

Notes from the Icehouse



Academics in Action: The Legacies of ICEHO's First Two World Congresses

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It is just over a decade since the emergent International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations (ICEHO) hosted the First World Congress of Environmental History in Copenhagen in August 2009. So great was its success that ICEHO gained immediate recognition as a bright new star in the international constellation of scholarly bodies. The most obvious legacy of this first WCEH was the formation of a robust formal international consortium of regional and specialist environmental history societies.

The Second World Congress, held in Guimarães in 2014, consolidated this development and left two important legacies of its own. ICEHO was fortunate to have a solid application to host the congress from Domingos Bragança, the Mayor of Guimarães, a city in northern Portugal. He had immense support from the regional University of Minho, and its Rector, Professor Antonio Cunha, as well as a strong Local Organising Committee chaired by Professor Estelita Vaz, Dean of the Faculty of Science. The congress theme, 'Environmental History in the Making', was appropriate because the University of Minho – established as a technical university in 1973 – had no strength in academic environmental history. Not only did the congress aim to encourage and nurture this discipline, but also to highlight the fact that the city and region had an extraordinarily rich envi-

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ronmental history that deserved international celebration. Guimarães had already been recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (2001), Cultural Capital of Europe (2012), and European City of Sport (2013). Appreciating and recording its environmental history would enhance these honours.

The first significant legacy of the 2014 ICEHO World Congress was the publication, by Springer in 2017, of two volumes entitled *Environmental History in the Making* edited by Estelita Vaz, Cristina Joanaz de Melo and Lígia M. Costa Pinto. These books, with 49 contributions, epitomised the excitement and variety of environmental history, consolidated the intellectual streams that had already emerged, charted many of the future directions of the discipline, presented fascinating information from almost every part of the world, and celebrated an historical understanding of the environment that nurtures and sustains humanity on earth.

The second legacy of the 2014 Congress was both extraordinary and extremely rewarding for ICEHO. During the congress an important Round Table provoked lively discussion of the question: 'A Green City: Impossible Dream or Necessity?' Attended by many local academics, civic administrators and the public, the panel grappled with a potential legacy of the World Congress: how to utilise the passion of the moment to work with the city of Guimarães to assist its transformation into a sustainable green city. Central to the probing debate was how the environmental history of Guimarães might mesh with the technicalities of modern environmental thinking. Thus, the Round Table explored whether, and perhaps how, Guimarães might use the application process for European Green Capital (EGC), a competitive initiative of the European Union (EU), to ensure its environmental future in accordance with international best practice.

With the enthusiastic support of the mayor and the university management team, the people of Guimarães were mobilised for an EGC application for the 2020 selection adjudication. With the bold aim of transforming the 150,000 inhabitants of Guimarães into 'eco-citizens', the Mayor appointed a large consulting panel – a Mission Structure – led by an Executive Committee and Project Coordinator. This included councillors, administrators and university experts in various fields, some of whom had been involved in the ICEHO World Congress. This group was tasked to study and to complete the complex application form required by the EU. Citizens were invited to public meetings to deliberate on environmental improvements and positive change; the popular newspaper, *Guimarães Mais Verde* [Greener Guimarães] galvanised citizen involvement; schools prioritised environmental projects; new parks and riversides were developed ecologically; transport was reconfigured; and innovation in planning and construction was supported. The Mayor also appointed a Scientific Advisory Committee, comprising Mohan Munasinghe, ICEHO World Congress keynote speaker and former Vice-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; Will Wynn, former Mayor of Austin, Texas, an architect and energy expert; and three environmental historians, ICEHO members, Mauro Agnoletti, Verena Winiwarter and Jane Carruthers. To-

gether these committees developed the powerful conviction that environmental awareness and change should be generated from the 'bottom up', by citizens and local leaders, rather than from 'top-down' international sanction or regulation.

One of the first city initiatives related to European Green Capital was the publication of a quarterly bulletin that publicised the city's environmental endeavours and invited public comment. Issue No. 4 of March 2016 reported on an international conference on 'How to Build a Green City' that attracted large audience. One of the participants was ICEHO's Jane Carruthers who spoke on the topic 'From UNESCO World Heritage to a sustainable city'. She was interviewed for *Mais Verde* as illustrated here.

The pride with which the entire city – adult citizens, committees, schools and learners, voluntary associations – adopted the EGC application process was remarkable. The idea of adding 'Green Capital of Europe' to its already long list of accolades and making Guimarães the outstanding and most prestigious all-round city on the continent proved irresistible!

