

**Call for Papers :: Please circulate to interested parties**

# **The Global Life of Sponges: Social, cultural, historical, and political**

**An international conference to be held  
on the Island of Hydra [Greece]**



**Saturday 19 – Sunday 20 May 2018**

A stand-alone conference of the **Interdisciplinary Animal Studies Initiative**,  
School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS, University of London]

## **Call for Papers**

Papers and expressions of interest are invited for an international conference,  
to be held on the Island of Hydra [Greece] in May 2018.

This is conceived as be an interdisciplinary conference, in line with other  
cross-disciplinary conferences that we have organised at or from SOAS. Our  
concern is to present contributions from a variety of thematic, disciplinary,  
geographical and historical areas. Potential papers could address the following  
topics:

- The anthropology of sponge fishing communities
- Sponge environments – damage, restoration and conservation
- Economics and potentials of the sponge market, past, present and future
- Documentation and categorization of sponge species

Papers addressing other themes are also welcome.

## **Summary:**

There is no publication that covers the extraordinary life of sponges, seen  
from the perspective of human exploitation of this marine resource across the  
world. We are thus calling for papers to make a first step towards filling this  
void, with the intention of publishing an edited volume. The island of Hydra,

in Greece, was for long an important centre of the industry, and is thus an appropriate venue for such a conference.

Diving for soft types of sponges, notably varieties of *Spongia officinalis*, is an old form of extraction of marine resources, going back at least to the Ancient Greeks. Initially, humans cleaned their skins with sponges when bathing. Other uses developed over time, such as cleaning surfaces, applying paints and varnishes, filtering water, and padding various objects.

The Greek islands, notably Hydra and Kalymnos, were great centres of sponge fishing in Europe, although diving occurred through much of the Mediterranean. The Caribbean became another major centre of sponge diving, especially from the late nineteenth century, as Tarpon Springs, Florida, attracted numerous Greek divers. The Philippines became the third global production zone, and sponges were extracted in many other places.

Free diving, using a stone for weighting, was the original production system. From the 1900s, greater use was made of diving suits, enabling collection from a wider area. There was also some development of aquaculture, despite resistance from traditionalist sponge fishermen.

By the 1950s, over-fishing, pollution, and the development of synthetic substitutes, had brought the natural sponge industry close to extinction. More recently the effects of deep-sea bottom trawling and marine engineering works have been noted as especially damaging. However, there has been a certain recovery of late, due to a rejection of synthetic materials for body or facial cleansing.

Conservation of sponge beds is recognised as a priority concern, because substances inherent in sponges (secondary metabolites) are already used in the manufacture of cancer treatments and antibiotics, and are a promising source of future medicinal resources.

### **Submission and deadline**

Abstracts of proposed papers should be sent in the following format:

- TITLE OF PROPOSED PAPER
- INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION(S) OF PRESENTER(S) OF PAPER
- ABSTRACT [max. 200 words]
- CV OF PRESENTER(S) OF PAPER [max. 100 words]

**Deadline:** They should be sent to reach the conference organizer by 12 noon on Monday 2 October. Notifications will be sent at the start of November.

Mail to: [ed.emery@soas.ac.uk](mailto:ed.emery@soas.ac.uk)

## Registration

The conference will be open to the general public. There will be a small registration fee for non-presenting participants. Write to the above address for further details, and for all inquiries.

We look forward to meeting you in Hydra.

**William Gervase Clarence-Smith** [SOAS, University of London]  
Conference chair

**Ed Emery** [SOAS, University of London]  
Conference organiser

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The **Island of Hydra** lies in the Saronic gulf, a journey of an hour and a half from the port of Athens / Piraeus. Apart from its extraordinary natural beauty, and the careful preservation of its historic built environment, it is remarkable for the fact that its land transportation is done principally by mules and donkeys. The island was also a historic centre of the sponge-fishing trade in the Mediterranean, a trade which reached to the shores of North Africa. The island's former sponge factory has been preserved and is now a particularly fine hotel, the Bratsera.

Access is by hydrofoil from Piraeus, or by boat from Metochi on the mainland of the Peloponnese. There is plentiful accommodation on the island, which can be booked online in advance or negotiated locally when you arrive.

Information website for Hydra: [www.hydradirect.com](http://www.hydradirect.com)

Municipal website (in Greek): [www.ydra.gov.gr](http://www.ydra.gov.gr)

Photo page for Hydra: [Mules and Donkeys of Hydra](#)

Link to [Greek sponge-fishing song](#)

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