A Sketch for Teaching the Anthropocene in the Alps

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The author and Susi in the Austrian Alps overlooking the Steinernes Meer where she grew up. (Photo: Heidi Danzl)

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The Alps can be considered a hot spot for climate change due to changing growing seasons and tree lines, species migration, more intense weather events, increased glacial melt, droughts, mudslides, avalanches, flooding, and the omnipresence of micro-technofossils. They are therefore well suited to teaching the Anthropocene and exploring its impacts. In the following, I sketch several ideas for teaching the Anthropocene based on existing cultural events, institutions, and practices within contemporary Alpine communities. Beyond studies of the Alps dominated by the natural sciences, Alpine culture is underrepresented in academia and is often reduced to somewhat kitschy questions of "*Heimat*" (home), "tradition," and an "easy, stress-free life." Prevailing perceptions of Alpine culture and the "McDonaldization" **[1]** of Alpine leisure activities (ski resorts and fun parks) are deeply problematic. Traditions are often reduced to fossilized stereotypes for tourism while alpine areas are represented as places for a second home or as a setting for television series such as "*Bauer sucht Frau*" (Farmer seeks wife). Through family farm holidays, farmers are commonly reduced to infotainment. Traditional Alpine inhabitants are also frequently labeled as eternally backward, petty, and narrow-minded. Consequently, there needs to be a renewed focus on the strengths of Alpine culture, which should in no way be understood as homogenous. In this article, I argue why traditional, regional knowledge should not be blatantly declared "old-fashioned," "right-wing conservative," "exotic" or "too regional." Rather, I want to present it as a credible source of local, place-based knowledge from which to teach the Anthropocene.

Centers of Knowledge in the Alps

There are a number of small but very valuable and innovative knowledge centers in the Alps that lend themselves to the teaching of the Anthropocene, or rather as Donna Haraway has proposed, “the Chthulucene,” a non-geological term primarily concerned with innovative histories and ways of thinking about our connection to humans and nonhumans alike **[2]**. These centers provide for a diverse debate about the Anthropocene beyond purely scientific-, ecological-, economic-, or tourism-oriented research. The word “knowledge” (*wissen*) is deliberately used here to draw attention to the fact that knowledge need not only be shaped by academic practice but can have other epistemological roots, such as that provided by regional or local knowledge. The **Messner Mountain Museum (MMM)** in South Tyrol pioneered this approach by embodying the world-renowned alpinist Reinhold Messner’s deep connection and understanding of diverse mountain cultures **[3]**.

The Messer Mountain Museum (Source: **Robert Carl-Leopold Mehl, CC BY-SA 4.0**, via Wikimedia Commons)

The centers referred to here are all located in the rural province of Salzburg (*Land Salzburg*) in Austria (not to be confused with the city of Salzburg, which is its capital), mainly in the region of Pinzgau, which also has the highest density of certified organic farmers in Europe **[4]** and boasts its own breed of cattle, **Pinzgauer Rind**. Each of these places of encounter is dedicated in a very unique, sophisticated, and highly motivated way to the cultural and environmental peculiarities of traditional Alpine knowledge, alternative schools of thought, and or regional art. I consider them to be particularly valuable for teaching the Anthropocene based on many years of personal experience and observation.

Top left: The province of Salzburg (*Land Salzburg*), Austria (Source: **Andreas Griessner**, **CC BY-SA 3.0**, via Wikimedia Commons) *Bottom left*: The region of Pinzgau (Source: **Gandi79**, **CC BY-SA 3.0**, via Wikimedia Commons) *Right*: Pinzgau cattle (Source: Pinzgauer Rinderzuchtverband/Edenhauser)

1. The Mining and Gothic Museum (*Bergbau- und Gotikmuseum*) in Leogang is a high-quality museum whose partners, among others, include the National Gallery Prague and the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts. At the end of 2020, this outstanding museum was nominated for the European Museum of the Year Award 2021, as one of only 27 museums from all over Europe. The museum deals with regional art from the Gothic period, its cultural roots, and its development throughout the region. In 2020, it was planning an exhibition on Pinzgau cattle as an important aspect of the region’s cultural heritage **[5]**.

