

Christof Mauch, Ruth Morgan, Emily O’Gorman

Introduction: Envisioning Australia

People have been shaping Australian environments dramatically for more than 50,000 years: First, Indigenous people altered the continent’s ecology, especially through their use of fire; then, a second wave of colonisation, led by the British—often dated to the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788—wrought another set of ecological changes. Over the last 220 years, these changes have been guided by competing environmental visions and practices that have transformed both the lands and the livelihoods of Aboriginal people and of non-indigenous settlers.

The European powers who later saw in *terra Australis* a blank slate on which they could project their dreams of a New World, as well as an island prison for Britain’s outcasts, had ignored the continent until the late eighteenth century. But sailors from southern Sulawesi (now Indonesia)—the Macassans—were attracted to the coastal resources of Australia from perhaps as early as the sixteenth century. They travelled south to harvest the continent’s wealth of sea cucumbers, marine vertebrates that the Macassans called “trepang.” With their catch, these fishers drew the land and its peoples into a network of trade that spanned the Pacific Ocean to the markets and kitchens of China, where trepang (*hǎi shēn*) were prized for their taste and medicinal value.

The Macassans also traded with the continent’s Indigenous inhabitants, which fostered lasting alliances and relationships between these peoples. The wider recognition of these cross-cultural exchanges and their legacies asserts the historic agency of Indigenous peoples and rejects the argument of cultural stasis that long supported colonial dispossession. For example, Australian Aboriginal people are now well known for the careful management of their country, for sophisticated irrigation practices,

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for their ability to farm eels, for bringing wild yams into gardens, and of course for intricate fire regimes, used to promote certain plants and animals such as kangaroos. These practices were developed over many generations and were negotiated via responsibilities to kin and ancestral beings.

This ancient island-continent, long isolated from other lands, proved a reluctant partner in the realization of European visions. Its expansive deserts, its fiery forests, its “boom and bust” weather, its delicate soils, all were stubborn adversaries for those newcomers who hoped for an antipodean agrarian idyll. The dreamers persevered, however, and by the end of the nineteenth century, they had effected a vast ecological and cultural transformation of the continent south of the Tropic of Capricorn.

The speed of the ecological changes wrought since European colonisation was unrivalled in both the Old World and the New. What elsewhere had taken generations of adaptation and adjustment was imposed in dramatic fashion as European newcomers encountered a land that environmental writer and historian Eric Rolls described as “more a new planet than a new continent.” The descendants of an ancient culture of land stewardship have seen their country transformed: Australia, which has more endemic flora and fauna than any other nation, has had the highest mammal extinction rate in the world since 1788 and lost nearly 40 per cent of its forests.

Fundamental to the settler vision of possessing the continent and its natural resources was the dispossession of its Indigenous peoples. This was true for both Australia and New Zealand. Conflicts between local Indigenous peoples (Australian Aboriginal peoples and New Zealand Maori) and British or Irish colonists, who would be followed by immigrants from China, escalated in the nineteenth century as the colonial hunger for land and fodder drove pastoralists inland. The Anglo desire to establish privately held farms (“stations”) for raising cattle and sheep clashed with the ethic of Indigenous peoples, which centred on access to land and the sharing of its resources.

In Australia, colonising projects were enabled not only by the denial of existing sets of laws and land boundaries, but also by government-supported massacres, programs of assimilation, and waves of deadly diseases. While Aboriginal peoples fought back, the onslaught of European colonisation was such that it is a testimony to their extraordinary resilience that they withstood this toll. This truth is an unsettling cornerstone of

the nation's foundation. Settler Australia has come at an unfathomable cost to the First Australians and their country.

Settler possession of the continent was simultaneously achieved through the intensive cultivation and exploitation of its lands, waters, and minerals. For settlers and sojourners alike, fulfilling their dreams of enrichment was contingent on the demands of capitalists and imperialists, whose own visions hungered for coal, gold, timber, wool, and wheat. Extracting these resources from the continent's unfamiliar climes demanded endurance and hard labour. Settler *belonging*, however, could not be won simply through toil. Belonging—a sense of place—demanded stories that could transplant their foreign cultures into Australian soils. These stories needed to be told and retold to themselves and to each other in order to take root and to flower. The Mallee Man, a labourer who worked the dry eucalypt shrublands and woodlands across southern Australia, became an icon: a white worker forged by the sinews of his labour; a man who honed the earth, while the earth honed him.

Visions and histories of Australian environments are distinct from those in other places. In the United States it seems, visions of exceptionalism—of a continent settled by free yeoman farmers, whom Thomas Jefferson regarded as the “chosen people of God” and who stood in sharp contrast to the factory workers of Europe—have long dominated the historical imagination. American environmental historians have challenged the national celebration of the economic conquest of “wilderness” and the fulfilment of Manifest Destiny that drove the settler expansion across the continent. Australian histories, however, have focused more on human bodies, on working men, and on settler stories of a land hard won. The environmental impacts of urban and industrial change—long the preoccupation of Europeans—only began to concern Australian environmental historians about a decade ago, even though most Australians now live in urban areas.

Although more than 90 per cent of the population resides in the nation's cities, Australians still tend to identify their continent with “the bush.” This “bush,” regardless of the kind of vegetation, refers to the more sparsely inhabited regions on the map and is most often associated with the continent's inland areas. Despite the seemingly distinct spheres of the Australian city and the bush, these spaces are bound both materially and intellectually. Urban scribes planted the nation firmly in the bush, seeing in the wide brown land a wellspring for their visions of Australia and its settler peoples. Many of

the stories that settler Australians told themselves were narrated through photography, paintings, and poetry. These tended to be intimate stories of harsh landscapes and vulnerable livelihoods, a depiction that recent writers and artists have tried to turn on its head to portray delicate landscapes deeply altered through exploitative, extractive industries. While the works of some of these writers and artists brought certain Australian stories to national prominence—from the poetry of Henry Lawson and “Banjo” Patterson, and the paintings of the Heidelberg School artists in the late nineteenth century, to the writing of Judith Wright, who became deeply involved in the twentieth-century environment movement—this collection brings some lesser-known stories to light for the first time.

This collection reminds us that histories and visions of the environment articulate, and are contingent on, *The More-Than-Human World*, and this is the subject of the first section of the volume. For instance, when the British arrived in Australia to establish the penal colony of New South Wales, they brought animals with them on their ships. Their presence on the continent has shaped livelihoods and landscapes, ecologies and cultures. Likewise, the aquatic world—from oysters to coral reefs—has played, and will continue to play, a significant role in Australian and Australasian environments and identities into the future. In the section *Identifying with Place*, contributors explore the ways that landscapes were often employed to imagine different futures of the Australian continent and how Australia, as isolated as it may appear, was ecologically and culturally connected across the seas. The articles in *Valuing Nature* discuss conflicting ideas and competing visions of Australian environments and natural resources, while the two photo essays in *Seeing Australia: Local and Global Perspectives* interrogate the role of the lens in our relationships with the environment locally as well as globally. They show how attentiveness to what is visible can help to form intimate bonds with specific places, while throwing others into the shadows. The final article by Tom Griffiths, a leading figure in the field, situates this collection within a broader historiography of Australian environmental history. Together, our contributors reveal not only how competing visions have shaped the continent’s ecologies, but also how the continent has shaped visions, lives, and livelihoods for many generations—and will do so for many more generations yet to come.