

CFP: Biodiversity and its Histories Part II

April 24-25, 2017, Columbia University and the New York Botanical Garden

We invite proposals for a workshop examining the multiple historical origins of the values of biodiversity. Our aim is to better understand how these diverse values have developed historically, and how they in turn inform current scientific research, international debates over conservation policy, and initiatives to protect biocultural diversity. Scholars in the following fields are encouraged to apply, especially those focusing on Africa or Asia and/or the pre-1900 context: ecology, biology, geography, anthropology, philosophy, law, art history, cultural history, and history and philosophy of science.

Biodiversity, a term introduced in the 1980s to facilitate dialogue at the conjunction of science, ethics, and law, has been notoriously hard to define. Central to the disciplines of conservation biology and environmental ethics, biodiversity operates as both fact and value in wider public debates about the preservation of species and habitats from human influence, exploitation, and destruction. Species conservation and environmental health have been proposed as apolitical goals that might form the basis of international collaborations capable of promoting peace, stability, and non-proliferation; and biodiversity has optimistically been identified as a value that unites the sciences with many world religions today. However, conservation initiatives have frequently run up against conflicts between the goals of species protection and those of social justice, between the welfare of plants and animals and that of human inhabitants. What's more, behind the term biodiversity stands a wide variety of values—from the utilitarian to the ethical, religious, and aesthetic. These disparate values have generated competing measures of biodiversity and conflicting prescriptions for its preservation. These ambiguities have begun to receive attention from philosophers, but their historical dimension has largely been neglected. While we cannot hope to produce a comprehensive history, we hope to do biodiversity justice by producing an appropriately many-faceted genealogy. We will draw on what is already a rich body of historical research on ideas of hybridity and exchange, habitat and distribution, civilization and extinction from the eighteenth century onwards. We will seek to broaden and deepen this genealogy by charting the concepts of diversity that have underpinned scientific, philosophical, spiritual, aesthetic, and economic views of nature since antiquity and across the world.

Among the topics to be considered are:

- Motivations for the observation and protection of variety in nature;
- The values attached to biological diversity in relation to human cultural diversity;
- The shifting valuation of “diversity” at the organismic level, as in cases of hybridity or mixed ancestry;
- Political and legal efforts to protect biological diversity in these multiple senses and the conflicts surrounding them.

This workshop is part of a series of scholarly and public events organized by Deborah Coen, Helen Curry, and Paul White, and sponsored by the Darwin Correspondence Project at University of Cambridge, Cambridge University's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, the Center for Science & Society at Columbia University and Barnard College, and the Humanities Institute of the New York Botanical Garden.

Conference participants will receive accommodation and limited funding for travel expenses.

Please send short abstracts (no more than 300 words) to dcoen@barnard.edu

Deadline for submission: November 1, 2016

Participants will be notified by November 30, 2016