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## Perspectives

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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
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Claudio de Majo

## Life Among the Giants: Translating Ecology into History through Mountain Studies

I observe the mountain from below and it looks still and peaceful. Actually, from afar it doesn't even look so big, with its blurred frame recalling a pencil sketch from some street artist improvising a landscape from the side of the road. From the concrete jungles where I have lived all my life to these rugged mountain peaks is a huge leap—it takes sharpness, flexibility, and even some imagination to adjust from one to the other. Soon enough, I will be crossing its slippery roads, driving a motorized vehicle along the asphalt strips that have been built to allow city dwellers like myself the luxury of visiting these natural giants with ease and convenience. At least this is how I like to think about it, open to the sense of guilt that comes with driving a car through a mountainous path. I guess the local communities must have benefitted from the construction of the roads, but I also know from my studies that major infrastructural projects like these were at the core of land grabs that led to the disappearance of traditional customs. It is hard to picture local inhabitants rejoicing at the construction of these roads. One of the downsides of fieldwork is that reality kicks in, and sometimes it isn't very pleasing.

The road climbs up the steep hills, violently twisting and turning around the mountain peaks. These sharp bends look like recent scars in the old, yet still solid, body of this imperious creature. There is something disturbingly *natural* about these peaks, especially as you cross the mountain through countless ups and downs and approach inhabited centers. At times, however, these mountainous scars look like they have been deliberately inflicted—like an unnecessary masochistic act. Seeing a huge concrete bridge with a couple of fast lanes cutting through these mountainous giants on a semi-suspended structure is among the most painful things you could ever see. You actually start wondering about the purpose of such constructions: Who actually needs this? One may be able to reach the closest city further down the valley more easily, but it seems like a stark concession for proponents of remote mountain lifestyles.

These are the thoughts that affect me during my fieldwork in the mountains of Sila in Calabria, southern Italy, and in Brazil's southeastern mountain range known as Serra

**Figure 1**  
The Fiumarella Viaduct (Viadotto Fumarella) in the province of Catanzaro, 2013. One of the many bridges built in the uplands of Sila in order to connect different zones otherwise hardly reachable. (Source: Wikipedia, CC BY SA 3.0)



**Figure 2**  
Serra Gaucha, 2017. Picture taken from the front seat of our car while driving through the uplands of southern Brazil. (Source: Vitória Fank Spohr)



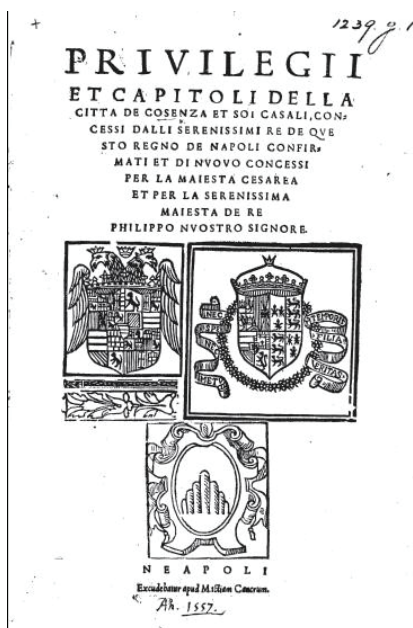
Gaucha. As part of my doctoral research, I am writing about the history of these two beautiful mountain ranges and the human civilizations that inhabit(ed) their peaks and surrounding territories, developing collective governance practices in close relation with these beautiful biomes. Ultimately, I would define my research effort as a work of translation: I use written sources, such as laws and archival records, and relate them to the complex ecological realms in which they are or were enacted. The main challenge I face is in applying ecological insights from the natural sciences as critical tools in order to interpret the choices made by populations in the past who lived in close relation with these colossi.



**Figure 3**  
*I Giganti della Sila, Fallistro* (Giants of Sila), 2013, contains around 50 European black pines, among the oldest on the European continent and certainly the most remarkable remaining evidence of the ecological value of this biome. (Source: Flickr, CC BY-NC SA 2.0)

We should perhaps define these people as the Indigenous civilizations who lived in close contact with the local ecosystems, developing a wide set of subsistence practices resting upon traditional environmental knowledge. As an example, in both southern Italy and in southern Brazil, these civilizations devised subsistence strategies in close contact with certain types of local trees—in both the uplands of Sila and in the Serra Gaucha, respectively. In both cases, these species are today vanishing. The so-called “Giants of Sila,” the ancient species at the core of the local ecosystems of these southern Italian uplands, only survive in a circumscribed conservation area open to the

few tourists who are still aware of their existence. The Araucaria trees in southern Brazil, while still delighting the tables of local inhabitants through their extremely nutritive fruits—the so-called *pinhões*—might also disappear. They migrated several millennia ago from the northeastern belly of Brazil to the colder south, which is today heating up just like the rest of our planet. However, while in their prime, these species were at the core of local ecosystems, providing local inhabitants with essential resources for daily subsistence. As the ecological sciences teach us, these species possess refined communication systems, with an underground network of roots and fungi acting as mediators between different trunks. The thick trunks that characterize these giants, both in Italy and Brazil, have evolved and rested upon complex systems of governance between communities of local tree species, which is an example of coexistence in ecological systems. Such well-regulated networks benefit the local ecosystems and the species communities that survive on their resources.



**Figure 4**  
Documentary evidence of collective governance rules in the mountains of Sila since the fourteenth century. *Privilegii et capitoli della città de Cosenza et soi casali* (Naples, 1557), Biblioteca del Senato.

