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Australian Environmental History: Ten Years On

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It is now ten years since John Dargavel edited a special *Australia* issue for *Environment and History* (Volume 4, Number 2, 1998). This issue, *Australia Revisited*, gives us an opportunity to consider the developments in environmental history over the past decade, and to reflect on how Australian environmental historiography sits in relation to that of the rest of the world. *Environment and History* has since published a special issue featuring *New Zealand* (Volume 9, Number 4, 2003) edited by Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson, and in the Tenth Anniversary Issue, Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths jointly reviewed 'Environmental History in Australasia', considering Australia and New Zealand together.¹

In this issue we focus on new writers and recent trends in Australian environmental history. A key initiative has been the inauguration of the National Museum of Australia's Student Prize in Australian Environmental History, a biennial award open to students everywhere writing about Australian environmental history. The first award, made in April 2007, was to Coral Dow of Monash University, Gippsland, for her essay, 'A "Sportsman's Paradise": The Effects of Hunting on the Avifauna of the Gippsland Lakes'. In this issue, we lead with this essay, one that makes a highly original argument about hunting, a subject often discussed in the African, European and North American contexts, but less commonly in Australian environmental history.

Judges for the prize were appointed by the National Museum of Australia (NMA) and the Australian Academy of Science (AAS): Rachel Ankeny (AAS), Mike Smith (NMA) and Libby Robin (representing the editor of *Historical Records of Australian Science*, AAS). The chair of the Academy's National Committee for the History and Philosophy of Science, Rachel Ankeny, chaired the judging panel. The panel was struck by the quality of the entries. With the support of Georgina Endfield, Editor of *Environment and History*, we approached the six most promising entrants, all of whom responded with revised essays for the refereeing process for this journal. We are proud to include all of

them here. The prize was established to encourage new writing in Australian environmental history, and its success in this mission is reflected in the quality of the writing here based on research undertaken by honours, masters and PhD students. The National Museum of Australia and the Australian Academy of Science were delighted that this special issue enables the scholarly public to read some of the newest and most exciting research that is happening in Australian environmental history. Libby Robin and Mike Smith have had the pleasure of editing the issue, which also includes a couple of extra essays commissioned to balance and give additional geographical reach (specifically Queensland and Western Australia) to the collection.

HISTORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL IDEAS SINCE THE 1990S

The nexus between environment and history has particular resonance in an Australian context. Settlers from Northern and Mediterranean Europe could hardly have chosen a more challenging or more different place from their homelands. It was, as Eric Rolls put it in 1997, 'more a new planet than a new continent'.² This sense of Australia's difference from the rest of the world has grown since the London international workshop on *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* that included Rolls's bold statements about the 'Nature of Australia'.

It is a lean landscape, with shallow soils, deficient in nutrients and trace elements, where the legacy of the last Ice Age is salt and salinised soils. It is a continent where the dominant vegetation formations – hummock grassland, Acacia shrubland or Eucalypt forests – are not just fire-promoting but also dependent on fire for seeding and regeneration. Its distinctive marsupial fauna – animals with lower metabolic rates than placental mammals and profoundly different patterns of reproduction – seemed 'a separate creation' to colonial British naturalists.³ And it is 'the El Niño continent', where inter-annual and inter-decadal climatic variability is the norm. A strong theme in Australian history, therefore, is a rolling engagement with the dynamics and ecology of an unfamiliar land, a long physical encounter that also represents an intellectual settling-in.

Environmental history, with its focus on the interplay of cultural and natural histories, has a prominent role in the National Museum of Australia, which opened in March 2001 as part of the celebrations of the Centenary of Federation. One of the Museum's three themes is 'people's interaction with the environment' and one of its three curatorial departments, the Land and People section, is dedicated to environmental history. This structure is a legacy of a Federal Government inquiry into museums in the early 1970s. Known as the Pigott report after its chairman, the report of the Committee of Inquiry on Mu-

seums and National Collections (1975) set out the intellectual framework for the National Museum, arguing that it was important to bridge the gap between culture and nature in Australian museums and to physically and intellectually bridge Indigenous and settler histories by looking at their common experience of a distinctive Australian environment.⁴ The first permanent gallery exhibition in the National Museum of Australia was 'Tangled Destinies'.⁵ This explicitly explored the idea that a society is shaped – maybe even defined – by the way it responds to the challenges and opportunities of its environment.

