

The Environmental Humanities in Japan: A Status Report

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Abstract

Despite over a decade of individual scholarly engagement with environmental humanities (EH) research and teaching, the field has had no institutionalized programs in Japan until recently. This paper documents the creation of three interconnected initiatives at Aoyama Gakuin University that have elevated the visibility of the EH: the AGU Environmental Humanities Forum (established 2021), an intra-university research unit on more-than-human imagination and narrative (2022-25), and Japan's first EH certificate program for Masters students (launched April 2024). These three initiatives serve the distinct but complementary functions of networking, research, and pedagogy, respectively. A significant barrier to EH's adoption in Japanese higher education is the general perception that environmental topics are overtly political and ideological rather than properly academic. The Forum counters this impression by showing that EH accommodates a wide range of intellectual approaches beyond environmental advocacy. It fosters open debate and collective, slow modes of collaborative scholarship, and seeks to provide a "safe place for unsafe ideas" (Gurian). It prefers organic emergence, figured by the spiderweb, over top-down planning (as the umbrella metaphor often suggests). This model of development may provide a useful model for academic cultures where environmental humanities scholarship faces cultural and disciplinary resistance.

Keywords

ecocriticism, environmental pedagogy, interdisciplinarity, slow scholarship, storytelling

As an academic professor in Japan, I have been strongly involved in the Environmental Humanities (EH) for over a decade. I have participated in numerous projects (including one at UCLA, initiated by Ursula Heise during the 2014-15 academic year¹), published several articles and book chapters for a Japanese-speaking audience,² and served as a co-editor of the Routledge Environmental Humanities series with Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson (since 2019). Nonetheless, for a long time, my involvement remained at the level of individual academic activities and did not bring about significant institutional change to higher education in Japan. As the survey article “Teaching the Environmental Humanities: International Perspectives and Practices” noted in 2019, there were “no specifically named EH teaching programs” in Japan or Asia more broadly (O’Gorman et al. 432), in stark contrast to Australia and North America, where one program after another was being created.

However, my situation changed in 2020 after moving to the English Department at Aoyama Gakuin University (AGU), in the center of Tokyo. Once at the AGU, I was able to help exploit the high potential of the department to facilitate bringing EH to Japan, in terms of both research and education. In this paper, I will introduce the three projects I initiated at AGU that have been instrumental in bringing about this change. Chronologically, these are the AGU Environmental Humanities Forum, the intra-university research unit regarding EH, and Japan’s first EH certificate program for Master’s students. Each of these projects has a different focus—namely, of networking, research, and education, respectively.

These projects would not have been possible without the rich and diverse academic environment of AGU’s English department, which is one of the oldest and largest English departments in Japanese higher education, with over thirty faculty members in six tracks. My understanding of this department’s significant potential to support EH was based on the fact that EH graduate programs in the United States have often been initiated by English departments. Thus, I started to publicize EH to my university colleagues via presentations, publications, and everyday conversations.

I will explain the development of EH at AGU in chronological order. My first year at AGU was during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited my in-person interactions with colleagues. However, during my hour-long online presentation about my research as a new faculty member, I took the opportunity to introduce EH to the department; I explained its significance in research and education, proposing that we create an EH community at AGU. While my talk was well received, few

¹ <http://environmental.humanities.ucla.edu/>

² Examples include Yuki 2017, 2018, 2022.

colleagues seemed interested at the time in working to build an EH community. In later talks with individual colleagues whose research interests seemed to me to be clearly related to EH (e.g., issues of gender, race, and romanticism), I realized that their hesitancy was mainly based on their misplaced belief that their research had nothing specifically to do with the “environment.” This made me realize that the idea of “environment” is often defined more narrowly than what I had become accustomed to through my own work in EH.

In 2021, however, three colleagues from the English Department, and two from other departments, joined me when I started the AGU Environmental Humanities Forum (hereafter, the Forum). As I will explain later, I have intentionally kept the Forum’s atmosphere open in order to help our colleagues understand that EH scholarship does not necessarily entail direct environmental advocacy.

I soon realized that, to help develop EH in a more substantial manner, we needed more robust interactions to complement the loose networking of the Forum. With a generous intra-university research grant from the AGU Research Institute, I created a research unit with my initial five colleagues from the Forum. Notably, the six of us have different areas of expertise (namely, Japanese literature, British literature, African American literature, soundscape design, semantics, and ecocriticism). Together, we worked on a three-year research project on the broad topic of “more-than-human imagination and narrative,” with the aim of publishing our results.

