ASEH 2020 in Ottawa Canceled

For the first time in its history, ASEH did not hold its scheduled annual conference. We are heartbroken that COVID-19 forced us to cancel our meeting in Ottawa. At the end of this newsletter, we've posed and answered some questions about the decision to cancel the conference. Thank you to the program committee, the local arrangements committee, and all of the registrants, presenters, and members who had planned to join us in Canada. Thank you to all of our sponsors and WEHN members and organizers. Thank you all for all of your support.

If you have not done so already, please fill out the form by April 30th to donate or request a refund of your registration fees.
PRESIDENT’S COLUMN: Cancelling the Ottawa Conference

ELECTING me president of something portends a natural disaster. When I was in high school, I was elected president of the senior class. In the spring of our senior year, a tornado cut a swath through our city, Omaha. It was the worst tornado in American history, in terms of property damage, up to that date. One of the damaged buildings was our high school. The tornado ripped the roof off the building, broke every window, and wrecked much of the interior.

The day of the tornado was terrible, but something marvelous happened the next day. Unbidden, students and teachers swarmed to the school to see what we could do. We piled debris, swept up broken glass, and marveled that no one at the school died. The remainder of the school year was cancelled, and I bragged at graduation that I was the only class president in school history to get the seniors out of an entire month of school. Thanks partly to labor donated by 1,500 people, the school was repaired and reopened on schedule in the fall.

One of the freshmen that fall was a lad with an encyclopedic knowledge of film history named Alexander Payne. He went on to direct Hollywood films, including Sideways, Election, Nebraska, and The Descendants. In Downsizing, which Payne wrote and directed, the character played by Matt Damon attends a high school reunion. Payne filmed that scene at our high school. So, if you saw Downsizing, you saw a high school that recovered from a natural disaster and helped launch a smart young fellow on a creative career.

Now I am president of ASEH, and the natural disaster was the COVID-19 epidemic that cancelled the Ottawa conference. This time, I am unable to joke about a silver lining in the disaster. Like five hundred other scholars registered for the conference, I was looking forward to it. I was eager to see old friends...
and meet new ones. I was delighted that we were meeting in Canada. Registrations included about 200 Canadians, which demonstrated the value of having meetings on both sides of the border. We had many first-time registrants, and we were going to offer them optional ribbons to attach to their nametags to encourage others to welcome them to ASEH.

The local arrangements committee—co-chaired by Kirsten Greer and Will Knight—had organized circle sessions, led by representatives of local First Nations, on place-based reparative environmental histories, and lined up interesting field trips. I was deeply impressed by the work of the program committee, chaired by Nancy Jacobs, to build a diverse array of offerings. I looked forward to chairing a discussion on mentoring with graduate students and attending a plenary that featured artistic approaches to environmental justice.

The executive committee, which meets on Saturdays during the annual meetings, had a busy agenda. It included presentations on enhancing diversity, bolstering society finances, and improving committee management.

In sum, Ottawa looked another in a long line of exciting, worthwhile ASEH meetings that would expand and strengthen our community.

Cancelling the conference cost us all those good things that would have happened in Ottawa. We risked losing a quarter million dollars, too. But something marvelous happened the next day. Past presidents rose to our aid by encouraging registrants to donate their registration fees to ASEH. Most registrants did so. Others claimed refunds because their employers required it, and then they turned around and donated their own money. Others simply donated. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Donating to ASEH is the equivalent of sweeping up the broken glass, piling the debris, and putting the roof back on the school. It is what we need to rebuild the ASEH community in the aftermath of the disaster. Although we did not lose the quarter million dollars we feared, the experience showed that we need perpetual reserves to bolster us against future disasters of any kind.

By making ASEH stronger than before, we are enabling it to foster the careers of the promising young scholars who will go on to mold the scholarship of the future (among other things).

One difference between the Omaha tornado and the COVID disaster is that, in 1975, we knew immediately whether the tornado killed anyone we knew. Not so with COVID-19. I have not heard of anyone in the ASEH community who has had the disease, but we are far from the end of the pandemic. If you or someone you know comes down with the disease, please let David Spatz and me know so we can send our best wishes for a speedy recovery. And, as always, please let us know if someone in our community passes away so that
always, please let us know if someone in our community passes away so that we can inform the membership and remember their contribution.

These are difficult days, and we need each other more than ever.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT, PAST AND FUTURE

Dear Colleagues,

To those of you who so generously donated your Ottawa registration fees or contributed to the ASEH to cover the losses we incurred from canceling the conference, a heart-felt thank you!

But, our work is not done, nor our need eliminated. The big picture is this: Over the past decade or so, our revenues from conferences and journal publication have declined. Over the next few years, these sources of revenue will decline still further.

I am writing today to ask you to donate (or donate again) to provide for ASEH's future in these uncertain times. These donations will be used as a cushion should travel restrictions and health concerns prevent us from meeting in Boston, and to enable ASEH to continue to support graduate student research.

