Teaching Local Anthropology on Climate Change: Ethnographic Field Schools at Lake Neusiedl, Austria

December 2023

ctg

Teaching Local Anthropology on Climate Change: Ethnographic Field Schools at Lake Neusiedl, Austria

Franz Graf

2023

Teaching Local Anthropology on Climate Change: Ethnographic Field Schools at Lake Neusiedl, Austria[1]

Franz Graf [*]

This paper aims to present field schools as a crucial tool in teaching the anthropology of climate change. Field schools provide students with insight into conducting ethnographic research within real field situations. Students can thereby gain experiences that cannot be replaced by traditional classroom lectures and readings. People learn through experience in practice, and scientific methodology is no exception. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu likens the research dynamics of the groundbreaking study on social suffering in the Parisian Banlieues to the artist's and craftsman's workshops of the Quattrocento. In a collaborative setting, a group of learners closely worked together under the guidance of an experienced craftsman.[2] My argument is that this praxeological approach can also be part of teaching ethnographic fieldwork and the core methods of anthropology. I will start with a short vignette from the latest field school, conducted with my co-teacher Gertraud Seiser. Then, I will address the need for integrating field schools into anthropology curricula. Next, I'll show what field schools can look like specifically, and highlight three aspects of the added value of this type of training, before illustrating the implementation of field schools by building on several interconnected aspects: First, real-world situations lay the foundation for learning the skills of participant observation in ethnographic research. Second, the specific embedding in research sites through field schools enhances interdisciplinary competence. Third, local collaboration is not confined to academic circles and also involves local institutions and ordinary residents. Finally, I'll summarize and emphasize the necessity of early integration of students into ethnographic fieldwork.

The experiences of students matter. To me that became evident in a conversation with Alois Herzig, a 77-year-old natural scientist, which was conducted as part of a field school on the perception of the environment at the National Park Lake Neusiedl in the summer semester of 2023.[3] The question concerned the history and development of this cross-border national park from the perspective of the involved actors.

> How should we best begin? Well, I have to start with myself, because my historical review, that I myself experienced, begins in 1966. So, as a student, on excursions down here. Because at that time, the main part of the excursions was within the realm of zoology, botany Burgenland.… At most a bus would have been chartered, and then these 30 folks were carted down here [from University of Vienna to Lake Neusiedl, about 70 km] and then we would walk around the *Long Lake* [Lange Lacke] or somewhere else observing birds. … That's how it was: we made our excursions down here, and that was essentially my introduction to this region![4]

[*] Franz Graf is a CRG-IWM Visiting Fellow 2023, Fellows Program Coordinator, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and Lecturer at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna

Afterwards, Alois Herzig wrote his dissertation on Lake Neusiedl as part of an international project and later on, he took over the management of the Biological Station. Today, he is a retired civil servant but still holds the position of scientific director of the National Park, which was founded nearly 30 years after his first introduction to this region, "when it all started." And he is not an isolated case. For many natural science students, excursions and seminars served as their entry point into this region and into their disciplines. Some of them still work there today, for example, Georg Wolfram (researching water and fish ecology), Bernhard Kohler (leading the World Wildlife Fund projects in the region), Thomas Zechmeister (a biochemist and the current director of the Biological Station), and Erwin Nemeth (an ornithologist responsible for the region at BirdLife Austria).

What I am trying to convey is that their experiences in early excursions not only made a significant contribution to their professional training, but also led to a profound identification with the region. An example of this can be seen in their contributions to the German publication *Das Ende des Neusiedler Sees: Eine Region in der Klimakrise. Herausforderungen. Perspektiven. Lösungen* (The End of Lake Neusiedl? A Region in Climate Crisis: Challenges. Perspectives. Solutions [My translation]).[5] Along with many others, they discuss the impacts of climate change on an already water-sensitive region with a hot Pannonian climate. Let's delve into what, in my opinion, led them to identify so deeply with a particular area. From their early days as students, they were shaped by field trips, learning to see things up close, to perceive them differently. They were sensitized to aspects they had previously not observed in such an intense way, leading to a more nuanced perception. They underwent specific and concrete experiences that caused their opinions to shift. The longing for participation, for being "in the thick of things," of experiencing involvement in something they can find meaningful, are feelings that students in the natural sciences share with anthropology students, indeed probably with many students.

Urgent Need of Early Ethnographic Fieldwork

I am concerned that university anthropological programs do not sufficiently fulfill their responsibility to provide young students with such experiences. There is consensus that participant observation constitutes a cornerstone of anthropological practice.[6] However, the pedagogical and didactic tools to teach this craft are often under-utilized. Frequently, methods courses fall short in providing the necessary skills beneficial for developing and honing a craft. In his evaluation of U.S. anthropology departments, John P. Hawkins' *The Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School as a Research Method* found that only around 2-4% of B.A. students receive sufficient method training in real research locations.[7] Proper training often arrives much too late, sometimes only during doctoral studies, when students confront ethnographic fieldwork through a lonesome process of trial-and-error. The narrative of the rite of passage that makes the solitary traveler into an anthropologist is still prevalent[8, 9] and probably a relic of the discipline's imperialistic and colonial history. There are certainly many excuses as to why adequate method training through the framework of field schools cannot be implemented comprehensively: the considerable time commitment that opposes the publish-or-perish pressures within faculties; the efforts associated with adequately supervising young students in specific field situations; the reservation of colleagues that working with students does not pay off; and the financial costs involved, as well as the related risks to the university, students, and the research field.[10] According to Hawkins, the repercussions can be severe:

