

Editorial

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Our second issue of 2011, which includes four articles presented at the Water History conference in Delft, the Netherlands, in June 2010, focuses on this relationship between history and science. Each draws upon both historical sources and various scientific approaches to examine the dynamic relationship between humans and water.

In the first contribution, Jongepier, Soens, Thoen, Van Eetvelde, Crombé and Bats take us to Northern Flanders to weigh in on the ‘peat debate’ between geoscientists and historians. While the importance of peat as a source of energy during the medieval and early modern period is well known, questions remain as to their exact location and size. Today, the marshes have completely disappeared. Jongepier et al. present a story of the continuing debate between geoscientists, who rely on ‘positive’ soil evidence, and historians, who draw upon ‘circumstantial’ historical data. The authors find a synthesis between these two positions in recent methodological advances, including integration of historical and geophysical data in a Geographical Information System. The integrated approach discussed in the article allows for locating peat extraction with a higher degree of accuracy, and identifies new locations, where peat exploitation had previously been considered improbable as well. The second article, by Crook, Dearing, Jones and Elvin, similarly uses an interdisciplinary methodology and source base to present the environmental history of two lake-catchment systems: the Annecy in Haute-Savoie, France and Erhai in Yunnan Province, China. Their comparison shows that each system experienced similar sequences of flooding during the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, which they relate to upland land-use transformations. In both catchments, people looked to engineering to control the floods. Although there are consistencies in how each society responded to the floods, the article underscores the importance of understanding the cultural context within which management options are debated.

Driven by the importance of water availability to understanding how societies responded to climate change and managed irrigation systems, the third article by Flohr, Müldner and Jenkins seeks to reconstruct water availability—both as rainfall and for

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irrigation—in the Southern Levant. The authors use carbon stable isotope analysis of barley and sorghum to do this. For barley, the results indicate a positive but weak relation between irrigation regime and total water input. However, the case is different for sorghum. Therefore, although there are limitations, it appears to be possible to use carbon stable isotope analyses of cereal remains for reconstructing past water availability, including for a relative measure of wetter and drier periods within a site. In the final article, De Kraker turns our attention to the in- and outgoing tides of the coastal areas of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Through a comparative analysis of four coastal areas, he discusses past human–tide interactions, particularly the sediments brought in with them. De Kraker links his findings to recent discussions on safety and coastal management, especially in the Netherlands, and concludes that coastal management in reclaimed marsh areas with a modest tidal range allowing continuous sediment deposition to build up the level of the marshes.

Together, these four articles illustrate the value of integrating both historical and scientific sources and approaches in order to situate human–environment relationships within their specific temporal and spatial settings. Historical data can be used to add a temporal dimension to scientific understanding. Scientific data can also play a role in reconstructing an anthropogenic landscape. *Water History* aims to transcend disciplinary boundaries while remaining true to the tenets of the historical discipline: ‘its careful use of archival or “primary” sources, its insistence on meticulously accurate chronology, and its mastery of narrative’ (Sewell 2005: 3). This issue demonstrates the benefits of crossing disciplinary lines and, in the process, celebrates the symbiotic relationship between historians and scientists. May the collaboration continue.

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