The Challenge of Scaling

Studies in Environmental History are faced with the challenge of taking into account different scales that influence their object of research. The local or regional is always partially determined by other scales, such as state institutions, laws, policies and supranational regulations. At the same time, it has its own logic through unique environmental conditions, technical arrangements, organizations, informal ties between people and their particular relations to the environment they inhabit. The challenge lies in reconciling the facts that the local is both a special, irreducible place, but also subject to a multiplicity of overarching influences from which it cannot be disconnected.

Environmental History has the potential to question and revise the traditional scales that are commonly used in historiography, namely the nation state and its subsidiary levels, which are still often times taken for granted. Rivers, pollen, soil or foxes do not respect state borders. Environmental historians, accordingly, construct new scales, which cut across the commonly drawn boundaries. Yet, these cannot be ignored because their existence is established and, when in doubt, enforced by powerful actors, even if they do not exist a priori.
In the project E05 “Salinization and soil degradation as a threat to agrarian orders” at the Collaborative Research Center 923 “Threatened Order – Societies under Stress” at the University of Tübingen, researchers from the disciplines of Contemporary History, Eastern European History and Anthropology work on three case studies on Australia, Russia and Central Asia. The case studies focus on the local and regional, and reflect their national and global context.

We are also interested in comparing similarities and differences across political and economic boundaries in the 20th and 21st century.