A CONTINENTAL NATION OF DIFFERENT ECOLOGIES

One of the challenges faced by 'national' histories is to tell a story about the whole continent, which is large (comparable in size to the contiguous United States) and ecologically varied and complex. As Tom Griffiths has commented, environmental history 'frequently makes more sense on a regional or global scale than a national one'. Writing for the *Australian Journal of Botany*, Griffiths wrote about the roots of environmental history in 'a contemporary sense of crisis about the human ecological predicament' and its role as a meeting place of sciences and the humanities. He also contrasted the subject and scale of its endeavour with more traditional history, but nonetheless located it in the humanities:

[Environmental history] often moves audaciously across time and space and species and thereby challenges some of the conventions of history, by questioning the anthropocentric, nationalistic and documentary biases of the craft ... It is a place where social history and deep time have to find their correspondences. Yet environmental history remains, at heart, one of the humanities, concerned with cultural, moral, economic and political questions, and founded in narrative.⁶

The focus of British settlement has led much Australian history to concentrate on the temperate south-east of the continent, an area with a very different ecology from the desert country (arid and semi-arid lands) that make up some 70 per cent of the land mass, the tropical north or the 'megadiverse' south-western corner.

The 1998 issue on Australia in *Environment and History* focused entirely on the south-east corner of the continent – with five out of the six papers set in different environments in New South Wales, and a preponderance of forest and ecological narratives, reflecting the flurry of history writing at the time around the development of 'regional forest agreements' and associated political campaigns. Forests are still a very important part of Australian environmental politics, as new books like Judith Ajani's *The Forest Wars*, explore from economic and environmental perspectives.⁷



FIGURE 1. Australia showing places discussed in this issue (Map: Clive Hilliker, Australian National University).

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENT

In this 2008 collection, Rachel Sanderson's paper focuses rather differently on forests. 'Re-writing the History of Australian Tropical Rainforests' considers the wet tropical forests of far north Queensland and the scientific and popular discovery of the ancient indigeneity of these forests in a land now so dominated by the Eucalypt. Looking at the shift from considering these forests 'alien and invasive' to 'ancient and indigenous', the paper offers a strong exemplar of the 'ways of seeing' literature, which includes the history of ideas, a literature that has grown significantly over the last decade, and includes key works such as Tim Bonyhady's *Colonial Earth*.⁸

Using different ways of seeing is seminal in the work of Andrea Gaynor and Ian McLean, who consider the value of art and art history in ecological restoration. Their paper, 'Landscape Histories', maps environmental and ecological change in the Swan River region of Western Australia, at the heart of Perth and its suburbs, through works of art. Environmental history has increasingly been turning to the large cities where over 80 per cent of Australians actually live, rather than the farming and forestry landscapes of earlier writing. Andrea Gaynor's recent book, *Harvest of the Suburbs*, is a good example of this sort of writing, drawing links between the thrift of suburban home gardeners on both sides of the continent and the protestant work ethic.⁹

In this collection, Rebecca Jones considers the moral value of compost in both city gardening and in organic farming in her paper, 'Soil: A Real and Imagined Environment for Australian Organic Farmers and Gardeners in the 1940s'. Jones uses soil to explore one environmental idea, while Hilary Howes with her paper, 'The Spectre At the Feast: The Emergence of Salt in Victoria's Irrigated Districts', looks at what happens to soil under the 'religion' of state irrigation schemes. Chris Soeterboek's paper follows popular ideas about soil, fire and green pick in "'Folk Ecology" in the Australian Alps', through the 'forest cattlemen' who gave testimony in the 1930s and '40s Royal Commissions into fire and grazing in Australia's highest country.

SILENCES

One of the most striking silences in Australian environmental history has been in histories of the marine environments. Although we sing in our national anthem that 'our home is girt by sea', the histories of settler home-making in Australia have very much concentrated on the land, and much of Australian nationalism has been based on the idea of 'battling' the land.¹⁰ The sea and its products have often been overlooked. New Zealand, Canada and the United States all have very much stronger traditions of histories concerning fisheries. In this collection Richard J. Gowers' paper, 'Selling the "Untold Wealth" in the Seas: A Social and Cultural History of the South-East Australian Shelf Trawling Industry, 1915–1961', redresses this imbalance. Gowers also provides some explanation of this silence in Australian history-making, as he considers how the people of New South Wales had to be coaxed away from a red meat dominated diet, towards fish, through a scheme sponsored by the state and ichthyologist, David Stead. Stead was better known as founding father of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia and a prominent conservationist, but this scheme ultimately had disastrous consequences for the major fisheries of the east coast.

