If we were to create an illustration representing the manifold and multifaceted relations people built in order to protect, conserve, and sustain their natural environments, the historical map of Europe that might materialize would differ fundamentally in some places from the familiar geopolitical boundaries. It would display quite different patterns, marked by the variety and diverse types of entanglements and contact zones, including mountain ranges, seas and streams, migrating wildlife, air currents, travelling waste, and floating pollution. Another map of entanglements would depict the meandering and crisscrossing routes of ideas, knowledge, norms, values, images, organizations, and jurisdiction as they move back and forth across the subcontinent. If we were even able to create a multidimensional model including a temporal element, it would reveal numerous single, temporary, or delayed events of action and even some dead ends. Such a European atlas might document not only threatened species but also expanding sites of environmental destruction as well as European patterns of exploitation and overuse which were exported beyond Europe, exterritorialized, and reimported. At the same time, the viewer would discover intensifying practices and collaboration of activists who increasingly labelled their endeavours and visions as European. The map would illuminate the ways in which the meaning of Europe changed over time and in different contexts and narratives. Ultimately, we would find ourselves looking at a multicoloured atlas displaying both material and intellectual exchanges all across Europe, with vectors of heterogeneous relations that reveal the multitude of inputs and outputs of activists, actors, and agents. Such an atlas would show the reverberations created by regional, national, international, and colonial experiences. This complex and multi-layered perspective including heterogeneous actors and spheres makes environmental history such a productive approach to disentangle and understand multi-relational processes in twentieth-century Europe. It challenges the notorious Eurocentric view by constantly incorporating the transregional character of environments, species, and resources. It, furthermore, contests established historiographies that focus on top-down narratives of European integration, institutionalization, and regulation. The environmental perspective is also essential for any historical research that is interested in understanding the deep ambiguities of European attitudes towards nature and in discussing current crisis and grand scale changes in human-environment relations.

This book has shed light on some focal points in the emergence and evolution of European environmentalism. Taking the series perspective as a point of
departure, it opted for putting human activity at the centre of attention, offering a new perspective for analysing contemporary European environmental history that reaches across conventional narratives and regional and temporal divides. The authors of this volume focused on human activities in human-nature relations by looking at ‘European moments’ in the modern history of conservation and environmentalism – situations and constellations in which people sensed opportunities, needs, or potential for co-operation that would surpass national limits and framed their ideas, actions, or campaigns as being of European concern or dimension. To this end, the authors looked for case studies and stories that in one way or the other epitomize genuinely European collaboration and relations. They focused on activities that transcended or challenged national narratives and instead claimed European aspiration.

Activity, nature, and Europe mark three key elements which elude clear-cut definitions, but which, when examined in conjunction, offer tangible insights. Following the people who became involved in protecting landscapes, nature and environments, flora, fauna, and human well-being reveals the significance of care for nature, species, and the biosphere in the process of “making” contemporary Europe. But this influence also flowed in the opposite direction: as the contributions show, Europe, both as an idea and lived reality, stimulated and spurred pan-European conservation initiatives and the rise of environmentalism.

The contributions in this book point to the long and deep history of concern for nature as something that crosses national borders. The objects and issues that activists have staged as being of European concern are highly diverse – and so, too, are the actors themselves. By embracing a broad set of actors and agents, the chapters of this book offer insights into the diversity of individuals, constituencies, and alliances that demonstrated European ambition in their endeavours to develop awareness for human-environmental relations. Almost ‘naturally’, the human activities seem to go hand-in-hand with activities of non-human agents. Here, we find the material side of the activism. While most historians would agree that “Europe” is a vague and volatile concept, environmental activism tends to express it in highly concrete terms. By identifying when and where Europe turns into a point of reference for actors and activities, the concept as such takes shape. While Europe did not necessarily mean much to people acting within the context of national claims, from a preservationist’s point of view, colonial experiences and international and global perspectives helped to consolidate diffuse ideas of Europe to a more compact entity. Moreover, as naturalists began to map and frame biospheres and habitats as entities that were not coterminous with national territories, the concept of Europe was a useful way to widen one’s own sphere of influence. This perspective offered orientation not only for epistemic communities but also for activist organizations and cam-
paigns. Even while Europe was closely embedded in linkages that stretched across the entire world, connections within Europe continued to form a dense, coherent network of environmental communication and activities. Thus, environmental issues, which were often organized along traditional channels of scientific exchange, had a particular potential not only to reach beyond national borders but also to bridge the East-West divide that so decisively shaped the character of Cold War Europe. Moreover, while environmentalists sometimes found themselves isolated in one region, they might share interests with activists across the national border who were tackling the same problems. Another overlap that made activists think European was the shared experience of loss and demise. Migrating species went extinct, acid rain travelled, and environmental catastrophes spoiled shared resources. They increasingly felt united in bearing witness to the results of European economic development and fossil-fuel-driven acceleration.

Another important finding of this book is how “nature” and “environment” turned into issues that became part of an evolving set of shared values. While landscapes and sceneries had long played a central role in establishing national narratives of space and homeland and proved essential for constructing distinct national identities, activists of the post-war era were eager to highlight a shared European natural heritage. One of the astonishing results of a closer reading of the initiatives of the Council of Europe – a topic that has heretofore been rather neglected in environmental history – is how the members and bodies of this institution boldly initiated resolutions, committees, and programmes to make conservation an established matter of concern to Europe. The importance of such actions is not to be underestimated, even if sometimes their effects were more symbolic than practical. National politicians could boost their show of commitment to Europe by supporting the a-priori soft goal of protecting a somewhat vague European natural heritage. The activists, though often minority voices on the national level, could strengthen their position by building alliances with others in neighbouring countries and playing the European card. Applying a European rhetoric to their individual causes could enhance their claims of political legitimacy far beyond the sometimes rather limited national sphere of attention. In sum, we find an intriguing interplay between environmental activities and contemporary Europe’s process of becoming. Europe represented a political sphere which was increasingly recognized and meaningful and which activists could use to further their objectives. Conversely, the issues of the activists tended to strengthen the cause of European cooperation.

At the end of this book, let us briefly return to the scene displayed on the cover: a group of people gathering under the unofficial flag of the European Movement in 1957. They had sailed out to the periphery to protest against military
action in the Wadden Sea which disturbed the traditional shelduck moulting areas. Not least because of the fact that the birds flew in from many different countries, the issue had developed European momentum. While the sandbank was saved and shelducks were able to continue their pan-European flights – as they do up to the present –, the human collaboration on this cause turned out to be short-lived. The activists would soon scatter to the four winds, satisfied with the designation of the area as a regional reserve. On the one hand, this episode demonstrates once more that there was no such thing as a linear process of “Europeanization”. Nature conservation and environmental protection did not become more and more European “naturally” or as a matter of course, but as a result of the concrete activities of tangible actors, activists, and agents. This development was marked by transitory achievements and failures, successful initiatives and ones that petered out into nothing. Taken together, the manifold activities contributed to a shared understanding of European challenges in nature conservation and environmental protection and the growth of expert and activist networks and of institutions and regulations with a European reach. Thus, on the other hand, our cover picture also captures the impetus that the activity of individuals – as turned into collective action – would have in the long run. The flag signalled a vision, a symbol they had agreed to assemble under. Europe denoted both their will to collaborate beyond national borders and the need to acknowledge the paradoxical fact that non-humans and even environments could be true Europeans in need of European protection, even though Europe was no distinct entity.