Audit of Research Activity in Irish Environmental History

Goals and Remit of Audit
As part of work towards establishment of the Irish Environmental History Network (IEHN), an audit of researchers in the major Irish research institutions was conducted, utilising online profiles provided by each institution. This was undertaken between mid September 2009 and mid October 2009. Its remit was the identification of researchers with interests in Irish environmental history or related disciplines, whether explicitly stated in their research interests, or clearly implicit in their disciplinary focus or publications record.

The results of the audit were further intended to:

1) Inform discussion regarding the establishment and directions of the IEHN.
2) Identify notable centres of activity and research foci.
3) Establish a database of relevant contacts for establishing and promoting the IEHN.

Missing and insufficiently detailed profiles introduce some uncertainty in terms of exact numbers of relevant persons per institution or discipline, but the results may be considered broadly accurate for the intended purposes of the audit. Full, temporary and part-time teaching and research staff were examined for each institution. Research postgraduates were not included because surveying the large numbers per institution within an acceptable timeframe proved infeasible.

Our definition of environmental history, and what are considered related disciplines, is extremely broad, and therefore so was the remit of this survey. It looked to identify researchers in any discipline employing any method (e.g. scientific, archaeological, historic, literary) that examine how humanity has studied, perceived, managed and influenced the natural environment, and been influenced in return by the environment, in any period of the past. Under “natural environment” we included all aspects of the natural world, oceans and landscape.

Researchers by Relevance and Institution
8,848 total teaching and research staff listed online were assessed through their profiles, where available. These persons were drawn from 12 major Irish research institutions as shown in Box 1. 533 persons in total were identified as relevant, representing 6.0% of the 8,848 total. These persons were then placed on a simple scale of relevance, distinguishing between persons of direct relevance, moderate relevance, and marginal or potential relevance. Placement on this scale was often made intuitively based upon the sometimes scant information available in online profiles.

In general, persons considered of direct relevance were engaged in research with clear emphasis on aspects of Irish history and environment and the interrelations between both. In addition to persons working explicitly (or clearly but implicitly) on environmental history, those considered of direct relevance included researchers with emphasis on disciplines such as environmental archaeology and palaeoecology (e.g. in tracing human impact on the Irish environment and the development of early agriculture). Persons developing sources of direct interest to Irish environmental history were also included (e.g. dendrochronology, palynology).

Persons of moderate relevance were those working with an environmental emphasis and some minor historic emphasis, or vice versa. Persons of moderate relevance also included those whose stated disciplines implicitly considered aspects of both the Irish environment and history (e.g. landscape archaeology). Persons working explicitly on environmental history, but with non-Irish or only minor Irish emphasis were also included here. Persons of marginal or potential relevance
were those working with environmental emphasis with potential for an additional historic perspectives (or vice versa). Those engaged in research of contemporary issues of environmental and natural resource management were common examples.

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<th>Box 1: Twelve major research institutions surveyed in audit</th>
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<td>University College Cork</td>
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<td>Queen's University Belfast</td>
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Figure 1 presents total and relative percentage values of persons placed on the above scale. 118 persons were considered of direct relevance, representing 22.1% of the 533 total. 119 persons were considered of moderate relevance, and 298 persons were considered of marginal or potential relevance. These values represent 22.3% and 55.9%, respectively, of the 533 total. The number of persons of direct relevance clearly demonstrates the viability of an Irish environmental history network, particularly one employing an inclusive definition of environmental history and its concerns. An observation of interest is that very few persons explicitly characterised their interests or research as “environmental history”, even those whose work fell comfortably within a narrow remit of this disciplinary term (e.g. those writing environmental histories). As the discipline of environmental history continues to flourish in the United States, continental Europe and elsewhere, it is likely that more Irish researchers will explicitly describe their interests and research activities as environmental history or relating to this.

Those identified as being of moderate and marginal or potential relevance represent a combined 4.7% of all 8,848 persons surveyed. This is a considerable number, and highlights the potential for the IEHN to promote the concerns of those engaged in environmental history and closely related disciplines in Ireland, and attract new researchers to these disciplines. It is reasonable to assume, for example, that the conclusions of those engaged in research on past strategies (or lack thereof) for the management of natural resources will be of interest to those whose concern is the contemporary management of such resources. It is also recognised that persons are engaged in relevant research in institutions and organisations beyond the 12 surveyed here.
Figure 1: Total persons identified on scale of relevance.

Figure 2 presents first the total number of persons surveyed in each of the 12 institutions, ranked by decreasing values. The total number of persons identified as relevant per institution is then presented. This is followed by the percentage of total staff surveyed per institution, represented by relevant persons. The totals surveyed per institution cannot be expected to perfectly reflect the totals actually employed in teaching or research per institution. Efforts were made to attain as complete coverage as possible, but this is limited to those staff listed online during the period of the survey. However, the totals likely provide a reasonable reflection of the number of research and teaching staff per institution.