HISTORIES FROM THE NORTH

British settlement is no longer the only 'foundation moment' in Australian history. The 1970s and '80s politics of Aboriginal Australia supported new histories of the frontier, and increasingly, of deeper pasts before European settlements. The Aboriginal perspective has changed the geography of Australia, with Regina Ganter recently urging historians to 'turn the map upside down' and begin in northern Australia.¹¹ It is now believed that this was how Aboriginal people arrived into northern Australia some 50,000 years ago. Historical contacts between the Macassans and Aboriginal people in northern Australia, particularly Arnhem Land, fed a market for trade in Trepang (sea slugs), the delicacy that brought the Macassans to northern Australian coasts. Earlier contacts and exchanges 4000 years ago brought the dingo to Australia – the probable cause of the extinctions of the thylacine (*Thylacine cynocephalus*) and Tasmanian devil (*Sarcophilus harrisi*) on the Australian mainland.¹²

Northern Australia has also been important in the history of science in Australia, as Libby Robin has argued. Scientific development for the 'empty north' has been advocated from the southern centres in Australia as in other places. The idea of 'internal colonisation' (that is, colonisation within a single nation), which is so fitting for North Australia, comes from Sverker Sörlin's analysis of scientific history in Sweden's frozen north. He wrote of settlers who were sent to 'fill the *horror vacui* felt by the state in the vast open stretches' of the North, and the science that supported agricultural developments for the difficult sub-Arctic terrain.¹³

AUSTRALIAN DESERTS AND WRITING ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD

There has been a renewed interest in the history of Australian deserts and their people, through Mike Smith's varied work. His *Peopling the Cleland Hills* shows some of the possibilities in a fine-grained history of frontier contact (in this case, in the Cleland Hills in the far western Northern Territory). Here Aboriginal people typically came in from the deserts of the West and Europeans came from the East, travelling out from Alice Springs. Smith has also spearheaded comparative work between the 'Southern Deserts' of southern Africa, Australia and South America – the deserts that are often left out of traditional discussions of 'world deserts', where the Sahara and Middle Eastern deserts have dominated historically. His scholarly and interdisciplinary book *23° South*, co-edited with Paul Hesse, and the popular international exhibition *Extremes*, featured at the National Museum of Australia in 2004/5 were two very different expressions of this comparative work.¹⁴

The idea of using Australia as a different and alternative lens on world environmental history has also grown in the years since Tom Griffiths opened the *Ecology and Empire* collection with the modestly titled 'Towards an Australian History of the World'.¹⁵ In his most recent book, *Slicing the Silence*, he takes 'an unashamed Australian bias' in his international history of Antarctica, the other 'Great South Land of European voyaging and exploration'... and the other 'continental desert'.¹⁶ The book, *A Change in the Weather*, took the global issue of climate change and considered what it means culturally for the driest inhabitable continent, one with an exceptionally variable rainfall over much of its land mass.¹⁷

Other environmental historians have used Australia as a lens on international ideas in the last decade: Tim Flannery has built on the *Future Eaters*, his comparative history of the 'new' lands, New Holland, New Zealand, New Caledonia and New Guinea, with his more recent American history *The Eternal Frontier*, and an international history of climate change science, *We are the Weather Makers*, each of which he has written with an Australian slant.¹⁸ Jared Diamond, who like Flannery is a biologist with specialist interests in New Guinea (but is not Australian!), has chosen to include a whole section on Australia in his book *Collapse*.¹⁹ These 'scientist-historians' with a passion for the environment and 'sustainability' are on the increase. One of the most interesting recent initiatives is a program for an Integrated History and Future Of People on Earth (IHOPE) emerging from the international global change community associated with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Australia is one of the places that is offering a regional response to this initiative (IHOPE – Australia).²⁰

TASMANIA AND THE REST OF AUSTRALIA

Within Australia, James Boyce has used the distinctive geography and history of Tasmania to critique the dominant historiography constructed in continental Australia. In the final paper in this special edition, 'Return to Eden: Van Diemen's Land and the Early British Settlement of Australia', Boyce considers the often neglected environmental factors in making a British colony early in the nineteenth century, and shows how Australian historiography benefits from both an environmental and an explicitly Tasmanian perspective. It provides an excellent exemplar of how, ten years on, environmental ideas are entering mainstream Australian history writing.