- *© Bergbau- und Gotikmuseum Leogang/friendship.is. Reproduced here with permission.*
- *This 500-year-old tiled stove housed at the Mining and Gothic Museum is considered a masterwork and cultural treasure of the region. © Land Salzburg – Bilddatenbank des Landes. Reproduced here with permission.*
- *The stove in detail. © Land Salzburg – Bilddatenbank des Landes. Reproduced here with permission.*
- *Gothic stained glass window (fifteenth century) showing the prophet Daniel as patron of miners. (Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons)*
- *Simon Troger, "Statue of a miner carrying some precious stones," 1760–1780 (Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons)*
- *Aragonite (Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons)*
- *Leogangite (Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons)*
- *The Mining and Gothic Museum, Leogang (Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons)*

2. The Hohe Tauern National Park was designated Austria's second wilderness area in 2019, with the **Dürrenstein Wilderness Area** Austria's only wilderness area up until this time. Alongside other projects, the Hohe Tauern National Park is part of a **€1.2 million multi-diversity research project** led by Robert Junker at the University of Salzburg.

3. Closely connected to the Hohe Tauern National Park is the **Tauriska Association** in Neukirchen am Großvenediger. Founded in 1986 by a local group and Alfred Winder, it was inspired by the economist Leopold Kohr. It was established with the aim of promoting cultural and regional development in the region of the Hohe Tauern National Park. Leopold Kohr was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize in 1983 and was the intellectual twin brother of the economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher whose work, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (1973), is often cited in the context of ecocriticism. Kohr's work focused on the "human scale" and regional development. The Tauriska Association already offers research facilities, a summer school, as well as other events, and it founded the literary festival *Literatur findet Land*.

- *Kammerlanderstall: the Tauriska office (Source: Courtesy of Tauriska Association). Reproduced here with permission.*
- *The Salzburg Philosopher Leopold Kohr (1909-1994) (Source: Leopold Kohr Akademie). Reproduced here with permission.*
- *Hubert von Goisern (Photo: Pepi Wimmer, courtesy of Tauriska Association). Reproduced here with permission.*
- *Stuhlfeldner Tresterer, Archive Tresterer (Source: Courtesy of Tauriska Association). Reproduced here with permission.*
- *Friedensgarten on the Wildkogel mountain (2.224 m) (Source: Courtesy of Tauriska Association). Reproduced here with permission.*
- *The literature festival "Literatur findet Land" (Source: Courtesy of Tauriska Association). Reproduced here with permission.*
- *Opening of the Leopold Kohr Akademie at the University of Salzburg (Photo: Walter Schweinöster, Leopold Kohr Archive, University of Salzburg). From Left: Prof. Reinhold Wagnleitner, Alternative Nobel Prize Founder Jakob von Uexküll, Susanna Vötter-Dankl (Head of the Leopold Kohr Akademie), Prof. Alfred Winter (State Representative for Special Cultural Projects), Rector Heinrich Schmidinger (University of Salzburg), Wilfried Haslauer (Deputy State Governor), and Julius Schmalz (President of the Salzburg Chamber of Commerce). Reproduced here with permission.*

4. The UNESCO Salzburg Lungau Biosphere Reserve, which was established in 2012, provides a wide range of insights into the reserve's alpine biosphere, traditional practices, and unique heritage.

5. The Study and Management Center (SMC) Saalfelden, in cooperation with the University of Salzburg, the University of Linz, the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland, and the FernUniversität in Hagen, offers a master's degree in the innovative fields of gastrosophy (the art or science of good eating), *Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie* (common good economics), and cross-media marketing communication.

6. The Center for Traditional European Medicine (TEM) in Unken, which deals with traditional alpine healing knowledge, teaches "the Ayurveda of the Alps."

