Making Tracks: Chris Conte

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“Rust Belt Recollections and a Winding Road to Munich”

by **Chris Conte**

By the time I arrived at the Rachel Carson Center in May of 2015, I felt ready to write local landscape history. My preparation began in southwestern Pennsylvania, where I grew up in the 1960s and ’70s. My hometown, Washington, occupies a pocket of an area aptly referred to in the United States as the Rust Belt. One can certainly find the corroding remains of lead smelters, steel mills, and abandoned coke ovens— especially along the banks of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers—but beyond the industrial valleys, a bucolic and rolling topography extends into the river hinterlands. Childhood left with me contradictory sensory imprints, especially the smell of smokestack sulfur and the sight of pasture and forest.

My family occupied what had been the servants’ quarters of a sub-divided nineteenth-century mansion on the town’s east side, where the extravagant turn-of-the-century homes had been paid for with wealth generated by natural gas mining and a thriving glass industry. By the 1960s, the days of prosperity had ended and many of these behemoths had fallen into disrepair or, like ours, had been subdivided to generate rent. Our backyard bordered a service alley, beyond which lay an overgrown tennis court and untended grounds littered with patches of thicket. My mother gave me free rein to wander —as long as I stayed within the expansive range of her loud, shrill whistle, I could explore the neighborhood ruins at leisure.

In the Rust Belt, industrial capitalism and pollution went together—working people ingested the byproducts of mining and steel production in exchange for secure union jobs

with high wages. The Clean Air Act, which the US Congress passed and amended in the 1960s and ’70s, meant the end of the steel-coal industrial complex in western Pennsylvania. The expense of smokestack retrofits, which the legislation required, led the major companies to abandon older factories in favor of rebuilds in other areas of the country and abroad. While the industrial downturn forced an exodus of the young, the end of steel also fostered improving ecological health, which took the form of vigorous forest growth on formerly lifeless hillsides of the river valleys. I saw that even a place beaten down by industrial pollution could quickly recover a measure of health.

I graduated from college in 1981 with a major in American history and few prospects. Ronald Reagan had been elected president and leaving the country seemed to be a reasonable course of action, so I left America’s industrial underbelly for Narok, Kenya, to teach high school English and history for the US Peace Corps. Narok High School was perched on the foothills of the Mau Escarpment, a huge raised plateau thrown up by the volcanism that formed eastern Africa’s Rift Valley. Most people in this area identified as Maasai and they made a living from herding livestock. Many Maasai had elaborate ear piercings and facial tattoos. My fellow teachers, all of them from other parts of the country, labeled the Maasai euphemistically as “traditional,” which implied that they were expected to join the rest of Kenya and become “modern.”

Around my neighborhood, Maasai herders moved daily between the Narok River and the surrounding hillsides behind my house. In addition to their local movements between water and forage, Maasai families moved seasonally to take advantage of ecological conditions tied to elevation and highly variable rainfall. As I got to know places around Narok, I learned about the ties between the Maasai culture, economy, and particular landscapes through place names, which in the Maasai language were actually phrases detailing local resource endowments. Mastering the complex name often meant you came to know a place’s environmental conditions in an exercise of mental mapping.

By the early 1980s, the Kenyan government had decided to “develop” the Mau Escarpment through the application of capital-intensive, fully mechanized cultivation of wheat. The government thus began to subdivide the Maasai highland grazing commons and to finance wheat cultivation through agricultural loans. Soon after the program began, large trucks and heavy equipment began passing by Narok High on their mission to obliterate the mosaic of forest and pasture on the high country. The resource sell-off disenfranchised what the government regularly claimed were irrational pastoralists stuck hopelessly in the past. I think the Maasai saw it as yet another form of unjust eviction.

I left Kenya in late 1983 and tried to find a graduate program that could address formally what I had begun to learn in Kenya. I finally settled on African history, with a strong dose of geography, which helped me to understand environments more systematically. For my doctoral field research, I returned to East Africa's highlands, this time Tanzania's Usambara Mountains, where I had the chance to study changes in land use and land cover in the archives and among the mountain residents. No doubt my two years on the Mau Escarpment in Kenya and my upbringing in the industrial wasteland of the United States had kept me focused on the relationship between economy and ecology. Living for months on end in the Usambaras, I began to understand the more nuanced knowledge that comes from people dwelling in a place for generations. I learned to value the search beyond the archives for evidence of the past occupying the present.

I remain focused on the history of Africa's rural landscapes, but I have broadened my search beyond the Usambaras. What drew me were the historical episodes of landscape evolution whose traces remain visible, readable, on the ground. I began to read about the idea of locality as a unit of study. I came to believe that landscape history borne of collaboration and available to the public could inform debates about conservation.

In the summer of 2013 I had the good fortune to be invited to participate in a summer school session organized by Patrick Kupper and Marc Hall in Engadin, Switzerland. Our topic was mountain environmental history. Jon Mathieu led one of our most compelling sessions, a hike among now abandoned village sites above the Inn River on the mountainside between Lavin and Guarda. Jon's deep knowledge brought to life a half-hidden, centuries-old landscape of farming terraces, masonry, grave sites, and religious relics, and suggested yet another way to write environmental history. I had found a cohort of international scholars who had an interest in what I had been studying for almost 30 years. Several of my colleagues at Engadin had an affiliation with the Rachel Carson Center, a place with a strong commitment to public history through the Deutsches Museum, and which attracts fellows from across the environmental humanities. For a while, Munich was home, but that's another story.