Australian Environmental History

**Class code**
ENVST-UA 9450; HIST-UA 9750

**Instructor Details**
Dr Adam Gall  
amg24@nyu.edu  
Office Hour: Tuesday 1pm-2pm; other times by Appointment  
Please allow at least 24 hours for your instructor to respond to your emails.

**Class Details**
Spring 2015

**Australian Environmental History**

Tuesday 3:00 – 6:00pm  
February 3 to May 12  
Room 202  
NYU Sydney Academic Centre  

**Prerequisites**
None

**Class Description**
What is Australian Environmental History, and how does narrative shape our understanding of the history of the Australian Environment? This course seeks answers to these questions, and to advance our understanding of the role of environment in Australian history. Questions include: How are environments incorporated into the tool kit of historians? What counts as evidence when historical research approaches non-human subject matter? Topics include the significance of nature for citizenship and nationalism, floods, fire, food crops, maritime, rural and urban environments, acclimatisation and the introduction of plant and animal species, tourism and the Great Barrier Reef, Antarctica and climate change.

Classes will be conducted in a seminar format including short talks by the lecturer and guest experts, mixed with structured, reading-focused discussion, screenings, and source-based activities facilitated by the lecturer. In these sessions students will examine not only the events and actors in Australian environmental history, but also the major debates in the historical scholarship, and historiographic, epistemological and political issues raised by the topics under consideration. During each week's class, students will also be encouraged to share and explore the results of their own inquiry and preparation for assessments.

The course will involve several excursions: we plan to take a walking tour in
Woolwich/Hunter’s Hill, and visit the Manly Quarantine Station and surrounding reserves.

**Desired Outcomes**

Throughout this course, students will be expected to develop:

- a general familiarity with Australia’s environmental history, and a more detailed engagement with key aspects of that history
- awareness of the work of prominent scholars in the discipline, and of a number of the most significant debates shaping Environmental History in Australia
- a degree of confidence using historiographic methods to inquire into environmental issues, including identifying, evaluating and working with primary sources
- a critical perspective on claims made about environments past and present informed by a consciousness of the different human and non-human actors and forces involved
- some insight into the problematic relationship between past events and narrative forms

**Assessment Components**

**10% Student presentations (10 minutes)** Each student will be asked to give a brief (10 mins) presentation on an Australian place whose environmental history they have investigated. They can speak about a place that is named in the course materials for the week they are assigned, or another that interests them and whose history is relevant to the themes of the course. Places could be suburbs, towns, waterways, human institutions or natural locations. Two students will present in class each week, beginning in week 4. Students are encouraged to provide visual materials, including photographs, slides, excerpts from media or archival documents to accompany these short talks.

**25% Short essay (5-6 pages)** Due in Week 6. Students will be required to refer to at least three relevant sources from the course materials. Questions to be announced Week 3.

**15% (2 pages) Animal or plant source evaluation** Due in Week 9. Students will be asked to choose an animal or plant species and investigate some aspect of its history in Australia by locating a primary source through which a historian might begin an investigation. Students will evaluate the source for its reliability and establish what we can learn from it about the animal or plant in question. Sources might include images, reports, media articles, research articles, books (popular or academic) or various other possibilities. More detailed instructions on locating and evaluating sources will be offered before the mid-semester break.

**10% Long essay proposal (1-2 pages)** Due in Week 12. Students will prepare a proposal for their final essay, including which question they intend to answer, a brief (paragraph length) statement of what they believe they will argue, and an annotated list of the resources from the course materials they plan to refer to.

**40% Long essay (12-14 pages)** Due in Week 15. Students will be required to refer to at least six relevant sources from the course materials. Questions to be announced Week 10.

*Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component will result in failure of the class.*
Grade A: Excellent performance showing a thorough knowledge and understanding of the topics of the course; all work includes clear, logical explanations, insight, and original thought and reasoning.

Grade B: Good performance with general knowledge and understanding of the topics; all work includes general analysis and coherent explanations showing some independent reasoning, reading and research.

Grade C: Satisfactory performance with some broad explanation and reasoning; the work will typically demonstrate an understanding of the course on a basic level.

Grade D: Passable performance showing a general and superficial understanding of the course’s topics; work lacks satisfactory insight, analysis or reasoned explanations.

Grade F: Unsatisfactory performance in all assessed criteria. Work is weak, unfinished or unsubmitted.

This course uses the following scale of numerical equivalents to letter grades:

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<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>A-</td>
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Written work due in class must be submitted to your instructor during class time. Late work should be submitted in person to the Academic Coordinator during regular office hours (9:00am-5:00pm, Monday-Friday). In the absence of the Academic Coordinator, another member of the administrative staff can accept the work in person. The NYUS staff will mark down the date and time of submission in the presence of the student. Students must also submit an electronic copy of late written work to Turn-It-In within 24 hours.

