

## Editorial

What we now call environmental awareness looked different in the past and developed through various conflicts, events that expanded our knowledge (sometimes outright disasters), new observations and interpretations of nature, but also through national and transnational institutionalization. From this by no means exhaustive list of factors that ultimately drove efforts to regulate human intervention in nature, it is clear that there is an exciting and varied history to explore if we want to understand why we restrict certain environmental impacts today and accept others, and why the debates in different regions of the world and countries differ so greatly, even though they otherwise have many similarities.

Pesticides are among the best-known substances where the tension between their benefits for more effective agriculture and their harm to biodiversity and health is particularly striking and has therefore become apparent to many producers and consumers. So it is not surprising that proponents of pesticide use not only emphasized their benefits but also advocated as so-called responsible use, while those in favor of restrictions or even a ban often settled for deadlines for finding similarly effective alternatives or defined conditions under which the damage would be temporarily acceptable until the greater scourge (such as rampant hunger, inefficient or insufficiently commercialized agriculture) had been overcome. Both sides qualified their central arguments to a certain extent and did not appear 100 percent convinced that the current use would continue indefinitely. The debate took place in these gray areas between meandering discourses. What remains is the impression in the public mind and among historians looking back that the road to a ban on the most dangerous pesticides is long and winding and that the movement toward it has been particularly slow. However, what we can learn from the case studies, and this is not entirely dissimilar to the current situation surrounding other, sometimes completely different problems in the relationship between humans and nature, is the diversity of the actors and their interests, the complexity of the institutional arrangements,

and the (remarkably long-term) influence of individual personalities at the center of the debate on the use of pesticides.

All of this contributes to the impression of considerable contingency that stands in the way of the stringent convictions of each individual interest group. The case studies gathered in this issue resist overly simplistic interpretations that offer clearly favorable conditions for progress in combating pesticide use and, conversely, unfavorable conditions under which little movement in this direction would be expected. This historical lesson may fuel pessimism among those who advocate factors they consider favorable, but it also raises hopes for unexpected changes in a history that is not lacking in surprises.

It is interesting to note how, in the debate on the presence of pesticides, awareness of the chain character of agricultural production, which is often organized across national borders, has developed. While some were concerned about the health risks to consumers, others fought for lower chemical exposure for workers in the fields. In this way, transregional ties came into focus, at least temporarily, and nurtured a view of the world that could no longer turn a blind eye to the consequences of growing productivity in distant regions, preferably former colonies. It became apparent that only such a comparative perspective could develop enough clout to make more efficient regulation possible. But the reference to regulation also shows that we have not yet really found a way out of the dilemma that arises between the demands for a rapidly growing food supply through industrialized (and therefore also chemically based and, as far as possible, monoculturally organized) agriculture on the one hand, and a massive reduction in the ecological footprint of humans on nature on the other. In the best case, regulation means making impact assessments more scientific and organizing political compromises between different interest groups. This problem will surely be with us for a long time to come.

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