



Perspectives on Environmental Humanities: Technology, Nature, and Human-Animal Relationships; Interview with Finn Arne Jørgensen

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Finn Arne Jørgensen is a professor of environmental history at the University of Stavanger in Norway. He studies the evolution of human relationships with nature over time and place. His latest book, titled *Sharing Spaces: Technology, Mediation, and Human-Animal Relationships* (2024, University of Pittsburgh Press), explores how technology enables and mediates relationships between humans and nature.

How would you summarise what environmental humanities are, their purpose, and where do you see their biggest strengths and weaknesses?

Environmental humanities have fairly recently become a collection of fields. They have longer traditions in separate fields such as environmental history, ecocriticism, and environmental philosophy, which were single-discipline strands asking questions about relationships between humans and the rest of nature. I say “asking questions” because, for environmental historians and the environmental humanities in general, the questions are perhaps more interesting than the answers – in some ways, at least the



Finn Arne Jørgensen. Credit: University of Stavanger

solutions – because we are not necessarily solution-oriented in the same way that some

other disciplines are. What has happened in the last decade or two, particularly since 2014, when a journal called *Environmental Humanities* was launched, is that there has been more cross-conversation between these fields. People have been drawing on methods from different disciplines to fully understand the connections between people, culture, nature, and so on. While I call myself an environmental historian, I draw on methods and inspirations from many other fields – literature, for sure, and also media studies. I was originally trained in science and technology studies, though with a historical focus. So, that is basically how I would define environmental humanities. It's a very broad field; it's not necessarily a discipline with strict gatekeeping, I would say. Now, there are increasingly new programs at universities and different journals – not just the *Environmental Humanities* journal, which, for full disclosure, my wife is a co-editor-in-chief of. There are also other disciplines focusing on and building on environmental scholarship and publishing work in the field. Perhaps a weakness of environmental humanities is that I don't necessarily think the field can offer discrete solutions to problems. I don't necessarily think that is our role, either. One of my approaches is that most, if not all, environmental problems we are facing at the moment are fundamentally cultural challenges and cultural problems. We already have the knowledge and technical solutions to address many of these issues, but the reasons we haven't implemented them are cultural. It's about values, politics, interests, and so on. This is why we need the humanities and social sciences. We need people working together to understand how and why people act the way they do.

What strikes me most about environmental humanities is how they examine the social structures underlying environmental debates. Are these social structures separate from environmental ones?

I'm not sure they're really separate. Much work in the field also tries to address the more-than-human and how these are interconnected. Humans are only one set of actors, and there are huge variations even within the group of humans. It's not as though all humans share the same approach, opinion, influence, or responsibility for what's happening. This idea is central to the Anthropocene debate – not all people are equally responsible, and not all people experience the consequences in the same way. The more-than-human perspective includes not only other species, which I find fascinating, but also other types of actors and constraints, such as non-organic influences. For instance, some scholars study stones, sand, and even how people live with weather. While humanities as a discipline is rooted in understanding the human, it should not view humans in isolation from the rest of nature. It has also become clear that we are at a point in history where things are on fire – both literally and metaphorically. I think the growth of environmental humanities reflects this reality. It's more than just an interest; it's a conviction shared by many humanities and social science scholars, as well as those in the natural sciences, that these issues – specifically the relationships between people and the rest of nature – are the most pressing challenges of our time. We need to build on our scholarship, our skills, and our expertise to speak about these issues and ask critical questions

about this relationship, and not view them as separate but as mutually influenced.

You used historical analyses to understand the environment, particularly focusing on how technology enables and mediates the relationship between nature and culture. Could you tell us more about the role of technology in your research?

I see technology as something that mediates, a concept I've explored in several publications. By this, I mean that technology fundamentally exists between people and the rest of the world. There isn't really a way to relate to the world without these mediating layers. We always experience some form of technological mediation. For instance, the most basic example is that we wear clothes to go outside. You and I both wear glasses to see. These are technologies that fundamentally shape how we relate to the world. Beyond these basics, there are layers upon layers of technologies that connect people to the world. This is not a neutral process. Often in public and academic discourse, when people write about technologies, they do so in moralising ways. For example, they may claim that new technologies have destroyed the relationship between people and nature, arguing for a return to more authentic, supposedly unmediated ways of engaging with the world. However, looking at this historically, you see that the technologies people now consider "authentic" were once viewed as intrusions – disruptions to the way people related to the world. This isn't limited to nature; it applies to many aspects of life. Take books, for example. Excessive reading was once criticised as harmful, as it distracted people from where

their attention was "supposed" to be. Every generation, in some way, establishes its baseline for what it considers natural – or perhaps authentic – ways of relating to the world. Deviations from that baseline are often viewed negatively. While this is a general statement, I do believe it holds true.

Does the relationship between humans and nature change when technology becomes the primary mediator?