Work submitted after the submission time without an agreed extension receives a penalty of 2 points on the 100-point scale (for the assignment) for each day the work is late.

Written work submitted beyond five (5) weekdays after the submission date without an agreed extension fails and is given a zero.
Plagiarism Policy

The academic standards of New York University apply to all coursework at NYU Sydney. NYU Sydney policies are in accordance with New York University’s plagiarism policy. The presentation of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism.

Penalties for confirmed cases of plagiarism are severe and are dealt with by the Director, NYU Sydney, not your instructor. Your home school will be notified and you will be dealt with according to the standards of that school. The codes of conduct and academic standards for NYU’s various schools and colleges are outlined in the respective school’s academic resources.

Attendance Policy

Study abroad at Global Academic Centres is an academically intensive and immersive experience, in which students from a wide range of backgrounds exchange ideas in discussion-based seminars. Learning in such an environment depends on the active participation of all students. And since classes typically meet once or twice a week, even a single absence can cause a student to miss a significant portion of a course. To ensure the integrity of this academic experience, class attendance at the centres is mandatory, and unexcused absences will be penalised with a two percent deduction from the student’s final course grade for every week of classes missed.

The class roster will be marked in the first five minutes of class and anyone who arrives after this time will be considered absent. Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence. Repeated absences will result in harsher penalties, including failure.

Classroom Expectations

This is a seminar subject and requires the active participation of all students. It also requires engaged discussion, including listening to and respecting other points of view. Your behaviour in class should respect your classmates’ desire to learn. It is important for you to focus your full attention on the class, for the entire class period.

- Arrive to class on time.
- Once you are in class, you are expected to stay until class ends. Leaving to make or take phone calls, to meet with classmates, or to go to an interview, is not acceptable behaviour.
- Phones, digital music players, and any other communications or sound devices are not to be used during class. That means no phone calls, no texting, no social media, no email, and no internet browsing at any time during class.
- Laptop computers and tablets are not to be used during class except in rare instances for specific class-related activity expressly approved by your instructor.
- The only material you should be reading in class is material assigned for that class. Reading anything else, such as newspapers or magazines, or doing work from another class, is not acceptable.
- Class may not be recorded in any fashion – audio, video, or otherwise – without permission in writing from the instructor.
**Required Texts**

There is no required text, but students will be expected to complete the required readings each week. These are posted on NYU Classes. They are advised to attempt the recommended readings also (particularly useful for essays).

**Supplemental Texts**

There is a wide range of scholarly material on various aspects of Australian environmental history. Below is a selection of works that may be useful in preparing assessment tasks or in understanding the field and the course content more generally.

- Eric Rolls. *They All Ran Wild*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984
Tuesday, February 3

This week students will consider the practice of environmental history and its relationship to narrative. They will be introduced to some of the significant themes in Australian environmental history and how these have been understood and narrated by historians. They will have an opportunity to discuss the conduct of classes, forthcoming assessment and the timetable and structure of the course.

Required Reading:

Session 2  Australia and Historical Metageography
Tuesday, February 10

What makes a continent? Where do we draw the lines? Given the environmental diversity of the country we refer to as Australia, this week we will consider some of the ways in which boundaries have been drawn to distinguish Australian environments. The historical nature of these boundaries influences the perspective we can take and the scale of the histories we narrate.

Required Reading:

Session 3  Settler Environments
Tuesday, February 17

Australia emerged through a process of colonisation which can be fruitfully compared to histories of other countries such as the United States, South Africa and New Zealand. This week we will take a broader view of this history in order to bring into focus what is specific to the Australian context as well as what it shares with other settler societies. We will look at global narratives of ecological imperialism, and some ways in which those processes took particular shapes in Australia.

Required Reading:
Session 4  Environments, Citizens and the Nation
Tuesday, February 24

The imagined community of the nation and the governmental projects of the state (themselves possessing intertwined histories) use and interact with environments in numerous ways. To link such cultural and social work to the natural world is a powerful ideological tool, but the story does not end there: natural environments do shape us and our activities, as we reshape them. This week we will consider some Australian histories of nationalism and citizenship in their environmental dimensions.

Required Reading:

Required field trip/excursion: Woolwich/Hunter's Hill Walking Tour. (Further details will be supplied in the first session).

Session 5  'Useful' Plants
Tuesday, March 3

The history of Australian settlement and colonisation is also the history of plants: collecting some to circulate beyond Australia, introducing others to cultivate in Australia, and experimenting with their uses. Along the way, new Australian environments have been created, and Australian plants have contributed to environmental change elsewhere. This week we focus on the role of institutions big (such as botanic gardens) and small (such as farms and market gardens) in mediating these processes.

Required Reading:

Session 6  'Problem' Animals
Tuesday, March 10

With the arrival of Europeans in Australia, animals and humans encountered each other in new ways, many unanticipated. This week we will consider the paradigmatic example: when introduced species 'go feral', causing disruption for indigenous ecosystems and economically valued activities in the environment. But this phenomenon will also be examined as part of a broader discussion about what it means, historically, for an
animal (or plant) to be identified as 'a problem', and some of the complexities of this sort of human-animal interaction in Australian history.