Finally, since the Forum and the research unit were led primarily by faculty members rather than students, I subsequently worked to help create an EH certificate program for MA students majoring in English at AGU. We did this in collaboration with scholars in the arts and humanities from Meiji University’s Science and Technology department, as well as with scholars in anthropology and international cooperation from Rikkyo University’s Intercultural Communication department. The three graduate programs at AGU, Meiji, and Rikkyo then established a credit transfer system, which laid the foundations for Japan’s first EH program, launched by the three universities in April 2024.

I would like to provide a few more details about each of these projects. The AGU Environmental Humanities Forum is supported by AGU’s Institute for Humanities and started in April 2021. The Forum hosts about ten public talks per year, given online by either a member or a guest speaker. In most cases, this is a one-hour session, held on Saturday mornings from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. It is short, informative, and invigorating; the Forum members seem to like this style and time, as it does not sacrifice too much of the weekend or cut into the work week.

As an organizer, I aim to keep the Forum “loose and suggestive,” following what American writer Wallace Stegner suggested to Cheryl Glotfelty when she set ecocriticism in motion in the early 1990s (Glotfelty xxii). I believe this open format helps colleagues to appreciate that issues of the environment are large in scope and can be addressed through diverse approaches, and that this diversity, in turn, can foster interdisciplinary thinking. So far, I believe that it is working.

In addition to online study sessions, the Forum occasionally holds in-person talks and meetings. For instance, the Forum hosted a public conversation between the anthropologist Okuno Katsumi from Rikkyo University, the comparative literary scholar Suga Keijiro from Meiji University, and myself. As the three of us had laid the foundation for an EH certificate program at each university, the event aimed to publicize EH to students, faculty, and the general audience. In it, we discussed what EH is like, what it does, and how it could help to recalibrate higher education. We also used this public discussion as an informal launch for the EH certificate program, which I will describe below.

The Forum also plays an important role in facilitating international collaborations in EH. For instance, the Forum served as a contact point for AGU’s participation in the “Asia-Norway Storytelling Network” (ANEST) project, funded by Norway’s INTPART (International Partnerships for Excellent Education, Research and Innovation) and initiated by Finn Arne Jørgensen at the University of Stavanger. Specifically, the Forum facilitated student and faculty exchanges as well as their participation in ANEST conferences, which were held at National Taiwan Normal University in October 2023 and at the University of Stavanger in August 2024. Graduate student exchanges between the University of Stavanger and AGU had a tremendous impact on AGU doctoral students, who gained valuable experience as independent and responsible early-career scholars in a different academic environment and culture.

In turn, the research unit is focused on more-than-human imagination and narrative. With a three-year grant from the AGU Research Institute, the six Forum members (including myself) engaged in discussions on the implications of the idea of more than human and how it recalibrates our notion of humanity in a way that can actively and creatively challenge our own areas of expertise. The research unit was not intended to unify perspectives but rather to create a common ground to critically examine received conceptions of the human, which is at the core of EH (Rose et al. 2). The results of this research were published in October 2025 as a book comprising

articles by members and collaborators, alongside contributions from the public conversation on EH mentioned above.³

The research unit also aimed to establish common ground for instigating institutional change toward an EH graduate program. We maintain that meaningful changes in the education system require the passion and commitment of faculty members. Active discussions in the research unit, as well as the loosely-structured, evolving activities of the Forum, have been integral to the development of the EH certificate program for Master's students.

As EH is interdisciplinary by nature, I envisioned that an EH teaching program with courses from different departments would be optimal, especially as several research topics from different departments are related to EH. We had a minor bureaucratic obstacle at the start: AGU did not allow graduate-level credit transfers between different departments at that time. However, our administration implemented a work-around which in fact led to a larger impact. By adapting an existing system that allows students to mutually transfer credits between English departments of twelve universities in Tokyo, they made it possible to allow transfer of credits across different departments within the partner universities. As Meiji, Rikkyo, and AGU are included in the Tokyo-based inter-university credit transfer system of English departments, we adjusted it to enable credit transfers between Meiji's Science and Technology with an emphasis on the humanities, Rikkyo's Intercultural Communication, and AGU's English departments. Thus, Japan's first EH certificate programs were launched at AGU, Meiji, and Rikkyo in April 2024, with the aim of fostering interdisciplinary thinking while building on each department's strength. The joint EH certificate programs benefit from the central location of the three campuses in Tokyo, each only a short train ride from the others. For example, students may study ecocriticism at AGU, ethnography at Meiji, and multispecies anthropology at Rikkyo. Earning a program certificate requires completion of at least ten credits across the three universities.

