

## ASEH 's Annual Conference in Baton Rouge

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### Thank You

More than 500 people attended our conference in Baton Rouge, and we would like to thank Louisiana State University for hosting this meeting. We received a sizable donation from the LSU Center for Energy Studies to support the Rolling Seminar to New Orleans – and we want to thank Robert Baumann and the center for their generous support of this well received field trip. The ASEH is also grateful to the National Science Foundation for funding a workshop on Toxic Environments/Toxic Bodies, which brought together scientists, historians, and activists in Baton Rouge. Materials resulting from this workshop, including a transcript, will be available on our website by this summer. Lastly, we want to thank Professor Mark Davis of the Tulane University Law School Institute on Water Resources for providing such a thoughtful keynote presentation on short notice.



Field Trip Leader Ari Kelman addresses the rolling seminar in New Orleans during ASEH's annual conference. Photo Courtesy John Opie.



Former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt (pictured left) greets ASEH President Steve Pyne at the opening reception in Baton Rouge. Photo courtesy *Baton Rouge Advocate*.



Marty Reuss (pictured in the middle of the photo) leads a field trip to the Old River Control Structure at the Baton Rouge conference. Photo courtesy John Anfinson.

### ✓ Mark Your Calendars

Next year's conference will take place in Boise, Idaho, March 12-16, 2008. The conference will include two workshops – one on GIS and one on fire history – which will be covered by the registration fee. Speakers will include Mark Kurlansky, author of *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*. Details are available on ASEH's website ([www.aseh.net](http://www.aseh.net), click on "Conferences"). The Call for Papers is available on page 5 of this newsletter.

### ASEH Awards

The following prizes were awarded at our conference in Baton Rouge:

#### George Perkins Marsh Prize for best book:

John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (University of Texas Press).

#### Alice Hamilton Prize for Best Article outside *Environmental History*:

Thomas G. Andrews, " 'Made by Toile'? Tourism, Labor, and the Construction of the Colorado Landscape, 1858-1917." *Journal of American History* 92 (December 2005).

#### Leopold-Hidy Prize for Best Article in *Environmental History*:

Richard Judd, " 'A Wonderful Order and Ballance': Natural History and the Beginnings of Forest Conservation in America, 1730-1830," which appeared in the January issue.

#### Rachel Carson Prize for Best Dissertation:

Joanna Leslie Dyl, "Urban Disaster: An Environmental History of San Francisco after the 1906 Earthquake" (Princeton University).

To view evaluation comments from the prize committees, please see ASEH's website ([www.aseh.net](http://www.aseh.net) and click on "Awards").

### ASEH Award Submissions for 2007

This year ASEH's prize committees will evaluate submissions (published books and articles and completed dissertations) that appear between November 1, 2006 and October 31, 2007. Please send three copies of each submission by November 7, 2007 to:

Lisa Mighetto  
 ASEH  
 c/o Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Program  
 University of Washington  
 Box 358436  
 1900 Commerce Street  
 Tacoma, WA 98402-3100

## From the President's Desk

### ASEH, Advocacy, and Archives

Our executive committee has just voted to approve guidelines for ASEH advocacy on matters directly relevant to the practice of history, such as ensuring continued access to documents and archival materials. This is a major step for our development as a professional society, and I urge all members to go to the ASEH website, read the guidelines and justifications, and let us know what you think of them.

In my first column as incoming president, I would like to share with you the justifications for our first advocacy position: opposing EPA library closures. Last fall, the Environmental Protection Agency began closing substantial portions of its network of technical libraries—the largest collection of environmental documents in the world. In October 2006, without notice to either the public or affected scientists, the EPA closed the Office of Prevention, Pollution and Toxic Substances Library, its only specialized library for research on the health effects of toxic chemicals. Major regional libraries, including those in Chicago, Dallas, and Kansas City, were

also closed last fall.

Professional societies such as the American Library Association - and now the American Society for Environmental History - have called on the EPA to halt the closures pending Congressional review. The ASEH website contains the full text of our resolution; this column gives some of larger context of our action.