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

**SPRING BREAK 16 – 20 March**

**Session 7  Soil, Agriculture and Population**
**Tuesday, March 24**

The qualities of Australian soil have been central to the possibility of substantial agricultural industries on the continent, and by extension to questions of appropriate levels of human population. Imported agricultural ideas and practices have also been massively destructive to existing environments, and the problem of soil has become interminable. This week we consider the relationship between land management (both Aboriginal and European), soil, agricultural productivity and population on the continent.

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

**Session 8  Fire**
**Tuesday, March 31**

Australia has a long history of catastrophic bushfire and thus, too, of fire-related controversy and ongoing public dispute over how best to approach this phenomenon (as well as to save lives). Yet even this assessment--that bushfire is catastrophic--is troubled by the question: are Australian environments made to
burn? What role did Aboriginal land management practices have in producing a fire-prone environment (or indeed, one where regular burning was necessary to many species)? This week we will consider how new patterns of settlement, development and land use raise again these perennial questions about fire in Australia as well as generating some new ones.

Required Reading:
- Susan Yell. "'Breakfast is Now Tea, Toast, and Tissues': Affect and the Media Coverage of Bushfires". *Media International Australia*. No. 137, November 2010, pp 109-119

Session 9   Freshwater
Tuesday, April 7

As the driest continent on earth, water dominates environmental histories in Australia: the problem of both its lack in drought and overabundance in flood have preoccupied settler Australians. Part of the problem is in understanding water in terms imported from other continents. Australian birds and other animals have adapted for local conditions, yet cyclical economic models derived from the Northern hemisphere have proved far less malleable. This week we consider different ways of living in Australian freshwater environments with a focus on rivers and river systems including Australia's major river system--the Murray-Darling--as well as some local Sydney waterways--the Hawkesbury and George's Rivers.

Required Reading:

Session 10   Saltwater
Tuesday, April 14

European and other settlers on this continent have often clung to the coast, joining and displacing Australia's Indigenous saltwater peoples. Their homes, transport and industry turned first towards the ocean, and only later inland. This week we look at life and leisure in coastal environments, as well as the practical and political problems generated when large numbers of people draw upon the resources the ocean affords.

Required Reading:

**Required field trip/excursion**: Manly Ferry and North Head Walking Tour (Further details will be supplied in the first session).

**Session 11 Urban Environments**
**Tuesday, April 21**

Much environmental thought (as well as policy and political activism) turns from the most populous areas of the Australian continent towards the most agriculturally productive expanses, or indeed towards wilderness. This week we look more closely at places that most Australians call home: suburban and urban environments. These have continued to be biodiverse spaces with their own ecological qualities, flora and fauna (including, in Sydney, the unfairly maligned ibis). They have also been actively shaped as more-than-human environments through uncertain alliances between human and non-human actors, adding complexity to traditional concerns of urban history over social transformation of space.

**Required Reading**:

**Session 12 Antarctica**
**Tuesday, April 28**

Given anthropogenic climate change, the fate of Antarctica is the fate of the world. Australia shares not only proximity but also political responsibility for the continent with a number of other nations. This week we consider this 'Australian' environment as a way into thinking about Australian environmental history as an unavoidably international, transnational and even global affair.

**Required Reading**:

**Recommended Reading**:
Session 13 Histories of Tourism and Science on the Great Barrier Reef
Tuesday, May 5

The world’s largest coral reef system, the Great Barrier Reef, has been valued by locals and as a World Heritage Site since 1981, yet is also threatened by global warming and human-induced environmental change. The contemporary understanding of the reef as focal point for science and tourism itself has a history, though, and this week we will explore some of that history and consider changing conceptions of the reef and its significance for humans in parallel to the changing environment of the reef itself.

Required Reading:

Session 14 Climate Change and Environmental History
Tuesday, May 12

By way of conclusion, we will consider the way that large-scale environmental problems such as climate change trouble the terms of our inquiry during this semester, but also whether environmental history can contribute anything to the address of such problems.

Required Reading:

Your Instructor

Dr. Adam Gall holds a Ph.D. in Gender & Cultural Studies from the University of Sydney. He is an interdisciplinary Australian Studies scholar who has taught in Cultural Studies, Human Geography, Indigenous Studies and Australian History contexts. Adam’s research interests include narratives of attachment, twentieth and twenty-first century cultures of nationalism, representations of the frontier and dispossession, and indigeneity and settler identity in Australian film and literature. His current research project looks at stories of human and non-human survival in southern settler-colonial cities (Sydney, Buenos
Aires, Cape Town), as well as in North America. This research deals with the relationship between storytelling, ethics and politics in situations of catastrophic social and environmental change.