Making Tracks: Ruth Morgan

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“Undertaking Doctoral Studies in Environmental History Led Me to People, Places, and Subjects That I Had Never Imagined”

by **Ruth Morgan**

I’m probably the person least likely to have ended up in the environmental humanities. I grew up in the suburbs of perhaps the world’s most isolated city—Perth, Western Australia—seemingly far from the great outdoors and environmental concerns. Or so I thought. It has only been in retrospect that I have been able to piece together the fragments that led me into environmental history, and so to the Rachel Carson Center.

It had taken me some time to even recognize that I had long been fascinated with the past, and that this interest in different places and cultures had influenced my eclectic choice of undergraduate studies at the **University of Western Australia**. Following a combined Bachelor of Arts & Bachelor of Economics and a brief foray into the world of journalism, I returned to the university to undertake doctoral research under the supervision of RCC alumna **Andrea Gaynor**. I shared with Andrea a desire to explore something “relevant,” something that was of interest to the wider community, something that would allow me to unravel the present. She introduced me to environmental history, and the rest, they say, really is history.

Within the year I was embarking on a project that spoke to the prevailing anxieties about water scarcity and anthropogenic climate change in twenty-first century Australia. Mammalologist Tim Flannery had just declared that Perth was going to be Australia’s first ghost metropolis, a city dead for want of water. At this time, Perth, the Western Australia wheatbelt, most of southern Australia, and the Murray-Darling basin in the southeast,

were all in the grip of drought, and anthropogenic climate change was in the headlines. Western Australian politics was focused on whether Perth's next water supplies should come from the state's northwest, seawater desalination, or the South West Yarragadee Aquifer. Not long after, Al Gore was telling us the Inconvenient Truth and Australia voted in what was then labeled the world's first climate change election, which led to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd signing the Kyoto Protocol in 2008.

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Undertaking doctoral studies in environmental history led me to people, places, and subjects that I had never imagined: from frontier conflict in Perth's swamps, to dunghills and typhoid, gold fever, wheat and resources booms, and the inevitable busts. Since at least the turn of the twentieth century, it seems as though Western Australians have been tormented by recurring fears that they will, sooner or later, run out of water. It is largely this anxiety about running out that has prompted support for the near-continuous development of new sources, including ambitious plans to transport water from the north of the state for Perth and the southwest. All the while, many Western Australians have maintained a profligate water culture, living beyond their environmental limits and rendering themselves vulnerable to running out. How this fear of running out has been experienced, and how these experiences have changed over time, is the subject of my research.

Researching water history, I soon realized that this was not only about water but was also a story about Western Australia and Western Australians—how we've come to where we are, why, and how things might have turned out differently. Some will find cautionary tales, others will be relieved at how far we've come. Others will think we still have a very long way to go. Going forward, these are the kinds of discussions I hope that my research will prompt—because conversations about water are also conversations about the kinds of societies we want to live in. And, living in a part of the world where the climate continues to become drier and warmer, few conversations are quite as important.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can trace the faint outlines of this research project in my own past. My suburban upbringing was not divorced from nature, as I had once thought—the boundaries between nature and culture are, of course, blurred. The nature with which I was familiar was more often than not a resource, something to be consumed

—whether it was water from the tap, forest to be husbanded, or chickens to lay eggs for breakfast. Environmental history gave me the tools and insights to see the connections and flows that bound me, my family, and our way of life to a much wider network of processes, organisms, and technologies.

Seeing the world in this entangled way led me to my current project, which I commenced during my time at the Rachel Carson Center. My research into colonial understandings of climate in Western Australia had alerted me to the environmental connections between the Australian colonies and British India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I explore the origins, impacts, and legacies of the traffic in environmental ideas, practices, and species that crossed the Indian Ocean during the colonial period. Examining the environmental connections between Australia and India will not only recover Australia's environmental history, I hope, but also illuminate the wider imperial processes and networks shared across multiple empires and between multiple colonies that created the modern world.

Undertaking research in the environmental humanities has introduced me to a wonderfully collegial community in Australia and around the world. During my doctoral studies, I was soon drawn into the tight-knit scholarly networks based at the **Australian National University**, under the leadership of Tom Griffiths (future RCC Fellow) and **Libby Robin** (RCC Board Member). It was under their guidance in particular that I learned how Australian researchers must travel to overcome the tyranny of distance: even in our ultra-connected world, the importance of face-to-face interaction cannot be overstated. It's the RCC's efforts to bring scholars together that have helped me—and others—to continue making tracks in environmental history.