According to the 2019 article on international trends in EH (O'Gorman et al.), EH can be described as a spectrum. At one end, "there is a view that EH should function as something like an umbrella, gathering up existing approaches within subdisciplines like environmental history, environmental anthropology, and ecocriticism—leaving these approaches essentially unchanged" (O'Gorman et al. 443). Borrowing Jesse D. Peterson's words, this type of EH takes the plural in

³ The book, published by Minerva Shobo, is entitled: *More than human no monogatari: kankyo junbungaku 10 no seekuense* (*More-Than-Human Stories: A Sequence in Environmental Humanities*).

“humanities” seriously (Peterson 68-69), encompassing multiple disciplines without necessarily merging them into a single enterprise. At the other end of the spectrum is “a notion that EH is interdisciplinary not just in the sense that it brings scholars of different disciplines into dialogue, but that it transforms their disciplinary approaches in some fundamental ways” (O’Gorman et al. 443). This is what Peterson calls the “singular” form of EH.

If EH as a plural can be compared to an umbrella, then what about EH as a singular? I would propose the metaphor of the spider web: EH as a singular and interdisciplinary enterprise is something that emerges organically, without being planned in advance. I previously compared EH to a platform, but that is misleading, as a platform implies a stage deliberately prepared in advance for the participating scholars. While EH has been rightly referred to as a matrix, as in Heise’s work, I would like to propose that the metaphor of the spider web better captures the emerging transformation, creativity, and resilience of interdisciplinary EH. A spider web takes shape before you even come to notice it, a quality that well captures the idea of emergence. Webs are also ubiquitous—from forests to the eaves of houses to the corners of city buildings—mirroring the wide-ranging topics of EH, from local environments to urban ecologies, from a sense of place to a sense of planet. Although I initiated the EH projects at AGU, I now witness a spontaneous networking that extends among and beyond the members of the Forum. To me, this process is like the unexpected joy of discovering a stunning spider web.

To conclude, EH at AGU can be characterized by three features. First, it is deliberately loose and suggestive. This openness in our activities has led to spontaneous rather than unified thinking. Second, it is slow and collective. As Hannes Bergthaller et al. note, EH is a form of “slow scholarship,” as research in humanities requires time for thinking across different scales in time and space.⁴ Also, it takes time to develop EH, as interdisciplinarity is not something that can be imposed by fiat but must emerge organically. Third, EH at AGU provides a safe place. In Japan, humanities scholars tend to avoid topics related to the environment, perhaps because these topics are considered overtly political and ideological and thus not properly academic. In other words, within the Japanese humanities, discussing topics related

⁴ One of the arguments that Bergthaller et al. has made is that humanities, with its emphasis on reflections and interpretations, is not compatible with the corporate ideology that has seeped into some universities. This point is further elaborated by Catherine Karkov, who advocates slow scholarship and is seriously concerned that the current trend of scholarship is “a product like any other that it can be assigned a monetary value and be bought and sold for a financial profit” (Karkov 7).

to the environment can seem academically unsafe. While I will not explore this idea further here, I would like to suggest that providing “a safe place for unsafe ideas,” to borrow the phrase from the art critic Elaine Heumann Gurian, has been crucial in developing EH at AGU.

I believe that the Forum, the research unit, and the EH certificate program have brought tangible changes to the institutional profile of AGU. Notably, these changes were made possible due to full institutional support, including financial assistance. As noted above, the research unit was supported by a generous grant from AGU’s Research Institute during its three-year research period. The Forum, in turn, has been operated as a project of AGU’s Institute for Humanities, which provides a small but sufficient annual grant to maintain the website and host guest speakers. Because the Institute for Humanities is a part of the College of Letters—comprising five departments, including English—I often announce the Forum’s events at a faculty meeting attended by all eighty full-time members. Even though only a few faculty members from the College of Letters have actively joined the AGU EH Forum, most faculty members are likely aware of its activities. This broad visibility is likely one reason why the Forum—which first seeded the research unit and later the EH graduate program—has continued to receive institutional support. Thus, in the case of AGU, it seems that a loose and open academic environment has provided the foundation for substantial institutional changes, which in turn are shaping EH as a research topic in Japan.

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