The EPA libraries contain a combined collection of 504,000 books and reports, 3,500 journals, 25,000 maps and 3.5 million information objects on microfilm. These libraries receive more than 134,000 research requests a year from EPA staff, in addition to requests from the public. Losing access to these records will impair not just the research of environmental historians, but also the work of EPA scientists and enforcement specialists.

While EPA staff have stated that “unique, EPA-generated” documents will be digitized within the next two years and made available online, these account for less than 1% of the holdings of the EPA libraries. No plans currently exist for digitizing records from before 1990. No plans appear to exist for cataloging materials before storage, or for sending dispersed documents to Federal Records Centers where public access can be assured. The EPA library plan does not allow for continued public access to EPA libraries; the only public access to EPA documents appears to be to the small fraction of the collection that will be digitized. These factors make us concerned that many important records will be inaccessible, perhaps indefinitely.

EPA staff have argued that these closures are justified because visits to the libraries have declined. While this may be the case, many government services are not used daily, but that doesn't make them any less valuable when it is time to use them. When the funds and competence associated with any such government services are cut, we have seen the dire consequences that can follow. The retention of historical memory--the archiving of knowledge and documents that would otherwise be lost forever--is among the defining attributes of civilized community. Not everything should have to pass a cost-benefit test to be protected.

The EPA libraries contain the material we need to understand our shared environmental histories. Trying to piece together responsibility for PCB contamination at a Superfund site, for example, would be impossible without the EPA's records. For communities of color struggling to understand asthma and air contamination, for epidemiologists

*continued on page 7*

#### American Society for Environmental History

##### Officers:

President: Nancy Langston, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*  
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Mark Cioc, *University of California - Santa Cruz*

The American Society for Environmental History seeks understanding of the human experience of the environment from the perspective of history, liberal arts, and sciences. The Society encourages cross-disciplinary dialogue on every aspect of the present and past relationship of humankind to the natural environment. ASEH maintains a website at [www.aseh.net](http://www.aseh.net). Contact [webmaster@aseh.net](mailto:webmaster@aseh.net) regarding material on the web page.

Items for the next newsletter should be sent by June 15, 2007, to:  
 Lisa Mighetto, Editor, [director@aseh.net](mailto:director@aseh.net).

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## The Profession

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### How to Propose Your Work for an ASEH conference

By Betsy Mendelsohn, ASEH 2007 Program Committee

This article presents guidance about creating sessions for ASEH meetings.

From the program committee's perspective, it is far better to review a session proposal than a single paper proposal. The organizer of a complete session has engaged 4-5 colleagues to address a broader topic. In addition, the organizer has pulled together individuals who share their expertise. Given the breadth of environmental history, it is unlikely that a program committee member shares your interest, so proposers of single papers may be unpleasantly surprised by the sessions created for them. A conference constituted of sessions organized by members will be more intellectually coherent.

Fortunately, the lone historian can find colleagues who wish to constitute a session. After defining the central theme or question, you may use email lists such as h-environment, h-sci-med-tech or envirotech to find collaborators. An organizer may go "top down" or "bottom up": either identify a senior scholar who will comment and then attract presenters, or trawl for presenters and then ask a particular scholar to comment. Using email lists allows the session organizer to draw in people new to them and new to ASEH, such as junior scholars, historians from far away, or people in other disciplines.

In addition to thinking about the intellectual coherence of the papers, the organizer should think carefully about the chair and commentator. As ASEH moves toward more interdisciplinary sessions, the organizer may want to remind commentators that the "new folks," such as climate scientists, anthropologists and literature specialists, are not writing history; their papers likely will not respond to central questions in environmental history, and yet will be worthwhile to colleagues who participate in the session. The person who chairs the session must be its responsible timekeeper: the ASEH executive council now requires that 30 minutes of each session be reserved to audience discussion.

The session organizer has an important administrative role in supporting the volunteer work of the program committee. Organizers make this work possible by reducing the number of individuals with whom the committee communicates: instead of 350 individual presenters, the

committee communicates with only 80 session organizers. Therefore, from the period June through April, session organizers must stay in touch with the chair, commentator, and each presenter of their session. The organizer must respond to the committee's emails, including audio-visual requests, double-checks of names, and updates on contact information. Likewise, the organizer must make sure that the chair and commentator receive papers and biographical information from the presenters. Session organizers who do not accept their administrative role place a large, often untimely, burden on the program committee.