Please donate now by going to https://aseh.org/Donate. We’d be particularly obliged if you would set up a monthly, recurring donation. Any amount is welcome.

With immense gratitude,

Sarah "Pass the Hat" Elkind

Vice-President of ASEH

DONATE

THANK YOU TO OUR OTTAWA CONFERENCE SPONSORS
ASEH 2021 in Boston

April 21-25, 2021
Hilton Boston Back Bay

The conference theme will be

"Resiliencies and Inclusivity: Opening Up Environmental History"

THE CALL FOR PAPERS AND PAPER SUBMISSION SITE WILL BE AVAILABLE SOON! STAY TUNED!

Massachusetts State House

Granary Burying Ground

Boston from above

WINNERS OF THE 2020 ASEH PRIZES AND AWARDS

Normally, these award, prize, and fellowship winners would been announced at the awards ceremony in Ottawa, scheduled for March 28, 2020. They were announced instead during the virtual business meeting on that day.

Distinguished Scholar Award - given every year to an individual who has contributed significantly to environmental history scholarship
HARRIET RITVO

Lisa Mighetto Distinguished Service Award - given every year to an individual who has contributed significantly to the development of ASEH as an organization

LISA BRADY

George Perkins March Prize for best book in environmental history

BATHSHEBA DEMUTH

*Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait*  
(W. W. Norton & Company)

Rachel Carson Prize for best dissertation in environmental history

ASHANTI KE MING SHIH

“Invasive Ecologies: Science and Settler Colonialism in Twentieth-Century Hawai‘i”

Alice Hamilton Prize for best article outside journal *Environmental History*

FRANK ZELKO

“Optimizing nature: Invoking the “natural” in the struggle over water fluoridation” in the *History of Science*

Leopold-Hidy Prize for best article in journal *Environmental History*

ANDREW BAKER

“Risk, Doubt, and the Biological Control of Southern Waters”

Samuel P. Hays Research Fellowship

Timothy Lorek – “Making the Green Revolution: Agriculture and Conflicted
J. Donald Hughes Graduate Research Fellowships

Du Fei - Mir Izzatullah’s travels, and human and ecological encounters, in Central Asia in the early 19th Century


Hal Rothman Dissertation Fellowship

Elizabeth Hargrett – "Carceral Landscapes: An Environmental History of Three American Prisons"

Equity Graduate Student Fellowship

Ramya Swayamprakash - dredging in the Detroit River as a political, technological, and territorializing process from 1865 to 1930

Thank you to the members of the award committees, and those who gave generously to support ASEH fellowships and grants.

ASEH will honor these winners with a full celebration at ASEH 2021 in Boston
ASEH SEEKS NOMINATIONS FOR ASSISTANT TREASURER

ASEH seeks nominations for Assistant Treasurer to aid the Treasurer in his duties, and ideally transition into the role of Treasurer. Assistant Treasurer is an ex-officio member of the ASEH Council, and Treasurer is an officer of ASEH and a voting member of the ASEH Council. Treasurer duties include:

- maintaining checking and investment accounts
- paying bills, grants, and awards
- preparing annual taxes, 1099 statements for contractors, and 501c3 compliance documents
- preparing annual budget and tracking actual expenses vs. approved budget
- storing and archiving all ASEH financial information and Treasurer's correspondence

If you are interested in the position, or would like to nominate someone for the post, please contact David Spatz - david.spatz@aseh.org or Mark Madison at mark_madison@fws.gov for details.

MEMBERS VOTE ON PROPOSED BYLAWS CHANGE

The ASEH Executive Committee passed a motion to change the bylaws at its spring meeting on March 28, 2020. Bylaws changes require the approval of the membership to be adopted. Please REVIEW THE PROPOSED CHANGES and vote at the link below.

Cast your vote for the bylaws changes by April 28th.

GO TO THE VOTING PAGE
The April issue of *Environmental History* is out now! Features include:

- Articles on muskrats in Britain, erosion in Mao-era China, avian invasions in North Africa, and much more
- Gallery feature on Catholic environmental imagery
- Book reviews and a film review of *Free Solo*

**Access *Environmental History* online.**

*Environmental History* has recently initiated an alternate review pathway for manuscripts submitted by graduate students. While the editors will continue to send out all manuscripts that might reasonably navigate peer-review regardless of their authorship, they have initiated this pathway with the aim of providing young scholars just entering the field with detailed feedback on submissions that would otherwise not be sent out for review. In the interest of cultivating a welcoming intellectual environment, established environmental historians would thus generously offer critiques of such manuscripts. The process is designed to be transparent throughout, with both the author and reviewer made aware of the situation. Although this alternate review process will be handled through the existing double-blind review platform, reviewers may choose to reveal themselves and so also serve as mentors. Accordingly, the journal’s editors are looking for volunteers to help make this program a success. If you are an established scholar and might be interested in serving the journal and society in this capacity, please contact the journal’s editors at editor@environmentalhistory.net.
CALL FOR NOMINEES FOR ASEH DISTINGUISHED CAREER IN PUBLIC ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

The Distinguished Career in Public Environmental History award is presented every two years to an individual who has promoted environmental history to the public over time. **We are now accepting applications for this award. Deadline for submissions: September 15, 2020. Click here** to nominate a person for the 2021 Award.