> We should equip our discipline's undergraduates with the mentored skills that we argue help deal with the cultural and situational variation sure to come in their futures. If we do not so equip our students, the discipline will surely wither.[11]

Hawkins is spot on, though I intend to raise the stakes even higher: In an era characterized by profound transformations driven by manifold social and ecological crises, the discussion transcends the boundaries of a single "discipline." This issue is intertwined with the symbolic and material fields that constitute the future of all of us. How can we implement a setting for students that makes field research experiences with "real people in real places at real times"[12] an early part of their education? This will be the focus of the next section.

Field Schools in the Curriculum at University of Vienna

Field schools refer to a teaching and learning approach that involves conducting research as part of a course curriculum. Students are given the opportunity to work on real-world problems and gain hands-on experience while being supervised by instructors or mentors. The focus is on providing students with practical skills, as well as enhancing their critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical abilities. Ethnographic field schools aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice by connecting students with a concrete field site and exposing them to methodologies and techniques in anthropology. Students are introduced to various forms of qualitative and ethnographic research and are provided practical training in these methods. This includes learning different interview techniques, forms of data collection, participant observation, archival work, and documentation.

However, and this is the point, good ethnographic practice cannot be reduced to the implementation of techniques in the belief of yielding useful results. Instead, "[a]nthropological fieldwork is the subject in practice."[13] The craft of participant observation is a profoundly social endeavor, laden with pitfalls and both personal and intellectual challenges. This requires a delicate touch that is best learned through an apprenticeship, akin to other modes of imparting a craft. This can be contrasted with formal education models that often rely on explicit instruction and standardized tests. In ethnographic research, the focus is on social skills, as well as implicit, practical, and context-dependent knowledge. These are acquired through direct participation and interaction in social and cultural fields. The learner gradually takes part in increasingly complex tasks, often with a blend of observation, imitation, practice, and feedback.[14, 15]

According to Hawkins, a stay of more than five weeks is necessary to conduct field schools.[16] However, experience shows that a total stay of three weeks within the semester, especially with repetitions in subsequent semesters, can also be very successful. Two stays spaced approximately a month apart have proven very effective. In this schema, the first stay is dedicated to getting to know the region and its institutions, establishing contacts, having intensive discussions with experts, developing research questions along a shared theme, finding suitable interview partners, and identifying further opportunities for participant observation. The intensive data collection phase is prepared based on this initial immersion. The explorations, impressions, and conversations garnered are intended to inspire the students to develop small, independent projects around a shared theme. During the second and longer stay, empirical data collection takes place. This structure, while intense, provides a scaffolded approach to fieldwork, allowing students to gradually build their skills and confidence while contributing to a collective understanding of the region and its inhabitants. The cyclical process facilitates a learning where students can apply insights from their first visit during the second, enhancing the depth and richness of their research.

In addition, there are regular group meetings for discussion and reflection, as well as individual meetings with teachers for more specific advice. Students and teachers learn both with and from each other, sharing their thoughts, experiences, and ideas, and expanding their comprehension through dialogue—a fundamental dynamic of anthropological practice that can only be learned on-site. Ethnographic encounters are discussed, interviews and transcripts are thoroughly examined in the group; intensive and critical reflections become part of the apprenticeship process.[17]

Since 2002, over 100 field schools have been conducted at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. Since 2011, nearly 800 M.A. students have attended. To my knowledge, there is unfortunately not yet a record of how many students have continued their research as part of a Master's thesis or dissertation. Currently, four field schools are offered per academic year in the Master's curriculum, two to three of which usually take place outside Austria and one to two within Austria.[18] What they all share is an appreciation for the fact that a local context is indispensable for learning the craft of anthropology. I will delve into why this is the case in the next section by using as example the particular field school in the Lake Neusiedl area during the summer semester of 2023.

Learning in Local Contexts

> [W]hile anthropological theories sprout, mature, and wilt like annual flowers, Malinowski's (or Boas's or Cushing's) way of gardening–the basic field method and its theoretically informed write-up–has endured…. Fieldwork, then, is the discipline's *axis mundi* of data acquisition, theory probing, professional formation, and generational succession.[19]

Climate change has now become one of the most crucial frameworks for understanding and analyzing diverse social phenomena: inequality, displacement, corporate power, political movements, environmental destruction, and much more, cannot be fully understood without it.[20] However, it is important to maintain focus on regional variations. The ethnographic method provides the opportunity to reveal local impacts and responses, highlighting their differences and similarities. Through detailed accounts, we can illustrate how planetary problems hold different meanings for people in various locations, invoking diverse strategies of dealing with manifold challenges.