I would say it does change, though not necessarily for the better or worse. Sometimes it improves, other times it worsens, but there is always change. Interestingly, there are also instances where stability persists through technological shifts. As a historian, that is a fascinating area to explore. For example, why do certain stories about people and nature remain consistent during periods of technological change? This is something I've explored in my work on the Norwegian cabin. The concept of having a home in nature is deeply ingrained in Norwegian culture. The cultural narrative surrounding life at the cabin – its activities, the relationships with nature – has remained remarkably stable. In a sense, it focuses on the authenticity of the experience, even as the cabin itself has undergone significant structural changes. Perhaps people emphasize this narrative because there is no longer a strong material or technological connection to the cabin itself.

Can technology offer a more engaged approach to environmental humanities in general? And can it reshape how people interact with the environment?

Absolutely, and we see many examples of this. Technology and digital platforms can open up nature to people in ways that previously required specialised knowledge and belonging to certain social networks – not the digital kind, but human connections, where you learned how to behave, where to go for walks, or which places are worth visiting. Here in Norway, we have a great app on our phones that highlights everyday walks in nature. These were places we would never have discovered otherwise, because you wouldn't know about them unless someone showed you. In this way, technology has enabled discovery and made experiencing nature more accessible. It lowers the threshold for engaging with the natural world. However, there's a flip side. Platforms like Instagram have contributed to overexposing certain places. Too many people are drawn to these locations, and many try to experience them in a way they've learned through social media, often by taking the same iconic photos. When people are more interested in being seen experiencing something rather than actually experiencing it, that's not my idea of fun.

Recently, you published the book *Sharing Spaces: Technology, Mediation, and Human-Animal Relationships*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Could you share what motivated this project for you personally and what guided your research on the use of GPS-equipped dog collars in moose hunting in Swedish forests?

This project has taken quite a long time to develop. It grew out of a workshop



Re-photography research technique.
Credit: Malin Kristine Graesse

we held in 2018, so several years ago, where we gathered a group of people interested in exploring how technology enables specific spatial relationships between humans and animals. We focused on how technologies blur the boundaries between human spaces, animal spaces, and the distinction between people and animals. What I was specifically interested in was the use of GPS-equipped dog collars in hunting. I was looking at GPS technology, and I used hunting as a case study. I started by analysing hunting magazines, which have been published monthly for many years. I noticed a surprising trend: around 2008–2009, something shifted in the imagery. Suddenly, all the dogs in the magazine photos had antennas – these were GPS collars with antennas – but the articles didn't mention them at first. Later on, they began to address the technology as it became a more established practice. I became really interested in how hunters were integrating this new technology into their traditions

and practices. How did they negotiate its place within their values and habits? What I found fascinating was that many hunters saw using the GPS to track dogs – on their cell phones, no less – as somewhat of a form of cheating. There was a belief that hunters should give the moose a fair chance, and relying too much on technology made it too easy. I did fieldwork in Sweden in a forested area with a hunting team from the Swedish Agricultural University. These were people I knew from other contexts, and while it can be difficult to gain access to a hunting team, these were academics who understood what I was trying to explore. They, like many other teams, used the technology, but they believed their way of using it was the “right” way, the better, more appropriate way compared to others. This sense of distinction was not limited to GPS usage but extended to their overall hunting practices, which reflected their values and expertise. One thing that really surprised me was how hunters speculated about the evolutionary shift in dogs due to the introduction of GPS. Before, hunters had to breed dogs that would bark in specific contexts to help them understand the dog’s location and actions. The barking served as a key part of reading the landscape. With GPS technology, however, the barking is no longer as necessary because hunters can now track their dogs’ movements directly on their phones. This shift in how they interact with their dogs – and with the landscape – is really interesting.

How do hunters in Sweden view the use of GPS technology with their dogs, and what role does it play in their hunting practices and relationship with the animals?

Hunters talk about how you can’t let the dog know that you know where it is via the GPS. They specifically mention this because one of the key things in training a dog is making sure it will come back to you. If not, you could lose your dog, and people form close relationships with their dogs. They’re not just tools; they’re almost like family members. This makes the relationship very emotional for the hunters. One story that came up was about a dog that figured out that if it didn’t return, the hunters would come find it and bring the car, which was nice and warm. So the dog became a bit spoiled by the discovery that the hunters could always track it. While the hunters always knew where the dog was, they had to make sure the dog didn’t know this so it would still come back. However, I certainly noticed a lot of anxiety around the idea of the dog not coming back. Part of this anxiety stems from the fact that there have been cases of wolves attacking dogs, as wolves will often attack dogs they encounter. This happens with some regularity. So hunters use the GPS collars as a form of security, allowing them to track their dogs. The situation can get complicated when the dogs follow a moose. This is particularly problematic if the moose manages to escape the group of hunters and leaves the designated hunting area. In the type of moose hunting I observed, each hunting team has a specific area where they are allowed to hunt. Since many people are moving around with guns, maintaining discipline and controlling where people are positioned in the landscape is crucial to ensure safe shooting directions. This is another skill they pride themselves on – they have mastered it and are good at it. However, if the moose manages to escape and enters an-

