

# Greeting Address for the First Issue of the Journal *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal on Environmental Humanities*

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As human beings we have long considered nature as a place to be conquered. In time, with the birth of an initial environmental awareness, we began to consider nature as a place to be preserved in defined spaces, such as natural parks or wilderness areas but always with the same logic: humans on the one hand, nature on the other. Over time our outlook has changed again. Following the teaching of the American ecologist Aldo Leopold, “as conquerors of the terrestrial community” we perceived ourselves as its simple members. We have become attentive to the bonds and interactions between human beings and nature, in its biotic and abiotic dimensions. We paid particular attention to the connections between ‘human and non-human collectives’. A logic of intertwining and participation thus prevailed, favouring a vision that is no longer anthropocentric, despite being aware of the damage caused to the planet and its inhabitants by human *hybris*, as dramatically expressed by the phenomenon of climate change.

Today the challenge of global warming appears to us of such magnitude as to seem insurmountable. On the one hand, governments are struggling to find an agreement on how to organise and share the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, on the other the human inhabitants of the planet, and es-

pecially those living lifestyles with a high climate-altering impact, struggle to reorganise their daily lives in order to help mitigate the rise in temperatures.

Awareness of the urgency of a radical change in the functioning of our economic systems is gaining momentum but is struggling to realise itself in the face of vested interests and the fear of losing millions of jobs, despite being aware of the new ones that the ecological transition could create. Another major critical aspect is the difficulty of the current technologies to ensure the green energy necessary to maintain the economic growth all governments are incapable of imagining the future of humanity without, and therefore they want it now to be sustainable. Geopolitics, fairness of transition, redefinition of entire social systems, scientific and technological research intersect each other in a complex way that looks hard to unravel.

Growing desertification, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, increasingly frequent and adverse weather phenomena, non-liveability of vast areas of the planet, increased migration, reduction of biodiversity and substantial modification of geodiversity, spread of pandemics are the main consequences, direct or indirect, of global warming and constitute scenarios of which humans, animals and plants are increasingly becoming victims. The urgency of the response necessarily requires an individual commitment by all humans. Both in changing lifestyles, through new ways of thinking and acting, and in asking for and supporting the choices of governments to tackle global warming.

For this reason, as UNESCO points out with determination, the action of formal and informal education of the younger generations and adults is fundamental for its transformative power of individual and collective behaviour. This transformative power can only be exercised through a greater knowledge of the functioning mechanisms of the planet Earth and of our role in it, focusing not only on this cognitive learning but also on the socio-emotional (empathic) and behavioural one. A challenge made even more complex by the fact that more than half of the world population lives in large urban agglomerations where the detachment from the functioning of natural mechanisms is so marked that it is difficult even to grasp the change of seasons, which seems to come suddenly, or understand that the fruit you eat has its own seasonality.

In this general framework, Environmental Humanities are of fundamental importance as an expression of scientific knowledge that intertwines human and natural sciences. Knowledge that has favoured the spread of a conception of human beings as being part of nature, recovering the vision of many indigenous societies (whose wealth of knowledge is often referred to by UNESCO). Knowledge that contributes to educational processes in a transformative key that are pursued, again within UNESCO, with its education manuals for sustainable development and the *Most* (Management of Social Transformation) programme.

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This is why we welcome with pleasure the birth of the biannual magazine *Lagoonscapes: The Venice Journal on Environmental Humanities*, born out of the collaboration between the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and the Center for Humanities and Social Changes.

The Journal could not find the light in a more evocative place. Venice is in many ways a fertile and emblematic territory for Environmental Humanities. A place of choice, where you can find inspiration from the fusion of nature and culture. A link that runs throughout the history of the city and is well reflected in the UNESCO study *Save Venice*, which was published when the Organisation, in agreement with the Italian government, launched an international campaign and made a direct commitment to save the lagoon city after the great flood of 1966 (the *aqua grande*) that showed its fragility to the world.

The relationship between UNESCO and Venice continued over the years with the opening of the Regional Office for Science and Culture in Europe – the only office in the Organisation to have competences in both areas at the same time –, with the establishment of three UNESCO chairs on areas that cross heritage protection and sustainable development with regard to urban regeneration, social inclusion and water heritage, and with the inclusion of Venice and its lagoon in the World Heritage list in 1987.

This inclusion reflects the close connection between nature and culture that characterises the city. The reasons for the inclusion, in fact, refer to its artistic, monumental and architectural heritage, its intercultural ties between East and West but also to its being a unique example of a semi-lacustrine habitat in which the interaction between its inhabitants and the lagoon environment – in which the city and a significant part of its history and economy developed – is crucial.

Today Venice is in 'difficult waters'. Over the past 70 years it has seen the number of residents gradually shrink and the number of visitors grow exponentially, which has had a significant impact on the authenticity and integrity of its urban fabric. There remains the crux of the 'big ships', recently banned from the San Marco basin and the Giudecca Canal, but which in the future may navigate in the lagoon with a significant effect on its biodiversity. The Mose is on the home straight to counter the phenomenon of high water which however remains a threat in the background due to the rise of sea levels, that might potentially lead to the disappearance of Venice. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic pushes us to reshuffle the cards, at least in part, in a city that seems to be aware of the need for economic development that does not solely depend on the monoculture of tourism.

These are just some of the challenges facing Venice and our hope is that Environmental Humanities, through the Journal that opens with this first issue, will be able to provide ideas for reflection and solutions for an authentically sustainable future for Venice.

