

Australia's Southern Mallee Lands and the Control of Nature

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This project begins with the entangled histories of environment and people in the Mallee lands of southern Australia. Using the insights generated in that study, it then moves to commence a major new environmental history of Australian modernity, incorporating a posthumanist perspective and focusing on ideas of control of nature.

Stretching discontinuously across the four southern Australian states, the Mallee lands are characterized by the multistemmed eucalypt form from which their name is drawn. These semi-arid lands have long human histories. Australia's oldest modern human remains, some 40,000 years old, have been found in Mallee country, along with the earliest scientific evidence of sophisticated mortuary rites involving ochre and cremation. Scattered documentary evidence and oral tradition reveals something of the changing practices and experiences of the Indigenous peoples who occupy these lands through contact, "dispersal," accommodation, and ultimately survival. In the twentieth century, the Mallee lands were subject to massive planned agricultural development schemes and came to occupy a prominent place in the popular imagination as sites of desperate struggles of settlers against elements; indeed, in the eastern states, as Tom Griffiths has noted, the term "Mallee" became "synonymous for heroic, even bloody-minded settlement." More recently, stories of population loss and decline vie with those of survival and hope.

In the first instance this project seeks to recast the history of the Mallee lands as an integrated story of the entanglement of human and nonhuman over the long run. Engaging with the work of posthumanist scholars, it recognizes that in multiple and complex ways humans and the social are inextricably entangled with those things and processes we call "nature," while also acknowledging humans as a powerful force for change in "nature." It seeks to understand the ways in which human and nonhuman have coexisted in particular places and over time, in ways commodified by knowledge, power, and conflict. Although deeply embedded in place, it is not an exercise in local history, but a history tied to global conversations about contemporary issues including climate and adaptation, risk and vulnerability, and the meaning and practice of conservation in a context of increasingly hybrid and novel ecosystems.

In the first weeks of the fellowship, these aims will be pursued in a book chapter and a journal article exploring the idea of conservation as control of nature. These works will serve as a launching pad for a major book project pursuing a new environmental history of Australian modernity, incorporating a posthumanist perspective, and with the control of nature as a key theme.