

RIVERS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

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The project

The *Anthropocene* is a concept coined by Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Crutzen to describe the hypothesis that we are living in a new era in which humans are altering the planet to such an extent that we are leaving a permanent and irreversible mark on the earth's biological, hydrological, atmospheric, and geological systems.¹ The Anthropocene as a concept is useful because it encapsulates the growing evidence base that the interaction of human interventions with the natural world has driven huge changes whereby formerly resilient ecosystems have been pushed into altered and degraded states. *Rivers of the Anthropocene* seeks to bring together scientists, humanists, social scientists, artists, policy makers, and community organizers to begin a new type of discussion about humans and their river environments — one in which specialists can speak across disciplinary and professional boundaries; one in which the methods and scholarship of each field informs the others. Only by bridging the humanities, human sciences and earth sciences are we likely to discover sustainable solutions to the complex environmental problems that we face in the 21st century.



The project addresses a fundamental problem facing scholars and policy makers alike: despite important advances in our understanding of the earth as a system we have yet to create an approach that brings together scholars of earth systems with scholars of human systems. This is to the detriment of our overall understanding of global ecological change and limits our ability to respond to escalating crises. As humans continue to play an increasingly significant role in altering their planet, it is incumbent upon environmental scholars to understand the human-environment interface in all its complexities. It necessary that academics work hand-in-hand with specialists in human systems to understand the limits and feedback mechanisms that beliefs, practices, ideologies, social structures, and cultural norms impose on human action. A comparative study of international river systems (River Tyne and Ohio River) allows us to begin building more meaningful bridges across the science-humanities divide. Phase 1 of the *Rivers of the Anthropocene* project (2012-2015) had as its core objective creation of a flexible, interdisciplinary methodological and conceptual framework for examining the human-environment interface, one in which specialists in the earth sciences can learn from the approaches of the humanities and human sciences and vice versa. Phase 2 (summer 2015 -) involves taking this forward and building a sustainable network of researchers to work on the multi-faceted subject of the Anthropocene.

¹ Paul J. Crutzen (2002), 'The Geology of Mankind', *Nature*, 415, 23.