The human groups that chose to inhabit these territories based some of their most essential daily practices on the fruits of this thriving collective system, devising patterns of environmental knowledge. Remarkably, these were also based on a collective ethos, laying the foundation for the so-called commons economies. So far, historical studies have mainly explained the existence of these collective governance systems in terms of basic economic laws, such as the maximization of income through a mechanism of shared risk. Looking at these patterns through the lens of environmental history might provide us with a different overall picture. Observing the natural laws at the core of local ecosystems, the collectivist choice devised by human beings appears as the foundation of a way of life aimed at managing and nurturing physiological cycles.

This is the beauty of environmental history, as well as its most controversial aspect: the capacity to describe the encounter between what at first glance might look like two completely different worlds, using what would commonly be considered to be divisive geographical entities, such as mountains. Several academic disciplines would righteously regard these rugged mountain giants as boundaries between different states and populations, isolating groups of otherwise fellow human beings from each other. Mountains are considered to be the barriers that have made people foreign to their own neighbors, discouraging interrelations. From a human perspective, this makes perfect sense. It has only been a few decades since city dwellers such as myself have been able to actually enjoy access to such difficult territory with relative ease. Yet, in thinking as an environmental historian, one cannot help noticing how these ecological giants have allowed different groups of people to nurture themselves in their rich natural realms. Humans have literally lived off the trees, soils, and water flows at the core of these complex mountainous organisms. They have done this through practices that reproduce ecological patterns of restrained predation and coexistence, which characterize the ecology of these territories, and allow the creation of multispecies patterns of interaction.

In regarding humans as just another piece of this fascinating puzzle, I feel particularly aligned with fellow researchers such as Edmund Russell and Tim LeCain, skilled explorers of the relational nature of human existence, who have been looking at human history as the result of coevolutionary relations with animals, plants, and the like. In this sense, my research weaves together traditional historical sources obtained through archival research (e.g., legal regulations about the management of natural resources, correspondence between different actors, and historical accounts) and scientific sources describing the ecological characteristics of mountain ecosystems (e.g., forest studies, botany, plant biology, and microbiology).

During my fieldwork, I do not simply visit local archives collecting traditional historical sources; I also look for scientific studies that describe the ecological characteristics of the mountain biomes. This allows me to look into the natural specificities of the mountain ecosystems that I strive to understand, attempting to explain how environmental factors have contributed to shaping historical processes, influencing human decisions and the distinctive cultural features that emerged from meaningful interrelations. How did the ecological characteristics of these mountain biomes influence the development

of governance strategies aimed at ensuring a mutually-enriching relation with these ecosystems? Why does human history present recurring examples of collective governance practices as a strategy to create a human ecological niche within a fully formed, functioning ecosystem? Thinking through the innovative research methodologies pioneered by environmental history, mountains are therefore more of a *trait-de-union* between different groups of people in several historical and geographical contexts than an insuperable ecological barrier. For this reason, from an environmental history point of view, southern Italian and southern Brazilian mountains appear to be part of the same discourse of human-nature evolution, involving the complex interaction of many different organisms.

This is what it means to do environmental history; it entails looking at human experiences and stories in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between human cultures and specific ecosystems. To some extent, this is a truly scientific enterprise. Environmental historians are just like scientists working in a lab. At first, we look at a natural phenomenon and its specific qualities, isolating it in order to better understand its characteristics. Then, we attempt to put it into context, or into an ecosystem. We proceed like a bull in a china shop, stumbling upon elaborate scientific concepts and ecological notions. These, united with a humanist philosophical background that informs most of us, produce an explosive mix of ideas. It takes an immeasurable effort before this convulsed ensemble can actually be transformed into a coherent discourse. Building a bridge between human culture and the natural world, which we so often regard as foreign, means to think beyond the enclosures of traditional academic disciplines. To some extent, this can look like one of those eco-monsters that crosses the beautiful giants that I like to study (see fig. 1)—these bridges are suspended and profane; they look quite unnatural, but they are also at times disturbingly *natural*.

This statement might sound controversial and perhaps this is environmental history at its best; it brings uncanny realities to light by putting human history into contact with ecology through a complex linguistic enterprise. It entails taking a step back and abandoning a reified and hierarchical idea of nature, embracing ecological dynamism and horizontality. It means leaving our safe Garden of Eden and entering an unbalanced and uncertain reality made up of symbiotic relations that constantly evade our perception. It means leaving aside an essentialist vision of nature as a harmonic whole



**Figure 5**  
The complex landscape of the southern Brazilian uplands, 2017. Remaining Araucaria trees are individually scattered across the landscape, with thick woods in the background, cultivated fields, and small pasturelands by the river—an animated, dynamic riddle in the making. (Source: Author)

in favor of an ecological view of the world as the combination of different beings, strangers to each other but also indissolubly interconnected. It is not just about looking at what things are in a universe of perfection, but attempting to understand how they behave in the chaotic ecological mesh that we inhabit.

In this sense, to do environmental history means to think and write ecologically every day, breaking the abstract barriers of the human-nature divide at the core of our modern world. I might sound like an idealist living off the map, but in fact I—and by extension other environmental historians—are not alone in this process. We can rely on fellow disciplines both from the ecological sciences (such as evolutionary biology and climatology) as well as from the emerging field known as the environmental humanities. Further, we can count on a growing movement against climate change, involving young citizens from all over the world willing to explore new patterns of living informed by game-changing moral values. In light of what will be an inescapable revolution of our bodies and minds, we should insist in our efforts on bringing ecologi-



cal relations to the core of our narrative efforts. We need to work across boundaries and disciplines with the aim of contributing to a better future for humankind and the other species that inhabit our beautiful earthly realm, including the beautiful giants that I have described here.

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