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The Impacts of Climate Change on Societies: What Can We Learn from the Past?

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This keynote presentation introduces the sources, methods, and major findings of the History of Climate and Society (HCS), a recently-coined field that uncovers the past influences of climate change on human history. It begins by offering a brief history of the field, from the eighteenth century through the present. It then describes how HCS scholars “reconstruct” past climate changes by combining what they call the “archives of nature” – paleoclimatic proxy sources such as tree rings, ice cores, or marine sediments – with the texts, stories, and ruins that constitute the “archives of society.” Next, it explains how HCS scholars in different disciplines have used distinct statistical and qualitative methods, and distinct causal frameworks, to identify the influence of climate change in the archives of society. It explores how HCS scholars conceptualize the vulnerability and resilience of past societies by introducing some telling case studies, and explaining how those case studies have grown more complex as HCS matured as a field. It then emphasizes the enduring challenges faced by HCS scholars and how, in recent months, they have been identified and are beginning to be addressed. Finally, it describes how HCS has informed climate change policy and public discourse, before offering some key lessons that policymakers can learn from the field.