What ethnographic fieldwork adds to other social science approaches is that conceptual insights are not only gained through internal academic debates but through active engagement with local experiences and worldviews. Through direct engagement with the lives of others through an extended immersion in the research field, students confront a diversity of perspectives. Participant observation also means building relationships with a wide range of different people. From the formulation of research concepts to data collection and writing-up, ethnographic fieldwork is invariably intertwined with interaction and integration within a complex social field. Students need the flexibility to respond to the unanticipated and the openness to follow aspects of research that become relevant only through the close contact with a concrete field. The specificity and multiplicity of a field, the diversity of its social actors, can only be discerned upon examination up-close. The social details—the specialty of anthropological disciplines—only reveal themselves on site; fine distinctions and variations in practices, discourses, and attitudes cannot be identified from afar. Therefore, students who are learning this craft must do so where these profound experiences are possible.

An example: In the summer of 2022, when Gertraud Seiser and I were planning the implementation of the field school for the summer semester in the Lake Neusiedl area, we were

taken aback by a sudden media presence of our research site. Concurrent with reports about the dramatic manifestations of climate change all around the world, Austrian newspapers regularly reported on Lake Neusiedl. Topics included the historically low water level, fish deaths, and the planned infrastructure construction for the diversion of the river Danube to "save the lake." Lake Neusiedl was deemed the "Patient Zero," the Austrian harbinger of climate change. Upon our first explorations, the local population immediately confronted us and our students with the highly emotional "water issue": farmers were concerned that they might be prohibited from irrigating their crops; ornithologists feared they would no longer be able to observe migratory birds on the shallow lakes; and boat operations and tourism businesses were worried about their earnings. The complexity of the situation became apparent only after intensive discussions with local experts during the first field visit.

The lake itself is only one aspect of the regional issues. The "Sea of the Viennese," as the lake has been dubbed since its colonization as a bathing resort in the second half of the 1920s (Békési 2007, 184),[21] or rather its low water level, is just a "problem of the Viennese." The more pressing concern for the region, however, is the truly pitiful state of the salt habitats. The soda lakes, unique and extreme biotopes, are characteristic of this westernmost fragment of the Eurasian steppe. The reason for their endangerment is a complex infrastructure built about 150 years ago for the diversion and lowering of the groundwater level. Increasing heat and the absence of winter precipitation intensify a problem that has persisted for quite some time. Other infrastructural measures, such as groundwater lowering wells for residential housing construction or unregulated groundwater withdrawals by industrial agriculture, intensify the situation.

Such was the intensity of the group's entry into the field. Students and teachers were thrown right into the middle of a locality where different interest groups have diverse ideas about issues like sustainability transition, climate change adaptation, and actions for a better future. The variety of perspectives and interests among the actors in the region constituted a significant component and challenge. Here, an advantage of collaborative research settings within field schools comes into play: on one hand, much more material is generated with students, and on the other hand, this material is multi-perspectival. The differences among the students in terms of gender, age, and social and regional background create diverse access points and a diversity of positioning. This can also lead to a variety of perspectives and a wealth of material.[22] For instance, one of the students, Marica Zvonarits, who herself comes from a farming background, delved into the question of how farmers, who irrigate their crops, perceive water and its management in this water-scarce region. To this end, she conducted extensive participant observations with agri- and viticulturists. Conversely, Vadym Yeremiichuk, who has a background in political science, explored the interconnections between tourism, nature conservation and politics. For this purpose, he compared two municipalities with very divergent approaches from a political ecology perspective: one pursuing bathing tourism, the other pursuing eco-tourism, with very contrasting attitudes regarding the question of the lake's drying up. Had the research questions been drafted on the drawing board in Vienna, rather than in the context of a real fieldwork setting, I am convinced that we would have deprived our students of a valuable learning opportunity.

However, this approach also presents challenges that vary depending on the locality and cannot be easily anticipated. Students' (and indeed, teachers') attitudes towards individuals and groups in the field must be consistently scrutinized and reflected upon. Ethnocentric perspectives, personal biases, and predispositions of both students and their milieu can greatly influence the research. These factors can either facilitate or hinder access to, and the mutual cooperation with, the local population of interest. This encompasses a wide range of areas that become relevant in

fieldwork, from dietary norms, language use, and gender conceptions, to political beliefs, and many others.

Anthropology draws its expertise from direct relationships with and proximity to local actors. This is the strength of the discipline that can be transmitted through a setting that puts students into real-world situations, confronting them with the complexity of social life. In this way they might be able to find an answer to the question posed by Akhil Gupta about exactly "how one does ethnographic research on climate change."[23] Our ethnographic methods are aimed at everyday phenomena in local contexts, and these only become accessible through on-site immersion. I want to emphasize that practical experiences in the field are crucial for students in order to bring local contradictions and particularities into dialogue with disciplinary approaches. Field schools at real research sites require students to respond to unexpected situations and challenges. Even a brief entry into the field allows for the learning experience of responding to unforeseen circumstances and developing the skill of maintaining openness and adaptability. This cannot be replaced by dry-run training.

