

Alumni Newsletter

Autumn 2021



Welcome to the Durham Geography alumni newsletter. This is another wonderful opportunity to engage with our alumni and to tell you about our exciting research initiatives, educational developments and how the Department continues to transform lives. And, as always, we are enjoying hearing from many of you about how being at Durham Geography helped your careers.

This newsletter comes at a time when we are dealing with some uncertainties, but also some very exciting opportunities. The external context is forever shifting and the new academic year brings with it increasing national and international competition, continuing uncertainties concerning the impacts of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased government scrutiny of Higher Education and its funding model. The University also has the exciting prospect of welcoming a new Vice Chancellor in the new year, the return of staff and students to campus, and the implementation of new Health & Wellbeing and Digital Strategies. One of the main concerns of Durham Geography in the aftermath of a challenging 18 months is to ensure that we continue to foster an inclusive environment in which all of our students can thrive.

We greatly appreciate the growing number of you who are supporting us in our work with employment talks to our undergraduates, with online profiles to give our current and future students a feel for the amazing things a Durham Geography degree makes possible, and with other forms of help. Many thanks.



Professor Cheryl McEwan
Head of Department

What's In This Edition?

- The year ahead
- Student achievements
- Research spotlight
- Alumni career talks
- Alumni lecture series
- History of the Department

The year ahead

Greetings from Durham as we start the academic year. Students are now back in Durham and, after a very long hiatus, this is starting to feel like a vibrant university again.

A new teaching year

Still, some things are definitely not the same. Both students and staff are coming to grips with ways of delivering modules that are very different from what you might remember from your time at Durham. At the moment we have about 30 students who have elected to study online-only this year; many of these are currently unable to travel to the UK, and this option allows them to start the academic year from abroad before they join us at some point later on. Over the summer the University invested in a number of 'Owls', small cylindrical devices with a speaker, microphone, and 360 camera, which allow us to stream lectures from our teaching rooms to anywhere in the world over Zoom or Teams. Teaching sessions are already recorded so that they can be played back by the students at any time – that uses an entirely separate system, with its own microphone and video feed. We have also replaced DUO with a new virtual learning environment – the software that students can use to access all of the materials for their modules, post questions, and hand in their assignments – and both staff and students are trying to figure out on-the-fly how to use the system most effectively. It's all a very long way from the days of showing up to lectures with a carousel of slides or a stack of transparencies.



Professor Alex Densmore
*Deputy Head of Department
and Alumni Lead*

Challenges and opportunities

The changes to A-level assessment earlier this year have meant that some universities, Durham included, have taken in many more first-year students than expected. For us, this has resulted in a first-year group of c. 360 students, our largest-ever cohort. While the University has been busy finding places in the colleges, we have been thinking about how to adapt our teaching programme to support this group, from first-year tutorials through to dissertation support and field trips in years two and three. Our teaching team, led by Jeff Warburton as Director of Education and John Thompson as head of the Learning and Teaching Office, have done an outstanding job over the summer of getting us in position to welcome our students to Durham.

All in all, despite the uncertainty, there is tremendous excitement that we are back to some sort of face-to-face interaction, both with each other and with our students. Most of us, staff and students alike, are delighted to be back in the classroom. Our larger cohort is also a great opportunity for us to diversify the ways in which we teach geography. We are cautiously starting to plan a return to field trips, starting with UK trips and some overseas trips in the spring. Other field-based modules are in the works. Online assessment and online exams are here to stay, and we're starting to explore some of the possibilities that those formats give us – things we just couldn't do when everything was handed in through the hatch at the department office. It's an exciting time.

Staying in touch

Over the course of this year, we'll also be trying out some new ways of letting you know about what's happening in the Department. Over the last 12 months we have completely overhauled our alumni website; many of you have already contributed to the new site, and we'll keep exploring ways to make those stories more accessible and more visible on the site. We're also trialling ways of keeping you connected with current research in the Department – for example, through the research project spotlight further down in this newsletter. The next talk in our alumni lecture series is coming up on 4 November, when Prof Erin McClymont will talk about how bird vomit can teach us about palaeoclimate in the Antarctic. Please keep an eye on our social media outlets for full details about this and other activities. We always love to hear from you, and you can get in touch either through the website or by emailing gg-alumni@durham.ac.uk. Many thanks as always for all of your contributions to the Department!



Student achievements

Each year the top undergraduate dissertations from across the department are nominated for a variety of prizes in human and physical Geography. These prizes are adjudicated by working groups from the Royal Geographical Society and other learned societies. We have an excellent track record of winners in these awards and 2020 was no exception. All the dissertations that have received recognition as truly exemplary undergraduate scholarship from 2020 are below.

