

Call for Papers

Shifting Baselines, Altered Horizons: Politics, Practice, and Knowledge in Environmental Science and Policy

Workshop, 21-22 June 2018

Department III, MPIWG – Max Planck Institute for the History of Science,
Boltzmannstr. 22, 14195, Berlin, Germany

Convenors: Wilko Graf von Hardenberg (MPIWG, Germany), Thomas Lekan, (University of South Carolina, USA), Sebastián Ureta, (Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile)

In 1995, fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly claimed the existence of a phenomenon he called the “shifting baselines syndrome,” where “each generation of fisheries scientists accepts as a baseline the stock size and species composition that occurred at the beginning of their careers, and uses this to evaluate changes” (Pauly 1995: 430). In Pauly’s eyes, such inattention to shifting baselines had led scientists to mismanage fish stocks by assuming that ecologically impoverished marine ecosystems were “natural,” leading to the gradual and incremental elimination of species. Beyond its relevance for fisheries conservation, Pauly’s conception has helped to shed a light on one of the most ubiquitous processes in environmental regulation: baseline setting.

The creation and mobilization of baselines is at the very center of a wide array of environmental protection and remediation efforts such as wildlife restoration, climate change mitigation, pollution cleanup, or sustainable development. In each of these arenas, processes of knowing and/or intervening are preceded by the establishment of a particular baseline state, usually understood as the “natural” or “historical” state of a species population, climatic system, waterway, or pattern of resource use, by which the current (usually negative) situation is evaluated and treatment measures are decided. The Anthropocene has focused even greater attention on how societies and policymakers establish ideal environmental or historical baselines in a new geological epoch in which the boundaries between natural and human agencies have blurred.

Despite the practical necessity of establishing baselines in environmental science and policy, the study of how baselines are produced and mobilized has occupied only a marginal space in the environmental social sciences and humanities so far. This workshop moves the study of baselines to the center of analysis by using the tools of environmental history, science and technology studies, and the environmental humanities to explore the emergence and mobilization of different kinds of environmental baselines in the Anthropocene. We are

interested in analyzing baseline setting as a complex set of practices, mediations, and devices, always populated by a heterogeneous multitude of entities (regulatory agencies, scientific standards, material samples, beliefs and ethical commitments, etc.), and whose ultimate consequences can be rarely predicted from the onset.

The workshop aims to understand baseline setting as an uneven process shaped by cultural representation and imagination, radical historicity, connections between power and knowledge, and the distributed agency of a variety of human and non-human actors operating at multiple geographic and temporal scales. By doing so we aim at calling into question the restorationist narratives favored by most current baseline setting processes and explore alternative interpretations of desired environmental futures and emergent ecologies.

Following these cues, our workshop will aim at suggesting alternative pathways for conceptualizing and utilizing baselines, putting in the forefront the necessity to locate all different kinds of existing baselines in environmental science and policy into their broader social, cultural, and material context. Potential themes are:

- Baseline genealogies: explorations on the critical historiography of baseline production and mobilization in history and geography, taking particularly into consideration how and in which terms global processes of standardization prevailed over vernacular knowledge.
- The political ecology of global baselines: studies on the transnational mobilization and adaptations of environmental baselines, especially between western countries and the so-called global south.
- Baselines as baselining: in-depth ethnographic descriptions of the practices and devices embedded in the creation of baselines for particular environmental issues.
- Material Baselines: STS-inspired explorations of the instruments, institutions, and material agencies that produce (and challenge) baselines.
- Baseline setting as alternative democratic forums: explorations of the participative processes of baseline setting, between cherished pasts and desired futures.
- Baseline futures: speculative reflections on alternative futures for baseline setting and mobilization.

Your proposal should consist of an abstract (ca. 300 words) and a brief biographical note (ca. 100 words). Please submit proposals to whardenberg@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de by **30 September 2017** with the subject "Shifting Baselines." Accepted papers will be notified by 15 October 2017. Papers will be due to the organizers by 15 April 2018 so that they can be circulated well ahead of the conference. Participation in the workshop is free of cost and, up to a generous maximum, travel and accommodation will be covered by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.