Interdisciplinary Aspirations in Changing Climates

Gilbert Hafner, a wildlife ecologist and ornithologist, is responsible for data management and knowledge transfer at the Biological Station Lake Neusiedl in Illmitz. The Biological Station, run by the provincial government, is a hub for qualified microbiological, chemical, zoological, and botanical research. He welcomes us at the door and leads us through the low energy building. He shows us the library, the botanical and biological collection, and the bird banding station. Then we go to the boathouse, where under normal conditions, the boats launch to check the lake's hygiene measurement points. However, due to low water levels, this must currently be done by car. He takes us to the large, double-sided glass meeting room on the first floor. On one side, we can see into the labs where employees conduct chemical and microbiological investigations of Burgenland's bodies of water. On the other side, we look out over the wide reed belt and beyond that, Lake Neusiedl. The head of the Biological Station, Thomas Zechmeister, arrives and explains to us about LTER, an international network of research stations established in the US in 1990 for studying long-term ecological changes. Together with the National Park, the Biological Station is part of this network. Lately there has been growing a consensus that long-term ecological research (LTER) needs to include social, economic, and political aspects. The goal is to explore the long-term interactions between humans and the environment and promote sustainable development. There are only two LTSER platforms in Austria, with the "S" in the acronym signifying an additional focus on "social" scientific research. The existing LTER Platform at Lake Neusiedl also aspires to integrate social science research and collaboration into its predominantly ecological research, with the goal of transitioning into an LTSER site.[24]

During our first visit to the field, we were invited by the head of the Biological Station to participate in a cooperation with this local natural scientific stakeholder. At the beginning, that seemed to us like a stroke of luck. Knowing that ethnographic field schools can be most effective and successful when in a collaboration with local partners, we were exhilarated by the offer. Moreover, ethnographic research dealing with climate change requires an interdisciplinary approach. Anthropology can offer a perspective on the local realities; however, we need support to see the whole picture and to question our own biases and assumptions in the face of the global phenomenon of climate change.[25]

For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* leaves no doubt that with the advent of the "Anthropocene", a viewpoint that describes humans as separate from planetary processes has become obsolete.[26] Research into ecology, environmental history, and sociality are becoming close companions. Based on empirical engagements, some conceptual

approaches have proven to be very useful: "multi-species ethnography," "more-than-human sociality," or "politics of dwelling," among others. What becomes clear is that the classic anthropological understanding that we deal with people and their diverse "cultural worlds" on the one hand, while natural scientists deal with an ahistorical "natural world" on the other hand, is outdated.

Chakrabarty is right to point to Bruno Latour's "Critical Zone" concept as a potential approach for addressing the complexity of human and environment interactions. The "Critical Zone" concept represents the Earth's thin, life-sustaining layer and promotes the understanding that we have a responsibility to preserve life on Earth. Instead of viewing "the human" as a single entity, this approach highlights varied actions of multi-layered people. It relates changes in farming and tourism practices, drainage systems, or EU policies and subsidies to modifications in ecological factors such as nitrate levels, biodiversity, or bird populations. The idea is not to see humans as a singular actor influencing nature, but rather as part of a network of diverse actors, only some of which are human, that interact in different ways. This opens up room for interdisciplinary collaboration and alternative pathways for political action that a simplistic human-nature binary might not consider.[27] Here, a contextualized form of focus group discussions is a useful tool to bring diverse actors to the table and in discussion, allowing for a collective exploration of problem diagnoses, causes, and strategies. In this way, diversity and shared dialogue can be effectively leveraged.

An example of the empirical examination of a human-environment relationship is the work of Magdalena Langheiter during the field school. Her work explored the diverse and heterogeneous perception of reeds, a wetland grass widely spread around the shallow lakes in the region, by various groups of stakeholders. She included natural scientists from the National Park, the Illmitz fire brigade, reed cutters and other locals. "Reeds are not just reeds": they can be raw material, necessary habitat, severe threat, and a source of identity. Field schools can foster interdisciplinarity in anthropology. In our field school, this was undoubtedly enhanced by the high presence of natural scientists. They provided students with the opportunity to explore a wide range of topics and examine them from diverse perspectives. But engaging with real-world problems in any particular and "real" location makes interdisciplinary collaborations more likely. The dialogical principle of participant observation in field research also goes beyond discourse with other academic disciplines, which leads to the last main point of this paper that I will elaborate subsequently.

Transdisciplinarity as Genuine Dialogue

Field schools also contribute to the integration and comprehension of transdisciplinarity. They expand the scope of traditional academic learning by fostering collaboration and dialogue with local communities. Transdisciplinarity is here understood as a research approach that goes beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines or subject areas. It involves a form of collaboration in which students of anthropology work together with non-disciplinary actors (for example, from politics, regional institutions or civil society) to address complex, real-world problems. Transdisciplinarity offers the opportunity to combine knowledge and experience from different fields—not all of which are academic—to gain a more comprehensive view of local challenges and holistic approaches to possible solutions.[28] Addressing climate change requires a deep appreciation of local contexts and conditions and the question of how people respond to local impacts of global phenomena is of elemental interest to the anthropology of climate change. What is more, this affords ethnographic detail in showing a broad range of solutions anchored in local circumstances. Ethnography allows researchers to explore these nuances and can help to develop approaches that are tailored to the

specific needs and realities of local communities. It recognizes that a one-size-fits-all solution is unlikely to be effective and emphasizes the importance of engaging with and understanding the lived experiences of people who are directly affected.[29]