2020 Dissertations

Nominated Prize	Student	Dissertation Title	Result
Space, Sexualities and Queer Research Group	Katy Simms	No one wants to meet the love of their life on Tinder: Investigating the effects of mobile dating apps on love and intimacy and identity negotiations for bisexual individuals	Winner!
Race, Culture, and Equality Working Group	Emma Brown	Making Sense of the Stolen Generation: An exploration into the logic underpinning the removal of Aboriginal children	Joint runner-up
Rural Geography Working Group	Dylan Inglis	Do Basque Speakers Value Nature Differently? A Q value analysis of value systems relating to the forests of the Eastern Basque Country	Winner!
Quaternary Research Association Undergraduate Dissertation Award	Ellie Day	A Sedimentological Reconstruction of the Glacial History of Happisburgh, Norfolk, through Marine Isotope Stage 12	Winner!
British Hydrological Society	James Lockwood	Assessing the transfer of heavy metal contaminants from Yewthwaite lead mines into the Newlands Catchment Area	Winner!
Participatory Geographies Research Group	Harriet Jennings	What to wear? Exploring the sartorial practices of young Bengali women in an age of transnational fashion	Second place

You can keep up to date with all our student's awards and achievements via the website:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/geography/undergraduate-study/undergraduate-highlights/>





Research Spotlight

The Geography Department is world-renowned for the quality of research produced by the academic staff and we would like to give you a little flavour of some of the research being undertaken currently in the department. In each newsletter we will be highlighting one or two projects to showcase the excellent work being driven by our team of academics and researchers.

Fragile Heritage Ecologies: Vernacular cultures and the at-risk landscapes of the Hindu-Kush-Himalaya (HKH) mountains

Professor Mike Crang, AHRC Funded



This project aims to develop a participatory and inclusive framework for mapping the natural and cultural heritage of mountain communities in the Hindu-Kush-Himalayas. The areas selected for study are important sites historically and culturally that are facing risk and loss due to the effects of climate change in the form of changing land/water patterns and frequent destruction caused by flash floods and landslides. The communities settled in the HKH mountain region have a heritage of adapting to cultural and physical movement. Traces of the ancient Silk Road connecting China to South Asia can be spotted, where exchanges of material and immaterial cultures, left legacies in language, forts, inscriptions, practices and ideas, and show the affinities with the greater Karakoram region connecting Afghanistan in the West; Khirgiz and Uirgus in the North and, Baltistan and Himalayas in the East rather than the Pakistani nation state. Both the natural and cultural landscape are historically unstable and in motion.

Heritage conservation work in Pakistan is limited to celebrated archaeological sites and forts within settlements, whilst little or no attention is given to living cultural heritage that forms the life and livelihoods of these mountain communities. Here, heritage is practiced, is lived and in-the-making, allowing us to move away from the lens of 'conservation' to think about adaptation (how communities renew their relations with cultural landscape). This project develops a participatory framework where local/host communities co-develop the process of understanding risk and loss, document the practice-based and oral heritages, and the vernacular spatial patterns (pattern language and architecture) in their landscape in order to:

- 1) assess risks to traditional ways of life and their heritage due to climate change
- 2) offer guidance on management of vernacular heritage.
- 3) offers a deep mapping that combines the natural and cultural heritage interacting with each other, which is how they are experienced by local people.

Sustainable Consumption, the Middle Classes and Agri-food Ethics in the Global South.

Professor Mike Crang, ESRC Funded Project.

Expanding middle class consumption in global South countries is seen simultaneously as providing a potential stimulus to global economic growth and a threat to environmental sustainability. Given that, promoting sustainable and ethical food consumption spaces and practices in the global South are of critical importance yet remain under-researched and poorly understood because most studies base their analyses on 'ethical' consumers situated in the global North.

This research evaluates the mobilisation and practice of sustainable consumption in the global South through an examination of systems of food provision and regulation, everyday consumer habits, and trends and fashions in food consumption drawing on three case studies: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Guangzhou, China; Johannesburg, South Africa. It asks what values drive ethical choices for the global middle classes, not just Anglo-European ones, and what is their vision of 'good' food and their ethical concerns.



Street art and the social meaning of masks

Professor Cheryl McEwan, British Academy Funded

This project aims to develop a participatory With collaborators in Uganda and the UK, Professor Cheryl McEwan has been leading a COVID-19 Special Research Grant funded by the British Academy to explore "The meaning of masks in the COVID-19 pandemic: a comparative study of depictions of mask-wearing in public visual arts in Eastern Africa and the UK". In the context of the pandemic, the project seeks to fill a gap in understanding about the social significance and cultural meaning of mask-wearing in different political, cultural and geographical contexts, and of why people choose to wear or not wear face masks.

