

Report on the IHA Professional Training Workshop in the Environmental Humanities

23 June 2026

Irish Humanities Alliance



Background

On 26 March 2026, the IHA Environmental Humanities Working Group hosted a gathering of doctoral students and early career researchers (ECRs) from universities across Ireland. Held at the Royal Irish Academy, the event aimed to support the building of networks among ECRs as they approach the challenges and opportunities of working in the environmental humanities space.

Organisation of Workshop

We divided the event into two parts, an hour-long networking session and a 45-minute panel discussion.

To facilitate the initial networking session, we invited participants upon arrival to join a table to discuss one of the following questions

1. What draws you into environmental humanities? What environmental aspects are there, or could there be, in your own work?
2. Hope in Dark Times? How to keep spaces for hope in a time of precarity and polycrises?
3. What are some shared methodologies across the various disciplines within the environmental humanities? (for example, do you do place-based research? do you have sources? what does your practice look like?)
4. How can/do early career researchers develop their teaching profile by applying their research to pedagogy?
5. How can artistic practice expand or challenge dominant narratives about the climate crisis and ecological change?
6. Where are the environmental humanities going in terms of policy impact?

Notes on discussions

Each group kept notes of their discussions. These were gathered and form the basis for the comments below concerning each theme. Please note that Question 3 was not discussed.

- 1. What draws you into environmental humanities? What environmental aspects are there, or could there be, in your own work?**

Anticipating that some participants may be new to the environmental humanities, this question aimed to elicit reflection on what makes this area of study interesting and timely, and to encourage participants to find environmental dimensions to their current research that were previously unnoticed.

Participants in this discussion came to it from backgrounds in ecocriticism, history/archaeology, languages, policy, and industry. They reported being drawn to the area because of significant concerns surrounding sustainability, the representations of environmental issues in wider culture, especially in the news, and the need to create new modes of thinking to address environmental issues in non-Western discourses and practices.

Participants identified several environmental aspects in their own research, including food production, farming, climate fiction, and the circular economy. They noted that STEM-type knowledge is well integrated into decision-making structures now, and they raised questions about how we can give voice to local knowledges and lessons from literature in these structures.

2. Hope in Dark Times? How to keep spaces for hope in a time of precarity and poly-crises?

Discussion focused on the power of narrative, 'about telling a story', and the role of Humanities scholars in shaping narrative and debate. Interaction between humanities scholarship and the policy landscape tends to be focused on STEM and social science areas. Reference was made to the work of Rebecca Solnit and the need to pay more attention to history, with the attendant bias towards presentism in much contemporary discussion/discourse on the environment.

Other strands of reflection included: the idea that there is a slow revolution since the 1950s-60s on environmental issues (post Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*) in wider society; the recent passing of Jurgen Habermas and his legacy on the need for dialogue and conversations in the post-war period, needed even more today at a time of geopolitical crisis and eco-social factures. It was stressed that individuals and communities have agency and power and there is a pressing need to push back against the TINA philosophy (there is no alternative) of the neoliberal era. It was agreed that the role of positive tipping points signalling change are important to highlight, to avoid doomster narratives which can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Reference was made to the distinctions and relationships between the categories of hope, optimism and 'realism' and considerations of gender, race, ethnicity and privilege were also highlighted as being of central importance in any discussions of EH, and the relationship between the Global North and the Global South. In general, community can be the most important unit/agent of change. Discussions moved to the role of narrative/storytelling which engage, reflect, challenge us to consider the scale and impact of the environmental crisis. The importance of the work of Donna Haraway and her injunction to 'stay with the trouble' and to 'just turn up' and do the work was considered.

The challenges of dealing with negative news stories, difficult political contexts and depressing data on the environment, and how not to be defeated by it. There is a need to learn from recent history, for example 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and Covid. Ideas of 'meitheal' community solidarity, hope and help are considered relevant in this regard. The need to compromise and to have flexibility were deemed critical. What are some shared methodologies across the various disciplines within the environmental humanities? (for example, do you do place-based research? do you have sources? what does your practice look like?)