Transdisciplinarity is integrated into ethnographic field schools through three aspects: taking the perspectives of local actors seriously, being open to transformation of research subjects, and reflecting results back to the community. Firstly, as soon as students craft the research concepts they are already confronted with local needs, perspectives, and interests. The formulations of the perceived problems and research questions are generated in dialogue with non-academic actors in the field. Transdisciplinarity can not only be understood theoretically but also lived and applied practically through active interaction and collaboration. This requires the inclusion of diverse perspectives at the same eye level. This often comes as a surprise to scientists from other disciplines, as a staff member of the National Park pointed out. Concerning the question of water scarcity in the region, he could hardly believe how willing the local population was to talk to us. Often, their attitudes and opinions significantly contradicted those of the ecologists: The lack of water is not the only local problem. With recurrent heavy rains, there are rapid floods in the very flat region. Flooded basements and drowned crops are just two examples of the resultant issues faced by local stakeholders.

Participant observation aims for dialogue on an equal footing and sees respect and trust as crucial aspects of the ethnographic ethos: we want to take people seriously.[30] Thus, the focus is on studying socio-ecological entwinements specifically with people who are often disregarded by urbanites (and academics, for that matter) as being uninformed and easily swayed by politicians. However, it is critical to acknowledge that "ordinary people" have valid and justified perspectives on the world. Understanding and explaining these viewpoints is at the core of our discipline. While we may not necessarily share the same opinions, it is our responsibility to make a genuine effort to comprehend them. This process of understanding goes beyond mere language-based surveys and requires a deeper level of engagement that is ensured through ethnographic practice, which provides a unique lens for exploring the complexities of social and cultural phenomena.

Secondly, through the conversations that student researchers conduct in the field, through their questions and participant observation, the participants themselves are potentially transformed. They are confronted with content and topics they may not have considered before, and their perspectives are broadened, as are ours. Ethnographic fieldwork creates an additional layer of reflection for all involved. The cyclical process involved in the anthropological craft makes a significant contribution here: Unlike a "hit and run" paradigm, various phases of research are conducted in constant or recurring contact with the participants in the field.[31] This dialogical principle provides depth for the students and simultaneously turns the local population into active co-researchers. While benefiting from students' past readings and intellectual proofs, an exchange of information and experiences takes place. Also, the interlocutors' reliance on their local networks for providing access to further research participants strengthens local discourse about the phenomena under consideration. In turn, the local population's discourse about the students' projects can also support transdisciplinary agendas.

Anthropological field work may precipitate a shift in the locals' awareness, particularly during intensive ethnographic inquiries marked by extended interview sessions. Here, the act of researchers taking their time and genuinely listening can surface narratives that starkly diverge from those echoed at local gatherings, armchair politics, or inscribed within questionnaires and ballots. Participatory observations can further catalyze this, prompting individuals to deeply anticipate, reflect, and reconsider their own stances. A recurrent sentiment voiced by students was their astonishment;

contrary to their initial impression of usurping the locals' time, many were profoundly grateful for an unconditional listening ear. It's not merely through presentations and publications that something can be reciprocated, but also in the very process of appreciative research itself. Of course, implementing a transdisciplinary approach also presents challenges, particularly with regard to positions of power and interests. This applies to both the socio-economic conditions in the field, as well as potential ethnocentric perspectives and behaviors of the researchers with which they enter the field. It is important to acknowledge these challenges and develop appropriate strategies to overcome them.

Finally, transdisciplinarity in the context of field schools is approached through reflecting the results back to the research participants and the broader community. The question of what the local population gains from social science research is paramount. It is crucial to share what is made of the material gained through ethnographic research. In doing so, field schools provide additional value for the regions themselves: through master's theses or dissertations related to an area, or through publications, presentations, reports or even shared seminar papers. Teaching and research, including publications, do not have to be contradictory. There are numerous examples of research with students leading to a diverse output in terms of publications.[32] For instance, a series of field schools focusing on the alpine phenomenon of Krampus led to the publication *Wild und Schön: Der Krampus im Salzburgerland*, which consisted of articles written by students, and edited by their teachers.[33] In another field school on social change in Altenmarkt, a rural town in Austria, the ethnographic research formed part of a special exhibition in a local museum and delivered extensive material.[34] The forms of reflecting back can vary and must be adapted according to each field setting. However, they can and should be part of what Eriksen and Mendes describe as a scaled-down approach: "any successful social change has to begin with an appreciation of local life-worlds and has to be developed not for but with the people affected."[35]

What is intended to be conveyed in the research endeavor of an inter-and transdisciplinary approach to the anthropology of climate change, framed within field schools, is exactly this kind of "appreciation." Appreciation, in the form of respect for people and practices and a nuanced understanding of local conditions in the context of global phenomena. It also underscores the importance of recognizing and protecting the rights and dignity of participants. In this context, appreciation means recognizing and valuing the diversity in perspectives and regulations, access and agency, as well as in the lived realities and power dynamics of social actors, of which only some are human. This poses a research-pragmatic challenge that does not require a strict adherence to intricate method sets, but rather demands open and reflexive engagement with social realities. Through anthropological modes of research interaction, ideally, many of those involved become visible and can be integrated into the research.