7. Another unique example is the mountain 'permaculture' farm "**Krameterhof**" in Lungau, established by the "alpine rebel" Sepp Holzer, which displays innovative Alpine farming practices based on an intriguing blend of traditional and contemporary knowledge of working with the land.

8. The Alpine Peace Crossing has its origins in the Jewish exodus (the flight of around 5000 Jews across the Alps) in 1947 and is today a refugee and migration support organization in Krimmel.

Concrete Proposals for Teaching the Anthropocene in the Alps

The **Tauriska Association** located in the Kammerlanderstall in Neukirchen and the **Mining and Gothic Museum** in Leogang would, in my opinion, make excellent partners for teaching the Anthropocene. The six proposals discussed below could be developed in cooperation with these centers. My proposal is, therefore, to follow Donna Haraway's call to engage with the "humusities" ("we are humus") **[6]** and "my Chthulucene" and therefore with personal and local histories.

Proposal 1. Mushrooms Considered Philosophically

Both Donna Haraway and Anne Tsing argue for more inclusive thinking about the Anthropocene, calling for greater "kinship" with nonhumans, be it with mushrooms or compost worms. At first sight, this might seem somewhat bizarre, but it leads to some rather interesting insights **[7]**. Anne Tsing, for example, teaches mushroom foraging with a focus on the margins of capitalism. Via the most expensive mushroom on the market, the Matsutake, through to the "ruins of capitalism" beyond scalable business models, Tsing invites us to an intellectual dance with mushrooms. Similar to the Matsutake mushroom, porcini mushrooms *(Boletus edulis)*, which grow naturally in the Alps, cannot be cultivated because they are a mycorrhizal fungus (where fungi and plants share a mutually symbiotic relationship). Porcini mushrooms depend on their symbiotic relationship with trees to grow, thus favoring very specific growing conditions. Combining a porcini mushroom hunt in the Alps with a reading of Anne Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2018, original edition 2017) would definitely have its appeal, not only from a culinary perspective but also from a philosophical and economic one.

Starting from Traditional European Medicine (TEM) (vital substances in mushrooms, see point 6) and the teaching of gastrosophy at the Study and Management Center in Saalfelden (see point 5), the mycelium establishes an intellectual connection ranging from Michael Pollan (mushroom as remedy) **[8]** to Paul Stamets (mushrooms as world saviors) **[9]**, via Haraway (the Chthulucene, "make kin," string figures) and Tim Ingold (the philosophical aspects of the mycelium) **[10]**, to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical approach to the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus* **[11]**.

Proposal 2. Local to Global: From Water, Salt Mining, and Timber Production to Migration and Tourism

Alongside mushrooms, mining, salt, and water are connecting themes for learning about global trade, which is a central aspect of the Anthropocene. Global trade still largely takes place along waterways, which played an important role as the means of production and transport in the historical salt mining trade and in the associated timber harvesting industry, which was both extensive and dangerous in the province of Salzburg. Water as a global resource in the form of glaciers (climate), mountain springs (drinking water), artificial snow production (tourism), and hydroelectric power plants (energy) are other rich and productive topics. With respect to global migration, the **Alpine Peace Crossing** also offers an interesting point of connection (see point 8). Diverse topics associated with the conflict between tourism and nature in the Alps could also be further explored through discussions with representatives from the region's many agricultural commons (*Agrargemeinschaften*), which share common pasture grazing areas in the Alps (for example, Neualpe, Leogang).

Proposal 3. National Park Management, Farming Communities, Land Use Conflicts, and Environmental Law (or of Trees and Cows and their Claim to the "Right of Abode")

In the field of environmental law, the impacts of industrial pollution and its challenges are well known. What is less well known is that some rivers and forests can now also act as legal entities in their own right. This is shown by a case in New Zealand, where this right applies to a forest and river, and in Colombia where it has been applied to a river **[12]**. This new approach to jurisprudence could be discussed in the Alpine region using the "pear tree at the Walserfeld" as an example. It "owns" its own property, which is managed by the municipality of Wals. Ulrich Höllhuber explains that the plot of land is registered to the legendary pear tree, showing that in the cadastral plan of 1875 there was a note specifying that the land is "for the pear tree." **[13]** The tree is always replaced when the previous one dies, with the first "ancestor" documented in 1567. In addition, "the pear tree" also plays an important role in many local legends and myths.