The EGC award is decided by a jury on the basis of twelve environmental indicators that include waste management, water supply and treatment, air quality, mobility and energy, climate mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity, and transport, among others. In addition to these technical issues, the human elements of environmental history, and the commitment, enthusiasm and attitude of citizens



Figure 1. Guimarães Mais Verde.

Figure 2. Pay as you throw (PAYT)



were regarded as being critically important in any drive for excellence. The city used the EGC application not only in hope of securing the prestigious EGC designation, but also to ensure that it became a model of urban sustainability and environmental resilience well into the future. This was an extremely exciting initiative and one in which ICEHO was pleased and honoured to take part.

The committees met regularly, and the Scientific Advisory Committee helped to shepherd the city's application towards gaining the coveted award. Mohan Munasinghe suggested 'Mais que Verde', (More than Green), adding an element to the city's slogan 'Mais Verde' (Greener) to guide the city towards the United Nation's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. This encouraged all involved to consider a longer perspective than the EGC award alone. The roughly bi-annual meetings of the Scientific Advisory Committee included visits to many projects that had begun in the quest for the EGC award, for example, the freshwater treatment facility and reservoir on Mount Penha, a travelling theatre bus that visits schools to give performances on environmental issues, an innovative Pay As You Throw (PAYT) waste collection system that encourages recycling and regular collection in the historic city centre (no unsightly bins on the streets), and a living science centre in the restored Couros leather tanning area.

Guimarães introduced a smart new waste management system in the historic centre of the city in 2016: Pay as you Throw, or PAYT. At regular intervals dur-

ing the day, and according to a schedule, an electric vehicle collects refuse bags that are put out on the street or handed to the vehicle operator. The collection of recyclables is free, and thus with PAYT citizens pay only for the garbage they produce. This was one of many initiatives that earned Guimarães Portugal's 'Best Municipality of the Year' in 2017. Not only does this system reduce waste, but it has encouraged a civic community spirit as waste collectors and residents meet on the sidewalk and discuss waste removal and other matters of public concern.

In this complex municipal area of 48 local entities there are immense opportunities for environmental history. Human use of the environment and its natural resources date back to the Bronze Age and the area has been utilised by successive communities until the present. The polycentric metropolitan fabric is diverse – agricultural, industrial and urban – and welding the large municipal area into an environmentally resilient whole was a large part of the challenge.

After three years of hard work – and a great deal of prior preparation – the application from Guimarães for EGC 2020 was submitted in October 2017. The outcome was announced by the EU in April 2018, coincidentally during a Mission Structure meeting that I attended. The disappointing news that Guimarães was not among the shortlisted cities came during a vibrant student Eco-Parliament and, for a short while, there was an extremely gloomy atmosphere in the room and around the city. There had been thirteen applicants for EGC 2020, and the three short-listed cities were Lisbon (also in Portugal and eventually declared the winner), Ghent (Belgium) and Lahti (Finland), all of which had previously been shortlisted, some more than once. Guimarães had been placed fifth.

However, it did not take long for people to recall the Mayor's often-repeated assertions that the EGC prize was only a vehicle, or template, for creating Guimarães as a future green city with a robust circular economy: it was not the sole objective. Spirits lifted. By evening – when citizens gathered at the conference centre of Vila Flor to hear spontaneous presentations by young and old about the importance of contributing to an environmentally sustainable city, and were buoyed by Mohan Munasinghe's presentation that emphasised the importance of looking forward with hope rather than reflecting on past disappointments – the civic community was ready to move on and to address the full implementation of the SDGs for 2030, with enthusiasm.

In the local government elections of October 2019 Mayor Bragança was returned to City Hall with an increased majority, and many in the region believe that his commitment to the environment played its part in his successful campaign. His new team of senior councillors is perhaps even more dedicated to continuing the process of making Guimarães a 'green' city and has wholeheartedly taken up the 'more than green' mantle. The Mission Structure has not been disbanded and the process towards environmental sustainability will continue unremittingly

Reflecting on this process, and ICEHO's involvement in it, what was the most significant aspect of the EGC application of Guimarães – although this was not a box that could be ticked on the application form – was how the process changed

the attitudes of thousands of citizens through a people-centred rather than technocratic approach. People who had not much thought about these matters became committed eco-citizens. The growing understanding that *their* environmental history – the long story of integration with the very region on earth where they lived – had a significant role in that transformation.

Academics have a responsibility to take on the role of public intellectuals as well as research scholars, and to make a difference to the larger societies of which they are part. For ICEHO, being invited into the heart of Guimarães and to have been able to contribute to making that difference has been a rewarding experience and an honour for the organisation. Through its chosen representatives as well as its broader commitment to the value of environmental historical understanding, ICEHO can make its mark as an example of what is possible – and increasingly necessary – for the wellbeing of our planet.