Personal Reflection on Changed Perception

Before I move to my final remarks, let me reflect on my personal connection with the region and the changes brought about through the field school. I grew up in the Lake Neusiedl area—one of the economically weakest regions of Austria. Unlike many of our research partners there, I have both consciously and unconsciously distanced myself and thought I had moved away from this origin. I migrated to Vienna. Only through the opportunity to revisit it and view it through an anthropological lens did I become more attuned to the beauty of my "homeland," the creativity and intellectual strength of the people living there, as well as the challenges, both social and ecological, that have become visible.

This area is a socio-ecological transition zone, viewed through the lenses of both earth and social sciences: The Lake Neusiedl area, situated at the intersection of the Alps, the Carpathians, and the Pannonia Basin, presents an ecological array of a unique shallow steppe lake, wetlands and salt habitats.[36] The Lake Neusiedl region is often referred to as an "antithesis" to the rest of Austria. Several local actors have emphasized that they often feel "misunderstood" by other Austrian ecological stakeholders. Experts from Hungary, and other steppe regions, would understand the challenges of this area much better than west Europeans, including Austrians. Simultaneously, this region is part of the youngest Austrian state that belonged to German West Hungary until World War I. The state has a long history of severe economic challenges and emigration.[37] Today, many residents still commute on a daily or weekly basis to Vienna, or work in small-scale agriculture, or host tourists. As a result of the possible drying up of the whole area and the increasing challenges due to the impact of climate change on this water-sensitive region, it has become a bellwether for perceiving multiple crises of our current time. There are numerous socio-ecological uncertainties regarding democratic-political dynamics, infrastructural inequalities and right-wing populist developments—a dangerous mix, especially when combined with a locally widespread feeling of being misunderstood.

Many of these issues became apparent to me only by revisiting the region and through the engagements and interests of our students. Thus, the teacher in a field school enjoys the challenge—and indeed, privilege—of reconsidering his/her own blind spots. Through the questions and projects of the students, with their respective specific backgrounds and interests, one is challenged to think about things that would not otherwise reveal themselves due to one's own bias. Therefore, let me come to a close by presenting the two missing projects to emerge out of this specific field school. Tirza Stock refers to the region's role as a border towards the East. In her project, she explores the perspectives of refugees who have settled around Lake Neusiedl, focusing on their daily realities and their perception of the surroundings. In conversations with the refugees about their views of nature, migration stories, notions of home, family, and religion emerge. Last but not least, Nikola Blagojevic's digital ethnography project explores the US-based "Burgenland Bunch" and their connection to the "nature" and environment of Burgenland. Many of the members of the "Burgenland Bunch" are descendants of emigrants and still have a link to the region through ancestral stories and personal experiences. During numerous waves of emigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries caused by economic upheaval, political instability, poverty, or religious persecution, the state became the primary area of emigration in Austria.

Summing Up

In this paper, I have argued that traditional learning methods often cannot fully convey the complexity and nuances of ethnographic field work. I emphasized a need for practical, experience-based learning in field schools. Field schools in anthropology bridge theory and practice by providing students with hands-on experience in real-world settings. They resemble an apprenticeship to learn practical skills in data collection, participant observation, and analysis. Through structured stays in the field and collaborative reflections, students develop competence in the anthropological craft of participant observation. This approach conveys the idea that learning is grounded in real, local contexts and emphasizes the practical aspect of ethnographic fieldwork. It also underscores the inherent connection between the practice of participant observation and its local application as an interdisciplinary collaboration; a prerequisite for research on climate change and human-environment interactions. Field schools focus on the significance of transdisciplinarity through a genuine dialogue

and collaboration with local communities, as well as an appreciation of them. Furthermore, it affords a reflecting back on research findings. The goal is to enhance understanding of complex local and global challenges, and to highlight the need to develop understandings and tailored solutions based on local communities' specific needs and realities.

Field schools have been employed at the University of Vienna extensively, including in a 2023 field school in the Lake Neusiedl area, which I have used as an example for my thesis. Ecological challenges, together with a history of economic hardships and the impacts of climate change, mean that the region is a focal point for multiple crises. This forms a solid foundation for real learning in real places at real times. Due to the efforts of passionate field researchers, particularly Gertraud Seiser and Wolfgang Kraus of the study program management (and many others), field schools were introduced to the BA program in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna for the coming winter semester 2023–2024. This did not happen without resistance. Reluctance to actively engage with students in ethnographic fieldwork could be traced back to a classic ivory tower argument: academia is sometimes still understood as a hierarchically structured elite club with students merely as the foot soldiers.[38] It is high time that we reconsider this attitude and start to understand dialogue and collaboration as the foundation of our existence as researchers.

Notes

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the workshop "Teaching Local Histories and Geographies of Climate-induced Migration" in Kolkata in August 2023. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group for their invitation, hospitality and invaluable feedback. I am also deeply grateful to my co-teacher, friend, and mentor, Gertraud Seiser, for her unwavering commitment to humanistic quality in both teaching and research. My appreciation extends to the students—Nikola Blagojevic, Magdalena Langheiter, Tirza Stock, Vadym Yeremiichuk, and Marica Zvonarits—who embarked on this inaugural journey with us. Further gratitude goes to my colleagues at the IWM Vienna, who made this endeavor possible amidst varied work-related challenges. And on a personal note, my deepest thanks to Eva, Jan, and Hannah for their understanding and patience.