The Baton Rouge conference expressed the creativity and energy of about 67 individuals who proposed sessions, and 13 additional who served as organizers of those sessions that the program committee created out of single paper proposals. It also benefited from the generosity of about 30 historians who were drafted in October to chair or to comment on sessions, or who recommended colleagues who served in those roles.

Note: See the Call for Papers for ASEH's Boise conference on page 5 of this newsletter. The deadline for proposals is July 1, 2007.

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### Graduate Student News

Sarah Mittlefehldt, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, recently received ASEH's first Hal Rothman Fellowship, for her dissertation research on the Appalachian Trail. She was presented the award at the fundraiser in Baton Rouge on March 2, which was dedicated to the Hal Rothman Fellowship Fund.

The ASEH Executive Committee appointed an ad hoc committee to recommend a procedure for adding a graduate student liaison to the Executive Committee by our Boise conference in March 2008. Details will be available on our website this summer.

Travel grants are available for those presenting at ASEH's next conference, to be held in Boise, Idaho. Information on how to apply for these grants will be available this summer, once the Boise Program Committee begins approving the conference sessions. See our website ([www.aseh.net](http://www.aseh.net)) for more information.

## Film Review

### The Battle of Chernobyl

By Bruce Thompson, University of California-Santa Cruz

Most of us remember the catastrophic explosion that occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on 26 April 1986 as the worst accident in the history of the atomic age. But as Thomas Johnson's powerful documentary *The Battle of Chernobyl* demonstrates, the disaster was even more dangerous than we thought it was. The initial explosion released a plume of radioactive gas that spread as far as France and Britain, forced the permanent evacuation of the nearby town of Pripyat, and devastated vast swaths of the Ukrainian and Byelorussian countryside. But the explosion also created a fire at the core of the reactor, with approximately 1,200 tons of magma burning at 3000 degrees. As that molten mass seeped through the concrete floor of the reactor complex, it threatened to reach the ground water table below the plant. Such an encounter between radioactive magma and subterranean water would have produced a second explosion far more powerful than the explosions that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki: the film's narrator informs us that Minsk (at a distance of 320 kilometers) would have been razed, and half of eastern Europe would have been rendered uninhabitable.

Because so much of the story has been forgotten or concealed, the film's momentum never flags. It is first of all, as its title suggests, a kind of war story. To contain the radioactive smoke and gas and the even more dangerous white-hot magma, the Soviet authorities had to enlist an army of more than 500,000 "liquidators"—soldiers, reservists, miners, firefighters, and construction workers—to smother the fire with thousands of tons of lead and boric acid, collect radioactive debris, and build a gigantic "sarcophagus" around the devastated reactor. The radiation in the vicinity of the plant was so intense that robots and remote-controlled vehicles could not function: the most dangerous jobs had to be done by thousands of men in hand-sewn lead suits working in shifts less than a few minutes long. Many of these men died in agony from radiation poisoning, and the now-disabled survivors face the likelihood that they too will develop lethal radiation-induced cancers.

"Here," recalls one of the veterans of this war, "you couldn't see the enemy. In a war, you see the cannons, the machine guns, the tanks. Here, you see nothing. The radiation is everywhere. It just goes right through you." As the film proceeds, the combat metaphor modulates into something like the imagery of the horror film genre, with the white-hot magma cast in the role of a subterranean dragon, a

seemingly unappeasable monster picking off men one by one (as monsters are wont to do in horror films). Another survivor, describing the end of day's work in the seven-month campaign to contain the threat, makes the horror imagery explicit: "It felt like our blood had been sucked dry by vampires."

If this documentary evokes both the combat and the horror film genres, it is also a journalistic exposé: although Mikhail Gorbachev is one of the film's most eloquent and thoughtful interviewees, its narrator charges the Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian authorities with covering up the gravity of the threat from the beginning of the crisis, and with failing even now to address the needs of the survivors and the dangers that still threaten millions of people who continue to live in contaminated areas. Twenty years after the event, relevant documents and footage have been altered or destroyed, accurate statistics on mortality and morbidity have been suppressed, and the huge sarcophagus that encases the plant has developed alarming cracks in its shell.

