



## Final report

# *Australasian Workshop on Teaching Environmental History and Humanities*

**14-15 November, 2019  
Macquarie Room  
State Library of New South Wales**

Eugene von Guérard, Bushfire between Mount Elephant and Timboon, 185

## **Australasian workshop on teaching environmental history and humanities**

Convenors: Andrea Gaynor, Nancy Cushing, Emily O’Gorman, Jan Oosthoek

The inaugural workshop on teaching environmental history and humanities in Australasia was run over two days in mid-November 2019. It involved 28 physical participants from across Australia as well as India and the Philippines, and two attendees via zoom from Belgium and India. Those assembled included PhD scholars, new and established academics, school teachers, and community-based practitioners, mostly from environmental history but also literary studies, acoustic arts, geography and interdisciplinary environmental humanities.

The workshop was interactive in orientation, structured around short, agenda-setting presentations followed by general discussion and sharing of experiences and ideas in a range of formats. Sessions focused on who we teach and how we might broaden our student base; the relationship between environmental history and humanities in teaching; decolonising and diversifying curricula; the risks and opportunities of projects and fieldwork; what new assessment avenues we might pursue in a digital age; how we can engage with the GLAM sector in reaching – and teaching – a wider public; and how we can collaborate with each other for mutual benefit in an increasingly pressured neoliberal higher education system.

Morning tea and packed lunches enjoyed out in the Domain behind the Library provided excellent opportunities for making new connections across institutions, states and countries, as well as consolidating existing connections. The workshop dinner (self-funded) on Thursday night, at vegan restaurant Bodhi, was well attended and facilitated further informal networking and discussion of opportunities for environmental history and humanities across the region.

Key themes and ideas were captured in a series of (hive) mind maps, in which each day or session’s themes were unpacked and recorded. The first day’s sessions, led by Andrea Gaynor, Ruth Morgan, Emily O’Gorman and Heather Goodall yielded a complex and interlocking set of themes, which included:

- The environmental history (and humanities) ‘canon’ and how we engage with it from regions outside of North America and Europe.
- Issues of scale, and how we tackle the possibilities for doing environmental history and humanities at a range of scales, from big history and deep time to world history to biography.
- How we navigate University and degree structures, including the significance of naming, identifying institutional strengths, making strategic alliances, and the use of “stealth” to insert environmental history and humanities into diverse curricula.
- Some key themes and topics, such as materiality, SDGs, economy, oceans, urban/rural, movement/mobility, justice, emotion, region/globe, climate change, sustainable cities and the Anthropocene.
- Negotiating ‘science’, and issues around reaching science majors, incorporating EH into science programs, communicating with science colleagues, and established points of contact in geography and marine historical ecology.
- Navigating hope and despair, for example through exploring different kinds of loss and home-making (eg in refugee communities); extinction elegies; notions of emergency and emergence as well as resilience; humanities as therapy; inspiring action including new forms of care; and through historicising loss and emotion more generally.
- Learning through diverse methods and sources, including storytelling, dance, oral history, art, objects/artefacts, sound, reflective and observational journals, glossaries, teamwork, multi-disciplinary perspectives and debates, using student family histories as a resource, ‘problem-based’ inquiry, ‘what is’ questions, fieldwork, and through exploring the importance of diverse perspectives on a ‘place’ (following Doreen Massey’s notion that places are never singular and stable but always have multiple identities).
- Indigenous engagement was an intersectional theme, with links to several other areas.

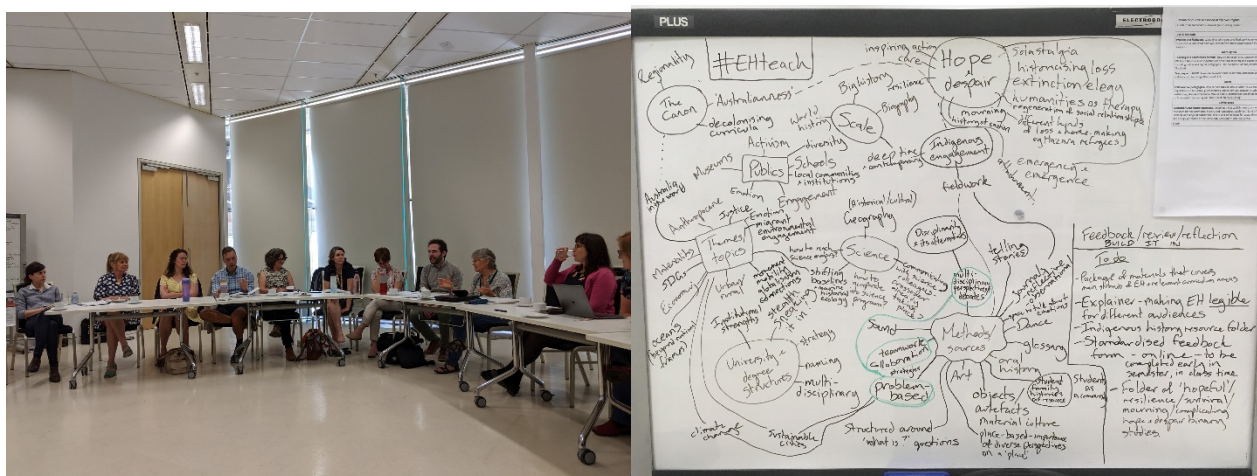


Workshop breakout groups discussing the risks and opportunities associated with engaging environmental history and environmental humanities. Photo: Emily O’Gorman.

On the second day, a session on fieldwork, led by Grace Karskens, yielded inspiring and instructive examples from teachers working in a range of settings. Discussion ranged across activities from one-off short visits to site-based project work and dwelt on three main areas: benefits, strategies, and challenges. Benefits included sensory experience, “making it real”, problem-based and place-based learning, multi-institutional potential, and the possibility of extended independent projects vs ‘snack-sized learning’. Strategies included providing scaffolding in the form of skills for interpretation and supporting literature (perhaps for students to find); downloadable walking tours; inclusion of visiting scholars and expert colleagues; connections with external organisations including cultural institutions and local government; undertaking readings in place; exploring contested and multiple meanings; and “cognitive apprenticeships”. Challenges varied according to the kind of fieldwork and ranged from logistics and scheduling, to paperwork and insurance, to managing risks associated with alcohol and sex on multi-day expeditions.

The assessment session, led by Jan Oosthoek, yielded a treasure trove of ideas for forms of project-based learning and associated assessment, from data visualising to podcasts, soundscapes, rephotography, posters, and GPS logger apps. The relative merits of public and internal assessment yielded some particularly useful discussion. George Main, Senior Curator at the National Museum of Australia, led the session on GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums), starting with an overview of the NMA’s new environmental history gallery opening in 2021, and the various opportunities for environmental historians/humanists to collaborate with the Museum. Grounded in some of the key environmental history and humanities literature, the new gallery seeks to provide a visceral visitor experience of the agency and force of a more-than-human world. Nancy Cushing then led us into a consideration of how we might collaborate for better teaching and learning across a range of institutional settings, leading to a range of practical suggestions for sharing resources, ideas, intelligence and perhaps even courses.

We have come away from the workshop inspired, informed and with a ‘to do’ list that includes the maintenance of a regional teaching network and a digital commons with shared teaching resources, a teaching session in the environmental history stream at the next Australian Historical Association conference, a survey, an explainer, a podcast by Jan Oosthoek ([www.eh-resources.org](http://www.eh-resources.org)), future workshops, museum collaborations and more. Watch this space!



Discussion and record! Photos: Emily O’Gorman (L) and Andrea Gaynor (R).