[2]Franz Schultheis and Pierre Bourdieu, "Das Elend der Welt: Eine zweifache Herausforderung (Pierre Bourdieu im Gespräch mit Franz Schultheis)," in *Das Elend der Welt: Gekürzte Studienausgabe*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Konstanz: Univ.-Verl. Konstanz, [2005] 2010), 442.

[3]Gertraud Seiser et al., "Feldpraktika-Impressionen: Naturwahrnehmung um den Nationalpark Neusiedler See – Seewinkel," conducted at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in the summer semester of 2023 at the University of Vienna, accessed September 28, 2023, https://ksa.univie.ac.at/forschung/forschung-in-bildern/feldpraktika-impressionen/.

[4]Alois Herzig, interview by Gertraud Seiser and Franz Graf, Apetlon, June 7, 2023, audio, 2:28:08.

[5]Christian Janisch, Alois Lang and Bibi Watzek, ed., *Das Ende des Neusiedler Sees? Eine Region in der Klimakrise: Herausforderungen. Perspektiven. Lösungen* (Salzburg/Wien: Residenz-Verlag, 2023).

[6]Tim Ingold, *Anthropology: Why It Matters* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 11.

[7]John P. Hawkins, "The Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School as a Research Method," *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 5 (October 2014): 555.

[8]Robert T. Trotter, "Ethnographic Research Training at a National Park," *Practicing Anthropology* 13, no. 4 (1991).

[9]Cassandra White et al. "Ethnographic Field School Teaching and Learning in the Face of Societal Transformation: an Example from Rio de Janeiro," *Teaching Anthropology* 5, no. 1 (2015).

[10]The risks involved warrant more attention than can be provided in this paper. For instance, a mode where two instructors supervise the students has proven to be extremely valuable in navigating the social challenges of group field research. For an overview and insights regarding various risk areas, refer to Hawkins,

"Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School," 550–64. This includes issues related to student ethnocentrisms, politics of language, and others.

[11]Hawkins, "Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School," 561.

[12]Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 141.

[13]Judith Okely, *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method* (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 1.

[14]Michael W. Coy, ed. *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1989).

[15]Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[16]Hawkins, "Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School," 555.

[17]Herta Nöbauer and Gertraud Seiser, interview by Franz Graf, Neusiedl am See, June 3, 2023, audio, 34:20.

[18]Wolfgang Kraus and Gertraud Seiser, "Lokalgeschichte und Identität: Eine sozialanthropologische Lehrforschung als partizipatives Projekt mit Museum und Gemeinde," in *Geschichte vor Ort: Salzburger Museen und Sammlungen*, ed. Dagmar Bittricher, Andrea Dillinger and Martin Knoll (Salzburg/Wien: Edition Tandem, 2022), 92.

[19]Hawkins, "Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School," 554.

[20]Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Paulo Mendes, "Introduction: Scaling Down in Order to Cool Down," in *Cooling Down: Local Responses to Global Climate Change*, ed. Susanna Hoffman, Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Paulo Mendes (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2022), 1.

[21]Sándor Békési, *Verklärt und Verachtet. Wahrnehmungsgeschichte einer Landschaft: Der Neusiedler See* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 184.

[22]Nöbauer and Seiser, interview.

[23]Akhil Gupta, "Feeling Climate Change," *City & Society* 33, no. 1 (April 2021): 1.

[24]Field Note, June 2023.

[25]Eriksen and Mendes, "Scaling Down," 5.

[26]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[27]Bruno Latour, "Some Advantages of the Notion of 'Critical Zone' for Geopolitics," *Procedia Earth and Planetary Science* 10 (2014): 4.

[28]Simone Gingrich et al., "Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research in Practice: Lessons from Inter- and Transdisciplinary Research in the Austrian Eisenwurzen," *Sustainability* 8, no. 8 (2016).

[29]Eriksen and Mendes, "Scaling Down," 18.

[30]Ingold, *Anthropology*, 1–25.

[31]Georg Breidenstein et al., *Ethnografie: Die Praxis der Feldforschung* (Konstanz/München: UVK-Verlagsgesellschaft, 2013), 45–46.

[32]Hawkins, "Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School."

[33]Matthäus Rest and Gertraud Seiser, *Wild Und Schön: Der Krampus Im Salzburger Land* (Wien: LIT-Verlag, 2016).

[34]Kraus and Seiser, "Lokalgeschichte und Identität."

[35]Eriksen and Mendes, "Scaling Down," 9.

[36]Erich Draganits et al., "Lake Neusiedl Area: A Particular Landscape at the Boundary Between Alps and Pannonian Basin," in *Landscapes and Landforms of Austria*, ed. Christine Embleton-Harmann (Cham: Springer, 2022), 207.

