sebastian Streitberger, before wrapping up at lunchtime in the Altstadt.



The workshop was the manifestation of several months of organising which it was my great pleasure to oversee as a Humboldt research fellow in global environmental history and environmental humanities hosted by Simone M. Müller, and all involved were determined to get to the bottom of historical uncharisma.

“Hideous, Invasive, Forgotten: Theorising Uncharismatic Species in Environmental History”, was a two-day hybrid workshop hosted at the Wissenschaftszentrum Umwelt (WZU) at the Universität Augsburg. A call for papers circulated in March asked environmental historians to bring attention to the unloved ones of the past: the hidden, mysterious, frightening, and repulsive. Two deceptively complex questions prompted the workshop. 1) which factors have historically rendered a species uncharismatic?, and 2) what does a study of the uncharismatic contribute to our understandings of the past?

Nancy Cushing and Kevin Markwell kicked off the conversation with their suggestion that uncharisma not be confused with negative charisma. This quickly became a major theme of the workshop, as presenters reckoned with the vastly different emotions that some species can elicit. Kathleen Burke followed with a presentation on guava, explaining how that same fruit was so differently received when it arrived in Indonesia and the Philippines. Uncharisma, it can be shown, has cultural elements, and is in the eye of the beholder. Sara Gregg showed the uncharisma of the coyote to be a product of its association with uncharismatic prairie grasslands, and Lea Horvat linked the uncharisma of chicory in the Habsburg Empire with its embedding into industry. As the “weed” was commodified as a coffee substitute, it took on new meanings.



During the lunch break we were delighted to have an important poster presentation on charismatising the uncharismatic by David Quinche, host of the podcast, “It’s Not a Monster”. Pratyasha Nath and Jenia Mukherjee contributed to this visual feast with a stunning painting, “Invisible Metabolisms”, reimagining Kolkata as a living organism.



Kate Stevens provided the first of the workshop’s two keynotes, an amusing musing on shipworm in the colonial Pacific. The warp of Kate’s historical analysis was cleverly united with the weft of her narrative: an engaging homage to

Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, which was rendered *The Very Hungry Teredo*. Kate's artistic talents shone through: each slide was hand painted with her stunning watercolours.

As the afternoon arrived, Hairong Huang contemplated corpulent pig bodies in Maoist China, calling attention to themes of aesthetics and productivity. Is uncharisma a capitalist construct, one wondered. Warwick Anderson's poetic paper grappled with the gut microbiota. Previously rendered repulsive, when not wholly ignored, it now forms part of a "multispecies rhapsody", being intensively scrutinised and implanted.

The final two papers of the day were delivered by Daan Jansen and Monica Mattfeld. Daan's work on rats revealed how individuals within the species, forever linked to plague and disease, moved beyond uncharisma to become revered as pets and valued aesthetically. Monica brought a much-needed disability studies approach, demonstrating that the horse, indubitably among the most charismatic species of all, can quickly lose this descriptor. Female horses, and horses unable to work, are more readily cast aside in the Capitalocene.

Day two opened with a novel hybrid session. All those in the room Zoomed into a hub at Monash University, Melbourne, hosted by Rohan Howitt. There, the two in-person presenters, Simon Farley and Claire Waddell-Wood, brought Australia and the Pacific to the centre. Shocking the audience with their colourful language, Simon traced the uncharismatisation of the Australian magpie through the nineteenth century. Claire offered a new more-than-tree approach to forest history, the discipline's oldest research topic, and cleverly uncovered hidden species in the log allocation files of the twentieth-century Victorian Forest Commission.

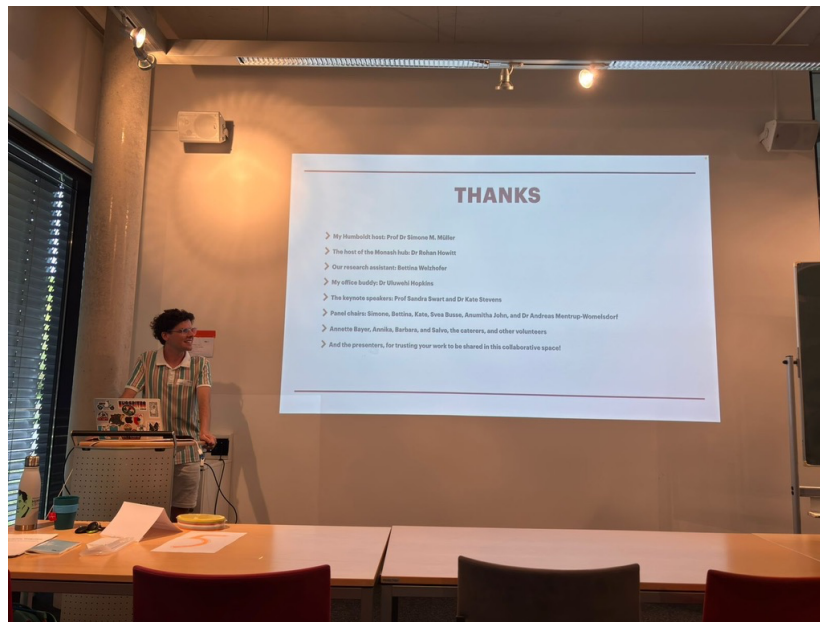


Mushrooms were attended to by Jon Mathieu, who was able to trace a story from aversion to affinity in Western Europe. Fungi have received only trepidatious attention by environmental historians, and Jon's research holds much promise. Vaibhav Ramani complicated the picture of deer in India's Nilgiris. Engaging with Harriet

Ritvo's classic *Animal Estate*, Vaibhav showed the species to be oppositely loved and loathed in different spaces within the Nilgiris.

Friday's lunch was followed by a second spectacular keynote. Sandra Swart gripped the audience with her fantastical tales of the Tokoloshe, the Occult, the alien, and the beloved in Africa. An extraterrestrial visiting from outer space was later revealed to be a baboon, foregrounding the complicity of the press in the production of the fanciful; and revealing the power of love to transcend the species boundary.

The workshop's final panel opened with Erragab Eljanhaoui's discussion of locusts in northwest Africa. That the species only shows up in the archive in times of crisis, and that it was perceived so differently by humans, forced the group to grapple with challenging methodological questions. Plague was similarly a theme of Elise Milburn's paper on ants in sixteenth-century New Spain and the Caribbean. Is charisma determined by the size and number of a given species? The final paper, delivered by Barry L. Stiefel, asked a sobering question: why do some extinct species get memorialisation, while others are wholly forgotten?



Late on Friday afternoon, the Zoom was disconnected, the snacks were tidied away, the tables were shoved aside, and the remaining in-person presenters huddled together in a circle to draw the workshop to a close. For more than an hour we sat in rigorous debate, determined to get to the bottom of the question of historical uncharisma. How can we tell the histories of species mostly absent from the archive? What new insights do their histories offer to our understandings of the past? It was difficult to reach consensus. But that was one of the great strengths of the workshop. So many diverse perspectives—from animal studies to medicine, blue humanities to conservation and historical preservation, forest history to postcolonial studies—led to some inspiring and robust synthesis and critique.

With the workshop now concluded, the presenters will begin to turn their workshop papers into chapters in an edited collection intended for publication with a university press. Some presenters will also be attending the 14th ESEH in Salzburg, Austria, in September 2027, and other minor outputs are also planned. Be sure to follow along with the project at the Universität Augsburg website, or reach out directly to Harrison.Croft@uni-a.de to learn more!