

## **Remaking wetlands: cultural histories of environmental change in the Murray-Darling Basin, c.1800s–2000s**

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Wetlands are important sites of biodiversity that are rapidly disappearing from the planet. They are the only type of habitat to have an international convention, the Ramsar Convention, dedicated to their conservation. Yet experts’ definitions as well as wider understandings of what a wetland actually is vary from place to place, reflecting local cultures and environments. This project aims to provide new ways of thinking about wetlands by studying changing understandings of these environments, their diversity, and the related history of water and wetland management in the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB), Australia. The MDB comprises one seventh of the continent and contains over 30,000 wetlands, with many today recognized as being of national importance and 16 as being of international importance under the 1971 Ramsar Convention (out of a national total of 64). In addition to being geographically significant, the Basin is culturally and economically prominent, forming Australia’s agricultural heartland. While in a sense all wetlands in this region have been changed by people, this project examines wetlands that are recognized as more “natural” and vulnerable alongside those that are more damaged and “artificial” (for example, some rice fields and sewage treatment works), to rethink and broaden our conception of wetlands.

Despite the past and contemporary importance of wetlands in the MDB, and their global significance, no Basin-wide cultural or environmental history of these places exists. Focusing on four case studies (Barmah Forest, Victoria; The Coorong, South Australia; Fivebough and Tuckerbil swamps and Riverina rice fields, New South Wales; and Toowoomba swamp, Queensland) and using the broader framework provided by the environmental humanities, this project addresses this significant gap. Ultimately, I will develop an environmental history of MDB wetlands to provide a better understanding of the values and attitudes which have influenced their present states. These issues are animated by contested uses of wetlands by, for example, governments, farmers, ecologists, and local Aboriginal people, and the exclusion of locals from important management decisions. I aim to interrogate wetlands history in the MDB using at least two geographical scales (whole of basin and sub-catchment case study areas), within Australia’s simultaneous environmental, social, and cultural transformations from the beginnings of British colonization to the present, and to contribute to international scholarship on wetlands, environmental history, and the environmental humanities.

During my fellowship I will establish this new book project on environmental histories of wetlands in the MDB, drawing on past as well as new research I have undertaken in the region. While at the Center, I will particularly focus on engaging with theoretical work on environmental knowledge and transformed and transforming landscapes, bringing this into conversation with my empirical work. In addition I will develop overviews of international wetland scholarship, particularly in environmental history and environmental humanities. I will also complete work on two co-edited collections: *Networks of Nature in the British Empire*, Bloomsbury (with J. Beattie, University of

Waikato, New Zealand; and E. Melillo, Amhurst College, USA); and *Climate, Science and History in Australasia*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Science & Technology, Palgrave Macmillan (with Beattie and Matthew Henry, Massey University, New Zealand).