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NEWS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- ASEH signs on to the [AHA's statement](#) regarding historians and COVID-19
- [Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow](#) in American agricultural history at North Carolina State University
- [Mellon Visiting Scholar in Environmental Humanities](#) at University of Oregon - **deadline extended to May 1, 2020**

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ASEH 2020 OTTAWA CANCELLATION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Why did we cancel the Ottawa meeting?** To protect public health from the risks posed by COVID-19. The executive voted unanimously to cancel. Subsequent events made it clear it was the right decision.

**What were the costs of cancelling?** The most important costs were the loss of the social and intellectual benefits conferred by conferences—presenting and hearing the latest research, seeing old friends and making new ones, browsing and buying books, meeting with publishers, and in Ottawa participating in the circle sessions highlighting First Nations.

But the financial costs were also important to understand. While our top priority was public health, EC also had a responsibility to understand the impact of cancellation on the finances of the society.

When we cancelled, we faced a loss of up to $250k--about $230k to hotel and about $20k in other expenses, such as tours and credit card fees. The hotel by far the biggest component, so this answer will focus on it.

- Our contract required our attendees to spend about $170,000 on rooms, and about $60k on food = $230,000 to the hotel. If our attendees spent less than that, then ASEH had to pay the hotel the difference. So if we cancelled, ASEH as a society would have to pay the hotel $230k.
- ASEH bank account had about $500k. So cancelling Ottawa would not
bankrupt us, but two cancelled meetings in a row could bankrupt us.

- One protection in contract was the force majeure clause. If the hotel was unable to host us, we would owe them nothing. When we cancelled, the hotel and its parent company took a hard line: so long as the hotel was open and ready to host us, force majeure did not apply. It said public health advisories and travel restrictions were irrelevant—it was not their fault if participants could not travel to the hotel.
- Then Ontario declared a COVID emergency. It banned gatherings of more than 50 people and closed all bars and restaurants, which made it impossible for the hotel to host us.
- Finally, the hotel agreed with us. It refunded our deposit.

**Why did we not have cancellation insurance?** Cancellation insurance is expensive and our liability insurance contained cancellation coverage for certain events. In order to be covered in this case, we (and everyone else) would have had to purchase, prior to January 15th, cancellation insurance with a specific communicable disease rider. The premiums are so high that few or no societies buy it.

**Are we reimbursing registration fees?** Yes. Everyone registered should have received an email with a link to form where you express your desire. We will reimburse all fees if you wish, and we understand that reimbursement is a financial necessity for some members. You also have the option to donate your registration to ASEH. Most respondents are taking the option to donate their registration, which we appreciate enormously. Others are telling us their employer requires a reimbursement, but they are making a personal donation of a similar amount. We appreciate that too. Please fill out the form to make your request.

**Are we honoring travel grants?** Essentially yes. Travel grants from two sources, ASEH and NSF. NSF grants require that you travel, so we can’t pay those out, so far as we know. We will be dividing the ASEH grants among all recipients. Travel grant winners will hear from us about details.

**If I was on the Ottawa program, can I put my presentation on my cv?** Sure. You can note that the presentation was accepted but the conference was cancelled due to COVID-19.

**Will ASEH put the Ottawa program on line?** No. ASEH does not have the resources to put the Ottawa conference on line, but we welcome efforts by other individuals or groups to organize on-line sessions themselves. H-Net has offered to host cancelled conference panels on line, and our good friends at NICHE have begun organizing on-line presentations. If you do organize an on-line offering, we encourage you to announce it on H-Environment.

**Are we at risk for cancellation and loss in Boston?** Yes. Our contract in Boston is similar to our contract in Ottawa. The Boston meeting is a year from
Boston is similar to our contract in Ottawa. The Boston meeting is a year from now, and it is unlikely a COVID-19 vaccine will be administered to everyone by then.

**How will ASEH ensure its future stability?** We need a much larger permanent reserve that will generate interest used to fund activities. Currently we are 2/3 of the way toward a permanent reserve for the Rachel Carson Prize. We have $20k out of the $30k needed to fund the prize in perpetuity. I encourage you to help us top up that fund. Then we can award that prize indefinitely. We also need donations to annual funding. The folks who donated their registration fees and made other donations are a huge help—thank you so much. If you have not already donated this year, I encourage you to go to the ASEH website now to donate. It is easy to do, and you will feel good about it for a long time.

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