other team's hunting area, the dog will follow. This creates the need for negotiations. The hunters will need to contact the team in the other area to see if they are hunting that day and whether they can enter to retrieve the dog. Safety is paramount because there are guns involved, so it's a dangerous situation. If your dog runs off into another team's area, it essentially means you can write off the rest of the day, as retrieving the dog becomes the priority. But hunting with dogs is nevertheless very much about the meat, which is common in both Norway and Sweden. Some people do it for the trophies, but the main focus is on filling up the freezer with meat. There's also a kind of trading economy where moose meat is shared with others. Moose are large animals, and there's a lot of meat to be had. I've been up close to moose at farms in northern Sweden, where they breed and milk them to make moose cheese. But there was something particularly special about the hunt I participated in. They did shoot a moose, and I was part of the group that reached it first. Even though it wasn't the biggest moose they'd ever seen, it was still huge. We had to turn it over to inspect the bullet hole because if it punctured the stomach, emergency butchery was needed to prevent the meat from spoiling. Just being there, seeing and smelling the moose, was fascinating. They smell like sweat, and smell is something you don't often experience as a historian. In archives, you typically smell paper. But doing fieldwork and connecting what I read in historical sources to current practices is really important. Being in the field, understanding the relationship between historical traditions and contemporary practices, has become very meaningful to me, and it will continue to be.

Together with Dolly Jørgensen, you established the Greenhouse Research Center at the University of Stavanger. One of its goals is to cross-pollinate theoretical insights from various disciplines, including history, literature, media, religion, philosophy, and art. In your view, how does interdisciplinarity help us better understand environmental issues?

I think part of the reason for this is that many of the environmental problems we face today are so-called "wicked problems", meaning they don't have simple solutions because they are interconnected with so many other issues. To understand and address these problems, we need to draw on a wide range of skills, disciplines, and ways of understanding the world. While there are certainly some multi-talented individuals who can tackle these problems on their own, most of us need to collaborate with others who possess different expertise in order to have meaningful conversations. It's important that we help each other grow and become better, more skilled scholars. However, learning to work together takes time. It's like any relationship that must be nurtured and developed over time, especially when it comes to creating a shared language. This is one of the goals of the Greenhouse, but it's always a challenge. Anyone who has worked at a university knows how big the divide can be between departments or even between buildings on the same campus. The Greenhouse name itself holds some interesting metaphorical connotations. A greenhouse is a place where things can grow and be sheltered, and that's something we really emphasize: the community we support within the

Greenhouse is one where scholars can come together, work, and discuss ideas. But there's also the idea of the "greenhouse effect", which reflects the increasing urgency we feel about the environmental crises we are facing. The idea of the greenhouse highlights not only growth but also the rising heat – we are in a place where things are getting hotter, and we need to find ways to address that. And I think that interdisciplinarity can certainly help us achieve our goals. But it's not just about having a conversation across disciplines; it's about shaping the kinds of questions we ask and the solutions we propose. I also believe that historical consciousness is vital in this process. Too often today, when people try to address problems, especially in fields like innovation and technology, they reinvent the wheel, sometimes making past solutions worse. Instead of simply replicating old methods, we need to ask why those solutions were abandoned in the first place. What were the fundamental issues? Societies don't work in isolation from technologies, and in order for technologies to work effectively, we must consider values, support systems, and the broader context.

Lastly, what advice would you give to young scholars interested in studying topics related to environmental humanities?

This could go in many different directions, but one thing I'd say is that if you want to pursue a career in academia, it's becoming increasingly difficult. The conditions for doing academic work are getting worse in many places, and securing permanent positions is harder than ever. Those permanent jobs that do exist can be quite challenging in

various ways. To succeed, you need to learn how to survive in an academic world that is increasingly driven by grant writing. In Europe, at least, funding your own research has become essential. On the one hand, if you're good at grant writing, you can fund and pursue a lot of cool, interesting projects. But there is also a downside to this, particularly the "projectification" of research. This approach shapes the kinds of questions researchers ask, and often results in research that is more rushed and short-term. Many of the defining questions in the field come from American scholars who have tenure, allowing them to spend ten years to work on a book – something that is rare in Europe. I think this is a challenge we all need to address: we must create conditions that allow us to slow down and produce really high-quality work. Beyond these practical considerations, there are still many opportunities for scholars to engage in environmental humanities. However, it's crucial to seek out and build community. Contribute to the communities you want to be part of, and build meaningful networks with others who share your interests.