In their various ways, all of the essays in this special issue of *Environment and History* mirror Australian writer Bernard Cohen's comment that 'Landscapes have histories and these are contained not only in the soils and fauna and the traces of human life, but in the history of ways of seeing the land'.²¹ The last ten years of Australian environmental historiography have focused as much on changes in the 'ways of seeing' as the 'strange land' itself.

NOTES

¹ Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths, 'Environmental History in Australasia', *Environment and History* 10,4 (2004): 439–74, doi: 10.3197/0967340042772667.

² Eric Rolls 'The Nature of Australia', in Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (eds.), *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press; also co-published in Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1997; Witwatersrand, University of Natal Press, 1997; and Seattle, University of Washington Press 1998), p. 40.

³ This was the title of a recent nature documentary: *Nature of Australia: A Separate Creation* (scriptwriter John Vandenbeld), ABC Natural History Unit, <http://www.abc.net.au/nature/noa1.htm>.

⁴ P. Pigott, *Museums in Australia: Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections including the Report of the Planning Committee of the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975).

⁵ Mike Smith et al., "'Tangled Destinies": Land and People in Australia', in *Land, People and Nation: Australian Stories from the National Museum of Australia* (Canberra, National Museum of Australia, 2004), pp. 93–114. Themes in this exhibition are explored in more detail in Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), pp. 31–55; 75–98. In 2006 the gallery was re-named 'Old New Land', but the structure of the original 'Tangled Destinies', with its voyage through the history of ideas about the environment was retained.

⁶ Tom Griffiths, 'How Many Trees make a Forest?: Cultural Debates about Vegetation Change in Australia', *Australian Journal of Botany*, 50,2 (2002): 375–89 (pp. 377–8), doi: 10.1071/BT01046.

⁷ Judith A. Ajani, *The Forest Wars* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

⁸ Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton: Miegunyah, 2000).

⁹ Andrea Gaynor, *Harvest of the Suburbs*, (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2006), pp. 48–66.

¹⁰ Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation*, pp. 208–12.

¹¹ Regina Ganter, 'Turning the Map Upside Down', *History Compass* 4,1 (2006): 26–35; doi: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2006.00301.x; Regina Ganter (with contributions from Julia Martinez and Gary Lee) *Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia*, (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2006).

¹² Timothy F. Flannery, 'The Trajectory of Human Evolution in Australia: 10,000 BP to the Present', in Robert Costanza, Lisa J. Graumlich and Will Steffen (eds.), *Sustainability of Collapse: An Integrated History and Future of People on Earth* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 89–94.

¹³ Sverker Sörlin, 'Rituals and Resources of Natural History: The North and the Arctic in Swedish Scientific Nationalism', in Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin (eds.), *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: USA/Science History Publications, 2002), pp. 73–122. Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation*, pp. 123–51

¹⁴ Mike Smith and Paul Hesse (eds.), *23° S: Archaeology and Environmental History of the Southern Deserts* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2005). *Extremes:*

Survival in the Great Deserts of the Southern Hemisphere ran from 26 December 2004 to 21 August 2005, http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/past_exhibitions/extremes/. See also Peter Veth, Mike Smith and Peter Hiscock (eds.), *Desert Peoples: Archaeological Perspectives* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

¹⁵ Tom Griffiths, 'Empire and Ecology: Towards an Australian History of the World', in Griffiths and Robin, *Ecology and Empire*, pp. 1–12.

¹⁶ Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), p. 3.

¹⁷ Tim Sherratt, Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, *A Change in the Weather: Climate and Culture in Australia* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Timothy Fritjof Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People* (Chatswood: Reed Books, 1994); Flannery, *Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and its People* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001), Flannery, *The Weather Makers: The History and Future Impact of Climate Change* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

¹⁹ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2005).

²⁰ For a history of this initiative and the Australian response see Libby Robin and Will Steffen, 'History for the Anthropocene', *History Compass* 5,5 (2007): 1694–1719, doi: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00459.x

²¹ Bernard Cohen, 'Love in the Mists', *The Australian's Review of Books* December 1997: 14–15. This was also used in an introductory panel in the Tangled Destinies exhibition, National Museum of Australia (2001).

