Making Tracks: Joana Gaspar de Freitas

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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**.

The Sea and the Sand: Building a Path in Environmental History

by **Joana Gaspar de Freitas**

The path that we take is never straightforward or clear. Sometimes we are driven, other times we make choices, but we never really know where they will take us. Looking back, I am tempted to say that specific circumstances, people, and events led me to where I am today: working on an environmental history of coastal zones.

In Portugal, the sea is always near no matter where we go. I was born in Lisbon, but lived part of my youth in Algarve in the south, where the best beaches are. The sand and the sea were my favorite playground during the warm summers and mild winters, but I never thought that these two elements would become my work’s aim.

From a very young age, however, I knew that I wanted to study history. Being an historian is not quite what parents dream for their children, at least in Portugal, where doctors, lawyers, and engineers are the top three successful professions. My family wasn’t exactly happy with my choice. When I got to university, people often asked me “Why does History matter?,” adding in a lower tone “you will never find a proper job!”

For a while I was divided between history and archeology, so I did a bit of both. Participating in archeological excavations and taking some courses gave me a sense of “space and place” that I couldn’t have acquired from studying history alone.

My first contact with coastal studies started with a job advertisement. The team responsible for the Datacoast project was searching for a historian with specific

characteristics, some I had, others I hadn't, but my background in archeology helped me to write a very convincing cover letter. Datacoast was a multidisciplinary research approach to coastal zones, crossing history, archeology, geology, climatology, and biology. Its main purpose was to study the evolution of the Portuguese coast, highlighting the interaction between sea, land, climate, and human actions.

I spent the next two years looking for information about sea, dunes, forests, agriculture, rivers, storms, ports, and maritime engineering works in nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers. The themes were different from anything I had worked on before, but the research methods, sources analysis, and interpretation were something I knew well. The thrill of belonging to an interdisciplinary team, learning new things about geology, geomorphology, coastal dynamics, finding a way of communicating my knowledge and assembling qualitative data to match, support, or explain natural scientists' quantitative data, made this experience a unique challenge. It changed the way I work and my perception about how to do history.

The year 2005 was the turning point. I had to choose the subject of my doctoral thesis and my advisors. The choice was between deepening my Master's theme on political and cultural Portuguese contemporary history or doing something new—that I could not label back then—about coastal areas and human-environment interactions. I chose the second option, in part because of someone I had met during the Datacoast project, Professor Alveirinho Dias: a geologist, who believes that social scientists and natural scientists working together can develop synergies and fill gaps to create significant advances in knowledge of coastal systems. He inspired me to cross disciplinary borders and to look for other paths in my research.

Some years later, after my PhD in contemporary history, with a thesis about human settlement and its impacts on the Portuguese coast, I discovered the RCC through a Google search. The more I read, the more I wanted to be a part of it. It seemed to be just the right place to learn what I could not learn in my country or in books. Since I work mostly with natural scientists, I felt the need to return back to basics and to engage with other fellow historians. The RCC and the people I met did not disappoint me. I found what I was looking for: methods, theories, different approaches, and new friends. My experience there is already intertwining with the work I´m doing now, having left marks in what I have been thinking and writing ever since.

After the RCC, I'm even more certain that the kind of environmental history I aim to do must be deeply interdisciplinary, requiring cooperation between researchers with different skills. The coastline, as a biophysical interface between the land, the sea, and the atmosphere, is an especially dynamic space, constituting a complex natural system with physical, geological, biological, and scenic characteristics that are constantly changing. In almost all countries, great cities and the main economic and leisure activities undertaken in them have become concentrated in this territory. The intense urban occupation of coastal zones and catchment areas, the overexploitation of natural resources and the resulting adoption of inappropriate measures of intervention, are at the root of serious problems.

Bringing together the social and natural sciences is essential in order to obtain data to support the implementation of sustainable solutions. Interdisciplinarity carries risks, because the methodologies used are not always clear for everyone, and uncertainties multiply when we venture into different areas of knowledge. However, as John McNeill said, "with risk comes opportunity." The differences and difficulties that make some people nervous are precisely those that stimulate the interest of others. The way I see it, environmental history has all the conditions to work as a bridge between the social and natural sciences.

In the case of coastlines, I believe that environmental historians can contribute to the framework of our present understanding of coastal systems, allowing, by taking a longer view, a better comprehension of the entangled relationship between humans and the environment. They also play an important role in stimulating environmental citizenship and in disseminating the idea that the future of the world coasts depends on what society decides and implements today. This is why history matters—at least for me—and is how and why the RCC became part of my path as an environmental historian.