

# Introduction to this special issue “The history of urban water management in the Baltic Sea Region”

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of development requires us to evaluate the interaction between societies and the environment from a long-term perspective. The past is the only source of long-term empirical data on the environmental impact of different societies. Environmental history studies the long-term interaction of nature and societies, and it provides new insights into the questions posed by the need for sustainable development.

Accordingly “The Sea and the Cities” was launched as a project whose goal was to write an environmental history of the cities, the history of pollution and protection of urban sea areas in the Baltic Rim over the past century. The project was carried out in 1996–1998 with support from the Nordic Council of Ministers. It was co-ordinated by the University of Helsinki. Local experts and students in the following cities participated in the project: St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Gdansk, Kiel, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki. The three main topics were long-term development of urban water and waste water technology, reconstruction of pollution and eutrophication histories, and successes and failures of municipal environmental politics.

This special issue of European Water Management presents for the first time the history of urban waste water treatment and purification in Northern Europe in cities that differ in natural, technical and socio-political conditions and national context. Although pollution problems affected medieval towns, modern sewage systems and industrialisation caused dramatic effects that were hitherto unknown. In the beginning of the 20th century the rapid growth and modernisation of the towns, the rise of the “networked city,” cities with technical networks to control the flow of energy, materials and people, transformed the traditional social water problems into modern environmental problems. The large cities became the first major “hot spots” of the Baltic Sea.

The role of cities in environmental history has been controversial, for even though they were sources of problems, they also looked for solutions. The cities allocated considerable economic and intellectual resources to resolve environmental problems earlier than any other institution. Recycling of waste was seriously studied and many long-forgotten technical solutions were proposed and tried at the end of the 19th century. Cities conducted the first serious natural scientific studies of water pollution. In addition, they built the first mechanical, chemical and biological wastewater purification plants. Consequently, urban watercourses have

been recovering notably during recent decades. It can be claimed that the contemporary network of thousands of municipal wastewater treatment plants has improved the state of our environment perhaps more than any other single innovation of environmental technology.

Unfortunately, the history of water pollution control in Europe has been almost completely neglected. Nevertheless, the aforementioned development in European cities and their watercourses may be understood only with help of a historical perspective. Therefore, research is needed to make future professionals aware of the long-term dynamics of environment and environmental protection.

In addition to the need to understand the prevailing systems, we should consider alternative strategies and rejected technical solutions on waste and wastewater management (for example earth closets, irrigation fields and pneumatic systems) from the 19th century up to today. What were the visions of the past for the future European city?

We invite all those who are interested in studying the environmental history of your own city to contact us. If you have or know about unique historical material (archival sources, plans, data, sewer maps, books, photographs or films) which you wish to be used for scientific or educational purposes, please inform us.

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