

History

HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

The study of history examines past events, processes, and structures and creates references to the present and the future. It looks at social structures in the fields of culture, politics, and economics, and, by examining specific examples, tries to reconstruct and analyse human activity of the past. At the University of Bern, importance is placed on discussing different perspectives critically. Examining the past in this way should make it possible not only to gain knowledge about earlier times, but also to derive potential forecasts for the future and possibilities for development. The study of history thus analyses local to global events and how they change through the ages [1].

How is history linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Studying history may also involve examining the development of the sustainability discourse. History can explore which patterns of thought existed in the past with regard to sustainable use of resources and the environment in general [2–5]. How new (or old) is the phenomenon of wanting to meet our needs while considering the needs of future generations? History can seek explanations for why things are the way they are, including with regard to sustainability.

As we shall see below, the topic of sustainability is addressed within various sections of the University of Bern’s [Institute of History](#). One of the subdisciplines – Economic, Social, and Environmental History – analyses the multitude of interactions between people and their natural environment. It asks, for example: What landscapes have been cultivated and where have people chosen to settle? How have they used natural resources? How have they been adapting to climate change and dealing with natural hazards? How have perceptions of nature and the environment changed over time? [6]

Example: Land reclamation through the ages

Worldwide there is not a ready availability of usable land. It is a scarce and precious commodity, and is therefore often made usable at great expense, in many cases at the cost of nature and the environment (**SDG 15**). Prominent examples are deforestation in the Amazon (**SDG 13**) or the construction of dikes in the Netherlands and artificial sand islands in the United Arab Emirates (**SDG 14**). In Switzerland, too, land has been reclaimed in the past in a variety of ways, many of which have been harmful to nature: Take land-clearing in the Middle Ages and in modern times, major river corrections in the 19th century, the drainage of the Seeland region, or the “cultivation battle” during World War II (**SDG 2**). Such interventions produced economic and social successes on the one hand (**SDGs 8, 1, and 12**), but they also placed a heavy burden on the environment and reduced biodiversity – just like many interventions do today. Measures are increasingly being taken in Switzerland to try to repair some of this damage to the environment, for example through renaturation.



How does the University of Bern's Institute of History incorporate sustainability into research and teaching?

The University of Bern's Institute of History, in 2005, was one of the first in Europe to introduce Economic, Social, and Environmental History – reflecting the “sustainability triangle” – as an integrative subdiscipline in the history curriculum. The Professorship in Environmental History and Historical Climatology – likewise a first in Europe – was established in 2010 and has since been replicated elsewhere, for example at the University of Oslo, where it has existed since 2018 [7]. The University of Bern employs a broad range of approaches and courses in its teaching of economic, social, and environmental history. Through diachronic analysis, lectures examine the development of the idea of sustainability from a *longue durée* perspective. Topics include forest and water use, agriculture, anthropogenic changes to the landscape in general, climate (change) and natural hazards, food, human–animal interactions, tourism, transport, and mobility. Approaches range from global comparison to area studies focusing on the Alps, for example. Seminars, proseminars, and exercises focus on case studies and certain individual topics, often combined with student project work or excursions. Sustainability-related topics are particularly prominent in courses that examine gender history or migration history.

Overall, sustainability-related topics are well incorporated into teaching at the Institute of History. The approach to this is interdisciplinary: courses are often co-taught in cooperation with other disciplines, such as Geography, Archaeology, Social Anthropology, Literary Studies, or cultural sciences such as Art History, Musicology, or Theatre and Dance Studies. Both interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are key to the discourse on sustainable development.

The student body is also diverse in terms of the disciplines studied, especially as most of the courses are open to students of the Centre for Development and Environment's Bachelor Minor or Master Minor in Sustainable Development. Student theses on sustainability topics in history are often (jointly) supervised by experts from different disciplines.

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Layout: Simone Kummer (CDE)

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Version 1.0

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This document was compiled within Project 7.9, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), of the University of Bern. Project 7.9 supports the Vice-Rectorate Quality in incorporating sustainable development into teaching at the University of Bern. Project 7.9 focuses on disciplinary and interdisciplinary connections with sustainable development, helping the faculties and institutes to identify these connections and make them visible to a wider audience.

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