And while the human impact of the disaster remains underappreciated, the environmental damage wreaked by Chernobyl remains poorly understood as well. The film reports a 30-mile zone of dead trees, and it notes that brigades of hunters had to kill thousands of contaminated animals in the wake of the disaster. But here again the full extent of the damage may never be known.

After the Red Army conquered Berlin in 1945, a red flag planted at the top of the devastated Reichstag building became one of the most famous photographs of the Second World War. Recalling that photograph, the brave men of Chernobyl placed a red flag atop the gigantic sarcophagus whose construction cost so many lives. But the Second World War in Europe ended with the conquest of Berlin, whereas, as this important film makes clear, the Battle of Chernobyl continues to claim more victims.

*The Battle of Chernobyl*, directed by Thomas Johnson, is available from First Run Icarus Films.



ASEH 2008 Annual Meeting  
Call for Papers and Posters  
DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION: JULY 1, 2007

Agents of Change:  
People, Climate, and Places through Time

Boise, Idaho  
March 12 - 16, 2008

**The program committee for the annual meeting of the American Society for Environmental History invites panel and poster proposals for its March 2008 meeting in Boise, Idaho. Proposals may address any area of environmental history, but in keeping with the conference themes we solicit submissions examining the intersecting roles of people, climate, and place in environmental history.**

**The conference site is one of the nation's most rapidly growing cities. Set in the Great Basin desert on the fringe of the Rocky Mountains, Boise has long been shaped by booster dreams of a desert transformed through water works. Today, Boise, like many places, is facing profound changes as global climate and economic trends intersect with its regional demography and environment. The committee encourages panel and poster proposals that focus on the following broad themes:**

*Agents of Change*—Contemporary science and politics have forced public recognition of the importance of natural agents in human affairs, especially climate, while forcing reconsideration of the status of these agents as “natural”. Historians, geographers, and historical ecologists can help advance and refine these perspectives. We encourage submissions from researchers that consider these agents, and whose work spans historical periods, from the modern to the medieval or ancient.

*Region and Place*— Environmental historians are increasingly questioning conventional views of regions and regionality, through research on places that transcend national boundaries and traditionally-defined regions, and by considering people—including immigrant, diasporic, and refugee communities—as “place makers.” We encourage proposals that rethink region and place in light of dynamic climatic, demographic, economic, or political processes.

*Shifting Boundaries* – Boise sits amid volatile boundaries: between mountains and desert, public land and private land, urban and rural communities. Similarly, environmental history encompasses multiple methods and disciplines. We encourage proposals that examine how spatial relationships, ecological processes, and intellectual boundaries have shaped our understanding of change, and our views of our own scholarly practices.

**The committee strongly prefers complete panel proposals rather than individual papers.** Limit panels to three papers (commentator optional) or four papers and no commentator. Plan the length of introductions, presentations, and comments so that your panel leaves ½ hour for discussion. Participants may only present one formal paper, but they may also engage in roundtable, chairing, or comment duties.

To submit your panel or poster proposal, go to ASEH's website ([www.aseh.net](http://www.aseh.net)) and click on “Submit Session Proposals.”

Should you have questions, please contact any member of the program committee:

Lynne Heasley, Chair, Western Michigan University ([lynne.heasley@wmich.edu](mailto:lynne.heasley@wmich.edu))

Stephen Bocking, Trent University ([sbocking@trentu.ca](mailto:sbocking@trentu.ca))

Kimberly Little, University of Central Arkansas ([klittle@uca.edu](mailto:klittle@uca.edu), [ksliddle@alltel.net](mailto:ksliddle@alltel.net))

Kevin Marsh, Chair, Local Arrangements Committee, Idaho State University ([marskevi@isu.edu](mailto:marskevi@isu.edu))

Kendra Smith-Howard, University of Wisconsin-Madison, ([kendrasmith@wisc.edu](mailto:kendrasmith@wisc.edu))

## Remembering the Life Force of Hal Rothman

By Char Miller, Trinity University

The moment was classic Hal Rothman: dumbfounded by the inane commentary on the audio tour of the Ansel Adams exhibit at the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, he let go of the recorder, murmuring “this is bulls...” Or something like that, for his speech was slurred, a consequence of ALS wearing away his capacity to speak. But his meaning was crystal clear. Hal was never vague or imprecise. You always knew what he was thinking and why.