The pear tree at Walserfeld with the Hochstaufen in the background (Photos: Robert Leasure)

Another interesting legal situation with regard to national park management can be found in the Hohe Tauern National Park and the Lungau Biosphere Reserve, where—and this is unusual—traditional alpine farming, including cattle grazing, can still be practiced in specified areas. This means that farming communities affected by the establishment of the national park have been successfully included in the park's management rather than being driven out, as has been the case in many other national parks worldwide. It was in this context that the Tauriska Association (see point 7) was established.

While not quite correctly described as the oldest state treaty still in force in Europe, **the Saline Convention** regulated the details of interstate salt mining between Austria and Bavaria. The Bavarian *Saalforste* (Saal forests) in Pinzgau are a relic of this treaty, and it was within its framework that the first forestry offices and the **modern timber industry developed**. Exciting solutions are also found in **farming/pasture commons**, such as in Asitz/Leogang (Neualpe), where land use conflicts between different stakeholders, such as farmers, tourists, restaurateurs, bikers, hunters, and foresters, etc. often arise. Of legal interest are also the many **hereditary farms** (*Erbbauernhöfe*), some of which have been in the same family for centuries and continue to enjoy special rights.

Proposal 4. Storytelling: Of Legends, Foxes, and Witches

Storytelling is an important aspect of the Anthropocene. Regionally, storytelling lives on through many community choral groups and other associations, as well as through events such as the **Rauriser Literaturtagen**, which has been going since 1971, and the **Neukirchen am Großvenediger Literature Festival** "Literatur findet Land." **Jazz and theatre festivals** are also very popular. Franz Innerhofer's novel *Schöne Tage* (Beautiful Days) is a literary classic, which offers insights into the everyday hardships of life in the region just a few decades ago. Stories and legends can serve as a source of inspiration to invent new stories, to explore new perspectives, or even as a point of connection to the region's history and culture. The legend of "*Der Müller Fuchs*" (The Miller Fox) in Leogang, "***die Übergossene Alm***" (The Buried Alm) in Dienten, or "*der verschwenderische Melker*" (The Wasteful Milker), who was dragged through the *Leoganger Steinberge* (the Leogang rock mountains) by the devil as punishment, leaving behind "***the Melkerloch***" (the milker's hole), a distinctive geological feature (see photo below), are examples of such stories. A somewhat darker part of Alpine history, in which fiction and truth often blur together, are

the witch burnings, for which there is a **memorial in Mittersill**. Isabella Ackerl **[14]** has argued that, above all, difficult economic circumstances often fuelled the witch hunts **[15]**. The goal of such storytelling could be to revive and retell the lively stories of the Alpine region in a similar way to the **National Leprechaun Museum**—an unusual storytelling museum in Dublin—with the goal of eventually developing contemporary Alpine stories of the Chthulucene.

Proposal 5. Resilience and Trauma: The Human Psyche in Theory and Practice

From a psychological point of view, a rather stoic attitude can be found among mountain farming communities, which is gaining renewed attention through resilience research. The health and well-being effects of some of the environmental features in the region are also interesting subjects of research. These range from the positive effect of the Krimml Waterfalls on the respiratory system and psyche to the psychologically uplifting effect of hiking in the Alps, as well as more recent trends such as forest and hay bathing. Forays into the topic of resilience offer an opportunity to discuss the psychological aspects of the Anthropocene, as well as related concepts such as eco-depression, climate trauma, climate refugees, environmental grief, solstalgia, multispecies society, eco-empathy, climate justice, climate fears, and even climate hysteria **[16]**. The question also arises as to how tensions between tradition and modernity, or even environmental disasters, affect the population.