With governments around the world regulating mask-wearing in public spaces to prevent contagion, the COVID-19 outbreak has had unexpected consequences, including face masks becoming a now-iconic image of the global crisis. They have become simultaneously valuable commodities, fashion items and, in the case of political leaders who have refused to wear them, a focus for debates about 'toxic mask-ularity'. In cities around the world, as public spaces were closed down, graffiti artists, street artists and muralists began to take over these spaces and create images of mask-wearing, using their artworks to express public health information, support of and dissent towards governments, and hope and solidarity at a time of fear and uncertainty. The project demonstrates that through their use of concrete and virtual spaces, street artists in both the UK and Eastern African countries are in a unique position to raise awareness of the pandemic, and to inspire debate and dialogue about issues of fear and stigma relating to disease. It highlights the role of street art in community building, resilience and recovery during the pandemic. It also demonstrates how geographers can play an important role in creating a better understanding of what face masks mean to people in different places and what challenges there are relating to people's willingness to wear them during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Street art and public health messaging in Mathare informal settlement, Nairobi, Kenya

Alumni Career Talks

Our Alumni Career Talks allow graduates of the department to come back and speak to current students and show them what they can do with their Geography degree. They also allow our alumni to show students how they have used their experiences at Durham to shape and direct their careers.

We cannot run these talks with you, our alumni, getting involved. They are of huge benefit to our students who get so much direction and positivity from listening to the achievements of our alumni.

Please do get in touch with us if you would like to get involved as we run these talks 3 times per academic year if possible and if we have the support from our alumni.

Going forwards, we will be running a mixture of face to face and online events via Zoom, for those who cannot maybe get back to Durham to allow extra flexibility to get involved.

You could also get involved by pre-recording your experiences on video and we can then show this to students at one of our talks as part of the event, so a great way to get involved even if you cannot make it on the day due to commitments or perhaps time differences around the globe.



Alumni Lecture Series

Our Alumni Lecture Series gives our current academic staff the opportunity to showcase their research to you and let you know of the exciting work being done in the Department.

Earlier in 2021 we were delighted to host a talk from **Dr Noam Leshem** who talked about his research on 'No Man's Land'

On Wednesday 3 November we welcome **Professor Erin McClymont**, who will be talking about her research on how Antarctic sea ice ecosystems respond to climate change so please join us if you can.

All talks are available to watch via our website if you missed them.



The next talks scheduled in for the series are:

- 3 November 2021: **Professor Erin McClymont** on Antarctic sea ice and climate change
- April 2022: **Dr Simon Englehart** on Evidence for earthquakes and sea-level change in the north western USA
- November 2022: **Professor Louise Amoore** on how algorithms shape our lives.

The talks are in the evening and last approximately 1 hour with time for questions and discussion and will be delivered online.

Find our more:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/geography/alumni/alumni-lecture-series/>

History of the Department

Durham Geography has a tradition of education and research stretching back to 1928.

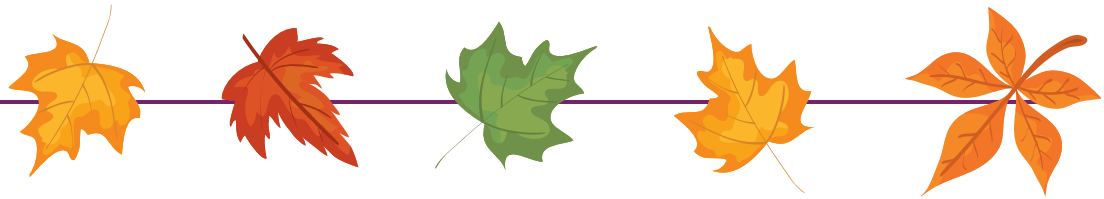
We have spent the last 3 years creating a written history of the department, reflecting the diversity of intellectual themes that we have worked on (and often pioneered) and the range of people who have passed through the Department over the years. The work was led by Professor Ian Simmons – very well known to many of you, who compiled and gathered not only his own experiences and memories, but those of many other past members or staff and students. We are very grateful for all the contributions made to help create this history.

Link to the History:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/geography/alumni/the-department-through-time/department-history/>



Stay in touch



We love hearing from our alumni and there are many ways you can get involved. Please get in touch with our alumni team (gg-alumni@durham.ac.uk) to find out more about how you can continue to be involved in the Department

- **Alumni Careers Talks** – tell us how has your Geography degree helped your career? Come back to the Department (whether in person or virtually) and speak to our students about your experiences.
- **Alumni Lecture Series** – a series of online events giving an opportunity to hear one of our world renowned Durham academics speak about their research.
- **Student Employability Mentoring** – individual mentoring for students who need career advice.



- **Internships and Placements** – make students aware of placements or other opportunities within your organisation.
- **Research and Projects** – get students involved in specific projects to make use of their skills and help them develop new ones.
- **Apprenticeships** – let students know about apprentice places or sponsorship of apprentice places within your organisation.
- **Alumni profiles** – answer a few questions about your time at the Geography Department and where your degree has taken you in your career, and join our other alumni in the profile section of our website. This can be in written form, or why not create a short video of yourself and give us a tour of your work place?
- **Reminiscing** – do you have any old stories or anecdotes and even some old photographs that you would like to share and we can include on our website and social media?

Contact Details

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