

CFP: Biodiversity and its Histories

March 24-25, 2017, University of Cambridge
Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

The concept of 'biodiversity' has become one of the most crucial and complex terms in the environmental sciences. Central to the disciplines of conservation biology and environmental ethics, biodiversity operates as both fact and value in wider public debates about the preservation of species and habitats from human influence, exploitation, and destruction. Although the origins of the concept and its recent history are relatively well known, its relationship to earlier traditions and discourses is less well charted. We seek to understand how aesthetic, economic, and moral value came to be attached to the diversity of life on earth.

The conference will bring together scholars and researchers in ecology, biology, geography, anthropology, cultural history, and history and philosophy of science. We will draw on what is already a rich body of historical research on ideas of hybridity and exchange, habitat and distribution, civilization and extinction from the eighteenth century onwards, and will seek to broaden and deepen this genealogy.

By exploring the concept of 'diversity' as applied to 'life' from this broad perspective, the conference aims to bring renewed attention to a powerful contemporary concept whose historical and disciplinary richness has yet to be fully explored and exploited. This is especially important at a moment when political debates threaten to eliminate the rich valences and values attached to biological diversity by substituting strictly instrumental calculations and more anthropocentric evaluations such as 'ecosystem services'.

Contributions will address themes and topics such as:

- The diversity of life as an object of scientific knowledge from the eighteenth century to present, including material practices of collecting, the fixing and measurement of diversity, and visual cultures and modelling of diversity
- The place of diversity, variation, and divergence in biological theorizing, especially evolutionary theories
- The role of variety and the exotic in natural theology, aesthetics, and commerce
- Multiculturalism and ideas of biocultural diversity, including efforts to protect and preserve such diversity
- Diversity within organisms or individuals, as in cases of hybridity or mixed ancestry
- The politics and ethics of biological diversity, including conservation efforts, bioprospecting/biopiracy debates, and international legal regimes

Conference organizers: Helen Anne Curry, Paul White

Conference participants will receive accommodation and limited funding for travel expenses.

Please send short abstracts (no more than 300 words) to psw24@cam.ac.uk

Deadline for submission: 1 September 2016

Participants will be notified by 30 September 2016