

4th WORLD CONGRESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Panel Deep04 - Forest, time and society

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Fire acceleration and dissonances in forest plantation economies

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Fast running fires in mountain slopes, super-hot and unpredictable flames, branches of trees blown by strong winds transporting fire from a hill to the next, all illustrate the acceleration of fires as these were evoked in Serra de Monchique and Serras da Lapa e Nave (Portugal). As part of a research project seeking to historicize fires, we listened to farmers, foresters, firefighters, shepherds, among others, who told us about other accelerations, like the rapid-growing plantation trees and booms of after-fire sprouting plants; the movement, lights and noises of trucks, helicopters, cameras and drones used to document and fight the flames; the piles of lines and numbers in reports, calls, contracts put together to prevent fires and deal with material damage, among other site-specific accelerations related to strategies of evacuation, grief and trauma. This landscape on the rush has overthrown the slow burnings of the past. People used to grow multiple slow-growing trees with diversified uses which, together with fire, reproduced livelihoods based on agriculture, cork and resin extraction, distilling and pastoralism. Fire jumped out of a time frame marked by seasons, which allowed for the reproduction of modes of fire control with soil, tools, and time; and has been immersing into a performative immediatism dependent on water, high-tech machinery, and digital technology. In dissonance with this acceleration, however, experiences of slowness and distancing are reported by several people in, for instance, compensation programs and political uses of fire, which ultimately aggravate the effects of the new time of forest fires.