It was this precision and clarity that made him such a dynamic teacher, riveting speaker, compelling scholar, and sharp-tongued pundit. And it is why his death on February 25, at 48, is so very tragic.

I first encountered him in print in the late 1980s: as I began research on a biography of Gifford Pinchot, I read an article Hal had written on the tense relationship between the Forest Service (for which Pinchot was the first chief) and the Park Service during the 1920s, an exploration of how Parks Chief Stephen Mather deftly plucked one landscape gem after another from the national-forest inventory, including Grand Canyon, Zion, Bandelier, and Cedar Breaks.

Although he probed a bureaucratic struggle of considerable import, Hal was less interested in the backroom maneuvers that enabled Mather to best his rivals in the Forest Service than he was in the cultural significance of this contest. “The National Parks Service tapped the pulse of the Jazz Age,” he argued, allowing it to sell “Americans leisure and grandeur at a time when, in the aftermath of World War I...the outdoors connoted appreciation for American values as well as for the physical strength of the people.” Its success, bound up with the national fascination with the automobile and the mobility it provided, put it in the driver’s seat; the Forest Service had much to learn from its rival.

So had I from Hal, a realization that was reinforced when we finally met at an environmental history conference in Houston in 1991. Appropriately enough our first conversation occurred in the book exhibit and its opening was no less apt: Hal walked up and asked me how my work on Pinchot was coming along. Open and generous were qualities he would reveal time and again, but at that instant I more puzzled by how he knew who I was. Later, I’d come to realize that this gregarious guy with a vast network of friends and colleagues somehow knew even those he did not know. It turned out, he had just been named editor of *Environmental History Review*, had read its back files, found an article I had submitted on the first chief of the USDA Forest Service, and told me to “rewrite the damn piece and resubmit.” It was that simple.

His own writing seemed as effortless. The dozens of books and anthologies he wrote and edited over the last 15 years alone are an impressive-enough reflection of his remarkable productivity; and of his ability to reshape historiographical debates in three linked fields--environmental, urban, and western history. Yet add to that massive outpouring of scholarship his innumerable commentary for *High Country News*, *Las Vegas Sun*, and *New West*, among a host of other venues, and it becomes clear just how much effort he exerted to bring his ideas before his readers. Up by 5 o’clock every

morning, he wrote and worked out at a furious pace before heading off to teach at UNLV, a ritual and rhythm that gave shape to each and every day. “Truthfully, I got 47 perfect years,” he told *UNLV Magazine* in the summer of 2006. “Everything broke my way. That’s a hell of a lot more than most people get. The gods reached down and put ideas in my head. Even better, they let them come out my fingers—and at a pretty good clip. Not everybody gets that.”

His almost-maniacal energy produced such a surge of words that at least three more books will appear posthumously, most notably *Blazing Heritage: A History of Wildland Fire in the National Parks* (Oxford University Press, March 2007), a magnificent study of the complex impact fire has had in the national parks and on the culture of the National Park Service. Much of this final body of work was completed with the aid of his family and a devoted clutch of former graduate students, and by dint of sight-recognition software that enabled Hal to compose text after he had lost motor control of his fingers. Despite ALS’ corrosive power, he continued to write his Las Vegas Sun columns until late October, a testament to his deep-seated desire to speak his mind as long as he could. His last was in the angered voice of a vigorous man ready to toss his hat into the ring: “I am a political junkie from a long line of political junkies, but this campaign season has really turned my stomach,” it began. “If I hear the phrase ‘outside of the mainstream’ or ‘out of touch with Nevada’ one more time, I may run for office myself.”

Although he could not run in any sense, he conceded nothing to the disease that disrupted his brain’s ability to regulate muscle function, remaining as engaged with the world around him as he was concerned for how others fared. When we last saw one another in early August, I arrived at his home in Henderson bearing bags of food (“what can you eat?” I had emailed before flying to town; “surprise me,” was his laconic reply), and before I could ask him how he was he wanted news of my wife’s recovery from chemo. Only then could we get to his situation, only then could we break bread.