Proposal 6. The Alpine Uplands of Lower Austria: Between Old Growth Forest and Wolves

Innovative projects in the alpine uplands in Lower Austria offer an interesting contrast to the Alps: these include wolves and an old growth forest, which are eminently suitable for teaching the Anthropocene. The Dürrenstein Wilderness Area was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017. It is the only old growth forest in eastern Austria. In the north, near Allentsteig, reintroduced wolf packs (*Pucher*) provide much material for discussion about conflicts of interest with respect to land use.

Dürrenstein Wilderness Area (**Christoph Leditznig**, **CC BY-SA 4.0**, via Wikimedia Commons)

Outlook

The Environmental Humanities make it possible to interpret the almost incomprehensible intellectual dimensions of the Anthropocene in innovative and multifaceted ways at the same time as making it emotionally accessible. The Alps offer an excellent opportunity to illustrate this abstract concept while also questioning it. In this context, the following parallel can be drawn: Knowing about the risks of smoking is one thing, personally getting lung cancer or banning certain advertising campaigns for tobacco is quite another. Having experiential opportunities through which to explore the various interconnected dimensions of the Anthropocene sharpens our ability to respond to the challenges we face. Due to the complexity and omnipresence of the Anthropocene, it will shape as well as significantly determine future discourses and teaching opportunities. The proposals offered here provide a way of influencing these discourses in exciting, inspiring, and personally experiential ways.

This is an edited and translated abstract taken from the article "Das Melkerloch: Von Ecocriticism zu Environmental Humanities und den Möglichkeiten, das Anthropozän am Beispiel der Alpen zu erkunden und zu lehren," in *Das Anthropocene Lernen und Lehren*, eds. Carmen Sippl, Erwin Raucher, and Martin Scheuch (Studien Verlag, 2020).

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"Das Melkerloch: Von Ecocriticism zu Environmental Humanities und den Möglichkeiten, das Anthropozän am Beispiel der Alpen zu erkunden und zu lehren" **Download**

Endnotes

[1] George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: Into the Digital Age*, 9th ed. (Sage Publications Inc., 2018).

[2] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, London: Duke UP, 2016), 101.

[3] Magdalena Messner, *Reinhold Messner – Selbstversorger & Bergbauer* (blv, 2016).

[4] See "**EU-weit die meisten Biobauern gibt es in Salzburg**," *Die Presse*, 16 September 2019, as well as Ingrid Brunner, **"Am Boden bleiben,"** *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 29 November 2018; for background information as to how this came to be, see: Maria

Schindecker, ***Die Entwicklung der biologischen Landwirtschaft in Salzburg – Rückblick und Ausblick***, Universität für Bodenkultur Wien, Master thesis, 2015.

[5] "Das Pinzgauer Rind ist Kultur," *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 4 November 2019.

[6] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

[7] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

[8] Michael Pollan, *How to Change your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (Penguin Press, 2018).

[9] Paul Stamets, *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World: A Guide to Healing the Planet Through Gardening with Gourmet and Medicinal Mushrooms* (Ten Speed Press, 2005).

[10] Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[11] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[12] See the article "**Umweltschutz international: Gefährdete Flüsse erhalten Rechtspersönlichkeit**," 7 July 2017.

[13] Ulrich Höllhuber, *Der Birnbaum auf dem Walserfeld* (Wals-Siezenheim: Gemeinde Wals-Siezenheim, 2016), 72–77.

[14] Isabella Ackerl, *Als die Scheiterhaufen brannten: Hexenverfolgung in Österreich* (Wien: Amalthea, 2011).

[15] See also Alisa Haugeneder, *Verfolgt, verkannt, gefürchtet. Hexenverfolgung als europäisches Phänomen unter näherer Einbeziehung des österreichischen Raumes*, 2015. Universität Wien, Diploma thesis. **http://othes.univie.ac.at/38402/1/2015-08-02_0848705.pdf**.

[16] This was also the theme of a recent workshop held at the Rachel Carson Center called “Existential Toolkit 2.0.” See also Sarah Jaquette Ray, *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet* (University of California Press, 2020).

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