An important observation is that relevant persons were identified in all 12 institutions surveyed, regardless of the differing disciplinary emphases of these institutions. This reflects the broad remit of environmental history and the many disciplines where relevant work may be undertaken. It suggests the potential for an Irish environmental history network to promote communication between major Irish universities and colleges. The number of persons identified as relevant does, however, vary widely between these. TCD and UCD had the highest numbers of relevant persons. This is unsurprising given that both had the highest number of staff surveyed. The difference between TCD (with 91 relevant persons identified) and UCD (with 141) is notable, particular as TCD had a higher number of surveyed staff.

Total numbers of staff surveyed per institution is not the only control on the number of relevant staff, as suggested by the number of relevant staff as a percentage of totals staff per institution. UCD has the highest percentage of relevant staff (i.e. 9.8%) but NUIG (8.4%) and QUB (7.5%), amongst others, also have notable percentages. Percentages in institutions such as MIC (7.1%) and SPD (6.4%) are also notable, but partly reflect the greater contribution of relevant staff to the lower totals surveyed. Percentage and absolute values should be considered together, in terms of identifying those institutions with the highest relative concentration of relevant staff and those institutions whose staff can make the greatest contribution to an Irish environmental history network in absolute terms.
Figure 3 presents the number of relevant staff identified per institution but distinguishing between numbers identified as being of direct relevance and those of combined moderate and marginal or potential relevance. The most notable observation is that the proportion of persons identified as directly versus moderately/marginally relevant within institutions can vary markedly. Although QUB and UCC each have 61 relevant persons identified, for example, the percentage of these identified as directly relevant is 42.6% in QUB but 18.0% in UCC. This is suggestive of specialism in disciplines particularly relevant to the concerns of Irish environmental history in certain institutions.
Researchers by Disciplinary and Sub-disciplinary Subject Areas

Some knowledge of the disciplines and sub-disciplines of persons identified as relevant in the survey is of interest in helping to identify research specialisms relevant to Irish environmental history. This may also be of use in helping to identify emerging disciplines as well as those currently receiving least attention. Box 2 presents a list of 26 headings representing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary subject areas derived from the stated explicit and implicit research foci of relevant persons.

An attempt has been made to make this list as inclusive as possible, whilst avoiding a proliferation of headings representing research foci and interests of particularly small numbers of the 533 total relevant persons. This task is not straightforward. For example, a single person might comfortably fall under several headings, whilst others defy easy classification. In this respect, a strict policy is adopted in placing each person under one heading only. Some headings appear relatively general (e.g. human geography) in comparison to other appearing more specific (e.g. waste management and pollution). This partly results from the nature of the available information (i.e. headings were not predetermined as might be the case in a questionnaire survey) and also the existence of sub-disciplines with sufficient numbers to merit dedicated headings.
It was felt that 481 (or 90.2%) of all 533 relevant persons were engaged or had stated interests in research that could be legitimately placed under one of the above 26 headings, leaving 52 persons currently unclassified. Figure 4 first presents the total number of persons classified per heading, ranked in decreasing order. It then presents the number of persons per heading considered of direct relevance, and thereafter the number of persons considered of combined moderate/marginal relevance.

![Figure 4: Relevant persons classified by subject area and relevance.](image)

The heading literature, nature & environment has the most persons identified as relevant, with 57 such. This includes persons researching the genre of travel writing, where historic accounts and journals kept by travellers are often known to possess valuable observations of nature and the environment. It also includes those engaged in ecocriticism, in simple terms examining the representation of nature and the environment in a range of literary genres. This might fairly be classed as an emerging subject area of growing importance. However, in terms of the number persons under this heading considered of direct relevance, a different picture emerges, with a total of 14 such persons only. This reflects the fact that most persons under this heading were interested in travel writing that does not specifically relate to Ireland.
Environmental health is the next most populated heading, with 41 relevant persons identified, researching the influences of numerous environmental variables upon human health. However, only 2 (or 4.9%) persons classified under this heading are considered of direct relevance. This arises because the vast majority of persons are focused upon contemporary issues of environmental health, with generally little historic emphasis. The difference between total persons per heading engaged in research considered of direct relevance and moderate/marginal relevance is even more striking for the heading natural resource management, with all 36 persons considered of moderate/marginal relevance. Both these examples suggest areas were an historical perspective might make a useful contribution.

The heading natural philosophy/science history is notable in terms of absolute values, with 40 persons identified as relevant and 12 (or 30%) considered of direct relevance. The heading palaeoecology is notable in terms of the proportion of persons considered of direct relevance (i.e. 10 of 14 persons, or 71.4%). The contribution of geographers, historians and archaeologists initially appears small, in absolute terms, but this is a product of the chosen headings. For example, those within the overall discipline of archaeology are found under the headings landscape & settlement archaeology (with 29 persons), miscellaneous archaeology (14 persons), environmental archaeology (8 persons) and maritime archaeology (6 persons) for a combined total of 57, 25 or 43.9% of which are considered of direct relevance.

Concluding remarks
The results of the audit presented above suggest that an Irish environmental history network can be regarded as highly viable with regards to the number of persons engaging in directly relevant research in Ireland. Furthermore, significant numbers of relevant persons are identified in many of the institutions surveyed, and in numerous disciplines within these institutions. Environmental history is by nature interdisciplinary and in the above context a network is likely to serve an important function in providing a point of contact between researchers from different institutions and in diverse disciplines who may otherwise have little meaningful contact.

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