4. How can/do early career researchers develop their teaching profile by applying their research to pedagogy?

Participants framed their discussion around the challenges and opportunities related to developing their teaching profiles. Among the challenges identified were the lack of training in eco-pedagogy and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and the small number of environmental

humanities modules currently running across universities. The lack of modules results in few opportunities for ECRs to develop their skills. They addressed academic cultural issues including a divide between STEM and Arts and Humanities. Participants also reflected on the difficulties involved in developing networks and sustaining collaborations.

Nonetheless, they judged that the very lack of opportunities may be viewed as a chance to spearhead curriculum development by proposing research-led environmental humanities modules. They observed that seeking out opportunities to assist in the teaching of current modules may facilitate training, and that training may be undertaken in less formal ways: by creating and participating in working or reading groups; engaging in peer support networks (within and beyond institutional boundaries); and in seeking opportunities that are not directly teaching-related but may hone transferable skills.

Therefore, participants pinpointed several action points for ECRs and the wider sector. ECRs should embrace their political voice and create a culture of solidarity. ECRs should seize opportunities to take the lead on curriculum development, for example, by proposing a fully designed module on ecological themes. Connecting with the sustainability office at their institution and investigating institutional policies on sustainability may offer support for these endeavours. However, the wider sector must help. Permanent staff should advocate for more opportunities for ECRs and more transparency in Teaching Assistant hiring. Universities need to hire staff on less precarious contracts; working conditions need to improve.

5. How can artistic practice expand or challenge dominant narratives about the climate crisis and ecological change?

It was proposed that artistic practice has a crucial role to play in terms of challenging apathy and embedding empathy. It was agreed that diverse audiences need to be engaged within terms of practice and narrative. Reference was made to challenges consequent on climate change such as migration, shortages of resources, severe weather events etc. These and other manifestations must be considered in this context. The discussion touched on the ideological dimensions inherent to this issue. It was noted that the highly individualistic nature of capitalism must be considered in terms of engagement with communities. It was suggested that artistic practice might consider the production and articulation of narratives from diverse viewpoints (such as the views of migrant workers). Counter-narratives could be reflective of various sub-cultures and might serve in terms of anti-establishment dynamic. Artists might avoid traditional extremes of right or left by means of new stories and fresh narratives.

6. Where are the environmental humanities going in terms of policy impact?

It was agreed that enhanced communication is key to challenging and questioning dominant narratives and making an impact in terms of policy. A mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies and approaches to communication with relevant target audiences is critical in this respect. It was suggested that humanities scholars might profitably articulate their perspectives in terms of people and human stories. It was agreed that communicating to people is more important

than communicating people. Humanities scholars should present a more holistic response to issues of climate change. There is a particular need to engage meaningfully and confidently with political and administrative elites. Fundamentally, scholars must challenge misinformation narratives. Scholars must be aware of power dynamics and constituencies of interest. Another dimension which requires consideration is the urban versus rural cleavage in terms of reception and communication. Overall, there is a pressing need to integrate a sustainable energy narrative within a broader framework of government policy. Narratives must be crafted for a range of levels, especially local and national.

Panel Discussion

The event then moved towards a panel discussion as Dr. Maureen O'Connor from University College Cork and Prof. Michael Cronin from Trinity College Dublin each addressed the theme of the challenges and opportunities involved in the environmental humanities by reflecting on their scholarly development in the area and their hopes and advice regarding its future. Discussing her pioneering work in animal studies, Dr. O'Connor demonstrated the vital role to be played by humour in communication about environmental challenges. Prof. Cronin championed language, in particular the importance of indigenous languages in preserving and communicating ecological knowledges, as he reflected on his work in promoting linguistic diversity.

For further insights into the workshop see [Irish Humanities Alliance | Reflecting on IHA Professional Training Workshop: Environmental Humanities](#) by Céline Thobois-Gupta.

The Environmental Humanities Working Group would like to express its gratitude to all who attended this workshop and participated in discussions with intellectual generosity, curiosity, and hope. We would also like to thank the IHA for their support in organising and running this event, especially the IHA Coordinator, Prof. Sonja Tiernan.

Further information

Irish Humanities Alliance – Promoting the Value of the Humanities

19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

T. +353 1 609 0666

E. iha@ria.ie

W. www.irishhumanities.ie