In truth, I have no memory of what we talked about, just images: of Hal chewing with care small bits of bagel, lox and schmeer; his humorous banter with his son Brent and wife Lauralee; his disdain for the idiocy of the Bellagio audio tour; his skilled maneuvering of his motorized wheelchair to gain better perspective on Adams’ arresting and iconic images--“Moon and Half Dome,” “Tetons and the Snake River,” and “Oak Tree, Snowstorm.”

After the show, Hal herded us over to the nearby Café Gelato where we took turns feeding him spoonfuls of the sweet Italian confection. He grinned in delight, but then bought me up short by noting I was late for my plane. I learned over and kissed him goodbye, and broke into a run.

**Note: Hal Rothman received ASEH’s Distinguished Service Award in 2006. This essay appeared in slightly different form online at [NewWest.org](http://NewWest.org).**

## Announcements

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See ASEH's website ([www.aseh.net](http://www.aseh.net)) for information on upcoming conferences, job openings, and other announcements.

### Member News

Marcus Hall's book, *Earth Repair: A Transatlantic History of Environmental Restoration*, was recently awarded the 2007 Downing Book Award by the Society of Architectural Historians as "the outstanding publication devoted to historical issues in the preservation field."

Verena Winiwarter recently was selected as the first full professor for the newly created chair for Environmental History at Klagenfurt University's faculty for interdisciplinary studies, the only one of its kind in Austria.

### JSTOR Project Update

As noted in the winter issue, JSTOR will be posting back issues of *Environmental History* and predecessor journals within the next two years. ASEH thanks the following individuals for donating copies (and offering to donate copies) of early journals: Bob Claxton, Thomas Dunlap, Mark R. Finlay, James Lewis, Neil Maher, Nancy Mannikko, Carolyn Merchant, Bernard Mergen, and Donald Worster. Thanks to their generosity, JSTOR now has a full set of all our journals.

### Notice to Members About ASEH News

We have been posting quarterly issues of *ASEH News* on our website since 2001. The ASEH Executive Committee voted in Baton Rouge to offer the newsletter online only, to save money on printing and postage. We plan to send a quarterly e-mail message to members linking to the latest issue on our website, beginning in September 2007 with this year's fall issue. If you would like to continue receiving a paper copy of the newsletter, please notify Lisa Mighetto, Editor, at [director@aseh.net](mailto:director@aseh.net).

If you would like to propose an article for the newsletter, please email Lisa Mighetto at [director@aseh.net](mailto:director@aseh.net)

### ASEH 2007 Election Results

ASEH congratulates the following candidates, who assumed office in March 2007, after our Baton Rouge conference:

**Vice President/President Elect** - Harriet Ritvo

#### Executive Committee

Nancy Jacobs  
Paul Hirt  
Mark Stoll

#### Nominating Committee

Paul Sutter  
Deborah Fitzgerald

Nancy Langston became president in March 2007, after the Baton Rouge conference.

We are very grateful for the service of the following Executive Committee members, who are rotating off the committee this year:

Sarah Elkind  
Ted Steinberg  
Mart Stewart  
Jeffrey Stine

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### from **From the President's Desk** page 2

searching for patterns of mercury deposition and disease incidence, for historians seeking to learn about restoration of streams after the Clean Water Act—the holdings of the EPA libraries are quite simply irreplaceable.

By allowing the destruction of these records, we may make it impossible for a woman, fifty years from now, to understand why she, her sisters, and her childhood friends all have tumors growing in their breasts. We may make it impossible for a father in the Bronx to understand why his sons developed asthma, or for a farm community to understand who contaminated their soil. We make it equally impossible for a particular industry to document that it was *not* to blame. We owe a responsibility to the future to make certain that our children and their children have access to their shared environmental histories.

If you have comments or suggestions, please send them to me at [nelangst@wisc.edu](mailto:nelangst@wisc.edu)

Nancy Langston,  
ASEH President

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  - **Tribute to Hal Rothman**
  - **ASEH Election Results**

## **ASEH News**

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American Society for Environmental History

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