[37]Leonhard Prickler, "Ebene im Osten: Der Seewinkel im Bezirk Neusiedl am See," in *Geschichte der österreichischen Land-und Forstwirtschaft im 20. Jahrhundert: Regionen, Betriebe, Menschen*, ed. Ernst Bruckmüller, Ernst Hanisch and Roman Sandgruber (Wien: Ueberreuter, 2003).

[38]Wolfgang Kraus, interview by Franz Graf, Sandeck, June 4, 2023, audio, 30:41.

References

Békési, Sándor. *Verklärt und Verachtet. Wahrnehmungsgeschichte einer Landschaft: Der Neusiedler See*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007.

Breidenstein, Georg, Stefan Hirschauer, Herbert Kalthoff, and Boris Nieswand. *Ethnografie: Die Praxis der Feldforschung*. Konstanz/München: UVK-Verlagsgesellschaft, 2013.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Coy, W. Michael, ed. *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again*. Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1989.

Draganits, Erich, Michael Weißl, András Zámolyi and Michael Doneus. "Lake Neusiedl Area: A Particular Landscape at the Boundary Between Alps and Pannonian Basin." In *Landscapes and Landforms of Austria*, edited by Christine Embleton-Harmann, 207–22. Cham: Springer, 2022.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland and Paulo Mendes. "Introduction: Scaling Down in Order to Cool Down," In *Cooling Down: Local Responses to Global Climate Change*, edited by Susanna Hoffman, Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Paulo Mendes, 1–24. New York: Berghahn Books, 2022.

Geertz, Clifford. *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

Gingrich, Simone, Martin Schmid, Thomas Dirnböck, Iwona Dullinger, Rita Garstenauer, Veronika Gaube and Helmut Haberl et al. "Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research in Practice: Lessons from Inter- and Transdisciplinary Research in the Austrian Eisenwurzen." *Sustainability* 8 no. 8 (2016): 1–14.

Gupta, Akhil. "Feeling Climate Change," *City & Society* 33, no. 1 (April 2021): 1–5.

Hawkins, P. John. "The Undergraduate Ethnographic Field School as a Research Method." *Current Anthropology* 55(5) (2014): 551–90.

Ingold, Tim, *Anthropology: Why It Matters*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018.

Janisch, Christian, Alois Lang and Bibi Watzek, ed., *Das Ende des Neusiedler Sees? Eine Region in der Klimakrise: Herausforderungen. Perspektiven. Lösungen*. Salzburg/Wien: Residenz-Verlag, 2023.

Kraus Wolfgang and Gertraud Seiser. "Lokalgeschichte und Identität: Eine sozialanthropologische Lehrforschung als partizipatives Projekt mit Museum und Gemeinde," In *Geschichte vor Ort: Salzburger Museen und Sammlungen*, edited by Dagmar Bittricher, Andrea Dillinger and Martin Knoll, 89–108. Salzburg/Wien: Edition Tandem, 2022.

Latour, Bruno. "Some Advantages of the Notion of 'Critical Zone' for Geopolitics" *Procedia Earth and Planetary Science* 10 (2014): 3-6.

Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Okely, Judith. *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method*. Oxford: Berg, 2012.

Prickler, Leonhard. "Ebene im Osten: Der Seewinkel im Bezirk Neusiedl am See." In *Geschichte der österreichischen Land-und Forstwirtschaft im 20. Jahrhundert: Regionen, Betriebe, Menschen*, edited by Ernst Bruckmüller, Ernst Hanisch and Roman Sandgruber, 741–94. Wien: Ueberreuter, 2003.

Rest, Matthäus and Gertraud Seiser. *Wild Und Schön: Der Krampus Im Salzburger Land*. Wien: LIT-Verlag, 2016.

Schultheis, Franz and Pierre Bourdieu. "Das Elend der Welt: Eine zweifache Herausforderung (Pierre Bourdieu im Gespräch mit Franz Schultheis)." In *Das Elend der Welt: Gekürzte Studienausgabe*, edited by Pierre Bourdieu, Gabrielle Balazs, Stéphane Beaud, Sylvain Broccolichi, Patrick Champagne, Rosine Christin, Remi Lenoir, Françoise Œuvrard, Michel Pialoux, Abdelmalek Sayad, Franz Schultheis and Charles Soulié, 439–43. Konstanz: Univ.-Verl. Konstanz, [2005] 2010.

Seiser, Gertraud, Franz Graf, Nikola Blagojevic, Magdalena Langheiter, Tirza Stock, Vadym Yeremiichuk and Marica Zvonarits. "Feldpraktika-Impressionen: Naturwahrnehmung um den Nationalpark Neusiedler See – Seewinkel," conducted at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in the summer semester of 2023 at the University of Vienna, accessed September 28, 2023, https://ksa.univie.ac.at/forschung/forschung-in-bildern/feldpraktika-impressionen/.

Trotter, T. Robert. "Ethnographic Research Training at a National Park." *Practicing Anthropology* 13, no. 4 (1991): 7–10.

White, Cassandra, Maeghan Dessecker, Jessica Glass, Christina Phillips and Johnie Sue Thurman. "Ethnographic Field School Teaching and Learning in the Face of Societal Transformation: an Example from Rio de Janeiro." *Teaching Anthropology* 5, no. 1 (2015): 74–81.

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

CRG Series on Policies and Practices