Making Tracks: Patrick Kupper

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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**.

Question the Obvious: On the Benefits of Transnational Research
By **Patrick Kupper**

For the past few years I have been working on the global history of national parks. It has been a time of fruitful research. But why national parks? Why did I choose that topic? In fact, it was not me that chose the topic; rather, the topic chose me.

National park history first approached me in the spring of 2006 in the person of Thomas Scheurer, secretary of the Swiss National Park's scientific research commission. Thomas wanted to discuss the possibilities of investigating the history of the Swiss National Park. The background was the park's centennial forthcoming in 2014. Thomas was exceptionally forward-thinking—in 2006 the centennial was still eight years away! By being well ahead of the celebration, he wanted to make sure that the investigation was independent, based only on scientific rationale, and not constrained or directed by any needs for representation or popularization. Such a scientific approach seemed all the more appropriate as the Swiss National Park (unlike other national parks) had been driven by research throughout its history. Park research, however, had been concentrating on the sciences; the humanities had barely been involved and historical investigations were lacking.

At the very beginning of my research, I made a crucial decision which governed the direction of my investigation: after a few preliminary inquiries, I came to the conviction that the history of the Swiss National Park could not be understood from within, but had to be studied essentially from a wider perspective. Thus, starting out my investigation on the Swiss National Park by studying American national park history (through a Schnitter Fellowship in History of Technology that allowed me to first spend a few months of

research in the United States) proved to be most rewarding. The German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, headed by Christof Mauch at that time, was an ideal place for this. In the course of getting familiar with the history of US national parks, I learned a lot from American environmental historians. To my surprise, I also discovered that some of the topics I was most interested in had been neglected in American historiography. Obviously, my different background made me ask other questions and consequently search the archives for other records. Thereby I gained some new insights into US national park history regarding the role of environmental sciences and transnational connections, which I subsequently made the subject of an article in environmental history.

However, the most important lesson I took home from the US was a generic one: I had learned to see the conditions and constellations of "my" Swiss park in a new way. I had to de-familiarize the familiar and question the obvious. My experiences in the US were a perfect training. I realized that not only the discourses on national parks differed widely between the US and Switzerland, but so did the outcomes. Driving along the scenic highway of Shenandoah National Park was an experience in stark contrast to hiking the trails of the Swiss National Park, and learning that this parkway had been constructed to evoke the feeling of driving along a Swiss alpine pass was astonishing. The Swiss National Park founders deliberately referred to the US national parks but decried Swiss alpine tourism as vulgarization of the Alps. A few decades before American conservationists were driven wild by mass motorization, cog railways carried Swiss conservationists into *Totalschutz*. By placing some land under complete preservation, they wanted to recreate an alleged former condition of wilderness.

Transnational connections remained a crucial aspect of my research: both as a topic to investigate and a way of working. For most of the time I had been based at ETH Zurich where David Gugerli's History of Technology group offered me a stimulating working environment. But I also profited enormously from continuously collaborating with scholars from other institutions. Especially fruitful was a long-lasting discussion which evolved from the suggestion of understanding national parks as means of civilizing nature and which resulted in an edited volume with that very title. An invitation to the Rachel Carson Center in Munich in 2010 not only allowed me to focus on writing for half a year but also to do so in the company of an international group of environmental humanity scholars. From my own experience, I strongly believe that this is the kind of working environment we need to further advance global environmental history.