

Centre for Applied Ecological Thinking

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

Vision

It is now widely recognised that we are in the midst of an environmental crisis.¹ Almost every society in the world is now issuing calls for new ways of thinking and acting at all levels.² However, it often proves difficult to translate local policies, technologies and scientific insights into practical and global solutions.³ It can be difficult to change behaviour, and many of the habits and practices that have led to the current crisis are deeply entrenched in our ways of thinking. Yet, as our experiences with COVID-19 in 2020 have shown, significant behavioural change across the globe is possible. The Centre of Applied Ecological Thinking (CAET) will therefore serve as a beacon of hope.

CAET's aim is to draw on the humanities' great reservoirs of knowledge of ethics, imagination, and cultural values to respond to the imminent crisis, to reconceptualise current ecological thinking, and to engage with stakeholders in the pursuit of new, applied routes towards sustainable transition. Many of the insights that characterise Scandinavian models of sustainability governance demonstrate that better ways of life on this planet are possible. CAET's aim is to establish itself as Scandinavia's leading centre not just for ecological thinking, but for the translation of that thinking into practice.

By promoting research-based outreach and outreach-based research, CAET will focus on hands-on problems, and promote dialogue between stakeholders and the rich academic community of UCPH researchers who are already committed to thinking in new ways about the relationship of humankind to the environment, the present to the future.

Applied Ecological Thinking

CAET is concerned with the current environmental crisis and transition, and the manifold ways in which this crisis/transition configures different forms of ecological thinking. However, ecological thinking also refers to the Centre's particular humanities-based approach, which rejects reductionist accounts in order to articulate a fuller understanding of humanity and the crisis/transition as something that also involves ethical questions and cultural imaginations. It highlights the fact that it is not easy to separate nature and culture, science and social life, technology and humanity, or academic thinking and practical solutions, and that conversations should take place *across* often disparate knowledge domains.

The keyword in CAET is therefore *applied*. CAET is both a research institution and an infrastructure for ensuring that ongoing humanities-based research is related to the tangible problems of the green transition, and that such problems are used to rethink research questions. By hosting, disseminating and co-creating humanities-based ecological thinking, CAET will help citizens, policymakers, students and ecologically engaged stakeholders to constructively reflect on worldviews, identities and practices

to question ways of addressing problems, to ask new questions, to connect different kinds of knowledge in new ways, to develop new conceptual vocabularies, and to advance knowledge by exploring the potential consequences of the choices taken. CAET's aim is thus to build capacities, reorient ecological thinking and institutionalise new practices by deploying knowledge derived from humanities research.

By initiating a novel set of research activities and launching a comprehensive outreach programme, the Centre will generate a number of new connections (see 'Activities' for more details). First, the existing environmental humanities research environments will be provided with a strong institutional platform for cooperation across departments and research fields. Second, the Centre will serve as a catalyst for international and transdisciplinary collaboration with outstanding research environments. Third, CAET will promote research-based education within the field of applied environmental humanities. Finally, and most importantly, activities at CAET will ensure that environmental research and education will operate in the space between academia and the wider world, and help to mobilise a green transition through engagement with, for example, green youth organisations, political decision-makers, and practice-oriented businesses with green ambitions. CAET's location at *Det Grønne Hus* (The Green House) in central Copenhagen, outside the university campus and in a building hosting other green organisations, is key to this aspiration.

CAET will draw on the resources of ecology-focused academic conversations and research groups that are already up and running at the Faculty of Humanities. These include conversations in the existing Humanities Climate Network, at the Centre for Sustainable Futures, and via our leading researchers in philosophy, history, art, cultural studies, language/communication and media studies. These constellations and areas of interest are well placed to attract student interest, generate further external funding, and invite international collaboration in the domain of ecological thinking.

Although top-level research into the environmental humanities is being done within research groups, these activities often fail to cohere into a larger conversation. CAET will introduce five new topic-clusters under which existing strands of activity can be organised and made visible to audiences across and beyond the University. These clusters will provide the new rubric under which events at CAET can be advertised, and new collaborations encouraged, but they are also topics that capture areas in which UCPH researchers are already active. Each cluster will address a set of key questions for mobilising reflection on how to respond to the crisis/transition.

The CAET clusters are: 1) Ecology and Ethics, 2) Ecology and Time, 3) Ecology and Culture, 4) Ecology and Aesthetics, and 5) Ecology and Communication.

Ecology and Ethics

Nature and human-nature relations have been major themes in the philosophical tradition since the Presocratics. Contemporary ecological ethics draws on this tradition in order to develop a plethora of theories regarding, for example, deep ecology,⁴ animal rights, climate ethics, land ethics, ecofeminism, and environmental virtue ethics. This cluster will address some of the following questions:

Ecocentrism challenges the idea in anthropocentrism that humans have a privileged position in nature. Following this logic, how can we challenge the tradition of political community in a way that includes not only human beings, but also nonhuman organisms? How do more ecocentric settings affect the well-being of humans?⁵ Such a discussion would involve stakeholders engaged in, for example, animal welfare and environmental planning.

How may we draw on *virtue ethics* to overcome the current crisis? In today's environmental virtue ethics,⁶ human character traits are said to be caused by habituation and are key to human agency, because such traits motivate humans to act in specific ways. Environmental ethicists argue that this is a valuable insight into the current knowledge-action gap, where humans *know* how to act in an environment-friendly manner, but do not *act* accordingly because they are not motivated. Can traditions of virtue ethics provide a foundation for addressing human motivation in the current crisis? Are there specific settings that support environmentally friendly character traits? Such insights could be mobilised in relation to, e.g., urban planning, CSR, and the development of new organisational forms.

Key departments: Dept. of Communication (philosophy), Dept. of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies (religious studies).

Ecology and Time

The current climate and environmental crisis is fundamentally a historical phenomenon. Not only has it arisen due to a specific set of accelerated resource practices that have arguably caused a new era in world history,⁷ but the crisis also essentially questions what we mean by central temporal concepts such as sustainability, growth, development and the future.⁸ This CAET cluster therefore explores the co-constitution of ecological and temporal thinking by addressing questions such as:

How may we conceive of progress in a way that implies actual transition, rather than growth or business as usual, by exploring different *understandings of temporality*?⁹ What can we learn about the current predicaments by analysing historical situations and different imaginaries of 'growth', 'development' and 'transition', including the ones involved in current resource extraction, financial speculation and (neo)liberal thinking?¹⁰ How may, e.g., school curricula and think tanks learn from historical examples of change and alternative forms of future-thinking,¹¹ not only in terms of 'what went wrong', but also in terms of rethinking change and ideas of the future?¹²

How can we rethink sustainability by *decentring the human* as the sole or primary historical agent of change?¹³ This implies an attentiveness to non-human agencies and temporalities in the analytical framework.¹⁴ Which agents have been seen, by default, as making resource histories, and how may we alter our understanding of resource histories and futures by including in our analytical purview the relation between a variety of agents with different temporalities and temporal horizons?¹⁵ Such perspectives could facilitate new cross-sectoral partnerships¹⁶ and interdisciplinarity in research and education.

Key departments: SAXO Institute (history, archaeology, ethnology), Dept. of Communication (philosophy, media studies, rhetoric), Dept. of Cross-cultural and Regional Studies (religious studies, studies of ancient cultures, language-based area studies, cross-cultural studies).

Ecology and Culture

Different cultural understandings of human-environmental relations give rise to a number of questions concerning cross-cultural relations:

In what ways may *cultural differences* act as resources for and inhibitors of a sustainability transition? Do certain cultural and religious value systems – e.g. religious cosmologies, finance culture and consumer society – generate environmentally destructive practices,¹⁷ and do others provide alternatives to mainstream understandings of ecology?¹⁸ Also, what are the barriers (e.g., poverty) to producing the long-term values and aspirations that are key to any cultural (re)orientation?¹⁹

How are discussions of *cultural relativism versus universalism* related to issues of sustainability transition? If universalising development agendas were previously centred on making the world more civilised as opposed to savage (19th century), more modern as opposed to traditional (post-World War II),²⁰ and more liberal as opposed to socialist (end of 20th century),²¹ they now tend to be concerned with making the world cleaner as opposed to polluted.²² However, such simple measures often tend to overlook both the cultural resistance to universal solutions and the cultural biases that underpin them. How are such complexities addressed when forming new partnerships²³ or promoting green solutions?

How are questions of *scale* intrinsic to the ecological crisis and potential solutions?²⁴ The notion of scale raises questions about the discursive framing of ecological ‘problems’ and ‘responsible subjects’.²⁵ Which conflicts and solutions are brought into play by framing the crisis in terms of, for example, CO₂ emission or wealth distribution? Who benefits from such a framing? Such perspectives could be used to rethink discussions in national and international policy-making.²⁶

Key departments: SAXO Institute (history, archaeology, ethnology), Dept. of Cross-cultural and Regional Studies (religious studies, language-based area studies, cross-cultural studies).

Ecology and Aesthetics

In the wake of the contemporary rise in studies in ecocriticism,²⁷ speculative fiction,²⁸ resource fiction,²⁹ sustainability art,³⁰ and similar new trends in the broad field of art and literature scholarship, it has become apparent that artistic practices can function as harbingers of profound insight into how human agency is entangled with its surroundings. This gives rise to some interrelated questions:

How is the *experience* of ecological concerns processed in art and literature? Art and literature express, in a range of different forms, the worries and aspirations, the sensations and the affects, the rhythms and habits of communal living in a richly contextualised historical lifeworld.

How are experiences being articulated through particular *forms of imagination*? The fact that they give form to experience means that art and literature are media of imagination, as they effectively create forms – narratives, figurations, metaphors, genres – through which otherwise unexpressed concerns, feelings and anticipations can be assessed and circulated. How does art, by employing particular techniques of the imagination, form our ecological thinking?

How are such techniques *mobilised in climate action*, thereby creating new bonds and alliances between the often more distinct spheres of art and activism? How do new forms of activism challenge distinctions between fact and fiction, nature and humanity, and how may this inform research and sustainability transition? Such perspectives could facilitate new discussions in the culture industry, and among architects, environmental activists and scholars producing teaching materials.

Key departments: Dept. of Communication (media studies), Dept. of Arts and Cultural Studies, Dept. of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, Dept. of English, Germanic and Romance Studies (literature, art history, aesthetic studies).

Ecology and Communication

Communication occupies a central role in research about the crisis/transition. While there is long-standing scientific agreement about the severity of environmental problems,³¹ no such agreement exists in public discourse.³² Rather, debate takes place in a tense atmosphere, saturated with complex scientific propositions and apparently unbridgeable ideological and economic differences. In other words, the current crisis can be seen as a crisis of translation.³³ This gives rise to some of the following questions:

What are the *barriers to translating* scientific and ecological knowledge? In the study of climate communication, such barriers have been explained as the result of widespread misinformation, or attributed to 'false balance-coverage'³⁴ or 'motivated rejection'.³⁵ What happens when information is translated from scientific information to popular media, and from one language to the other? What roles do ideological interests play in this process of translation and reception? And how can the study of translation barriers feed into the development of curricula, new media platforms, and cross-cultural dialogue?

What are the implications of *new forms of digital mediation* for information about the environment? How do the new attention economy and phenomena such as pluralistic ignorance,³⁶ informational cascades, polarization and echo chambers influence ecological thinking and activism? With a view to finding new ways of communicating, questions like these will be explored, including through digital methods and in cooperation with media, civil society, organisations and industry.

Key departments: Dept. of Communication (media studies, rhetoric, philosophy), Dept. of Arts and Cultural Studies, Dept. of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, Dept. of English, Germanic and Romance Studies (linguistics, communication).

Activities

In close co-operation with researchers and research groups at the Faculty of Humanities, the director, scholars and staff at CAET will use the thematic clusters to approach the crisis/transition through activities that will mobilise interdisciplinary research co-operation and engagement with other organisations at Det Grønne Hus, a growing network of stakeholders, and the public. CAET will also collaborate with non-academic stakeholders to generate ideas for activities.

CAET's activities in Det Grønne Hus will be planned in detail once the CAET director and event organiser have been appointed, but activities will include the following:

Engaging

Inspirational talks by researchers or stakeholders for targeted audiences. 12 per year.

Open debates between practice-oriented sectors, politicians, and researchers on hot topics aimed at engaging the general public, including the media. 4 per year.

Feedback sessions at which new research ideas or stakeholder problems are discussed. 8 per year.

'Meet the professor' sessions at which researchers engage in direct or online dialogue with youth (high schools or youth organisations). 6 per year.

Educating

Online teaching modules in ecological thinking, aimed at university students (including from other faculties) and Open University students. 1 per year (start 2023).

International Youth Ambassador Training Programme in sustainable transition from a humanities perspective for high school students and youth organisations. 1 per year (start 2023).

International university summer schools on ecological thinking. 1 per year (start 2022).

Student internships at CAET working on outreach and with stakeholders on crisis/transition questions. 4 per year.

Student projects. CAET supports UCPH students by coordinating writing-up seminars and organising sessions to spur interest in ecological thinking. 4 seminars and 2 sessions per year.

Co-creating

'Laboratories' in which stakeholders get together with researchers to work experimentally on project challenges aimed at facilitating a sustainability transition. 2 per year.

CAET pop-up panels at which researchers and stakeholders co-develop expert-stakeholder discussion panels, used for events. Ongoing.

Podcasts exploring aspects of the crisis/transition, co-created by stakeholders and researchers. 2 per year.

Exhibitions co-created by researchers and students, together with artists and/or activists, in order to spur dialogue and make products for circulation. 1 per year.

Influencing

White-paper sessions at which researchers and stakeholders (e.g., youth organisations) draw up white papers on urgent environmental issues in order to influence decision-making processes. 2 per year.

Training series in applied ecological thinking for stakeholders. 2 series per year (start 2022).

Intra- and cross-cluster research seminars organised by CAET to facilitate interdisciplinarity and research co-operation at UCPH. 4 per year.

Research results will be presented and circulated by CAET. Ongoing.

Research workshops and conferences will be organised and promoted, with the aim of drawing on insights gained through CAET, to engage the wider national and international academic community. 1 per year.

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See also new research project at CCRS on Buddhism and waste, supported by Velux Fonden:
<https://veluxfoundations.dk/en/about/projects-granted#/0060X00000eVgQkQAK>

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