Uses of Environmental History: Tom Griffiths

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This is the fifth in a series of posts exploring the uses of environmental history. The series has been adapted from contributions to a roundtable forum published in the first issue of the new **Journal for Ecological History**, edited by Renmin University's **Center for Ecological History**.

By **Tom Griffiths**

A few years ago, when I was writing a history of Antarctica (*Slicing the Silence*) and researching human experience in polar stations during the long, dark winter, I turned to the medical and psychological studies of life in isolated communities and kept coming up against the limits of faceless, nameless, clinical accounts of deeply personal and cultural matters. In the name of objectivity, rationality, and generalization, scientists and social scientists gutted the real people, and the meaning ebbed away. History, by contrast, spills over with illuminating, specific, named, known, verifiable examples that you can argue with. This person did that here, then, because. History's commitment to contingency and particularity has often been seen to weaken its usefulness. But to understand the rigors of the long polar night—and to survive it—people need vivid tales of winters past.

Historians are often challenged about the usefulness of their discipline—and they frequently challenge themselves. The Australian historian and political scientist, Hugh Stretton, besieged by rising economic rationalism in the 1980s, treasured history as a discipline because it has "three qualities which have been scarce in modern social science": it is "holist, uncertain and eclectic."

"Who study societies of every kind," Stretton asked, "study them whole, know most about how they conserve or change their ideas and institutions, write in plain language,

and generally know how uncertain and selective their knowledge is at best? Historians do."

Stretton valued history as a form of knowledge: subtle, humble, all embracing, complex, and contextual—and therefore less amenable to generalization, prediction, or application.

Historians welcome questions about usefulness because history is a democratic practice that cherishes its connection with the people and the polity. As historian Greg Dening said (in **Performances**, 1996), history can be constructed at the dinner table, over the back fence, in parliament and in the streets, and not just in a tutorial room or at the scholar's desk. Historians aim to give voice to common experience and seek to communicate with the widest audience. Ironically, it is this very inclusiveness that can expose their authority to challenge. History is so important, so ubiquitous, so integrated with our public and personal lives—with the very substance and art of living—that it is possible to take it for granted and overlook its power. It so seamlessly underpins everything we do that it can be hard, sometimes, to detect its daily revolutionary influence.

Often we can discern a direct causal link between academic scholarship and public policy—as, for example, in the recognition of Native Title by the High Court of Australia in its *Mabo* judgement of 1992 or in the declaration of conservation reserves on the basis of ecological and historical research. But just as important is the role that history plays in generating the groundswell of reform, in shaping new narratives that infuse the public imagination and expand the realm of the possible. For example, the deeper timescales of environmental historians enable us to see our fossil-fuel society in perspective, and ourselves not just as a civilization, but as a species. A history that only looks at the last few hundred years makes exponential economic and demographic growth seem normal instead of the aberration it is in the longer history of humanity. And history that values nature only as a resource for humans renders invisible the ecological interdependence that sustains us. Sometimes we need a different history in order to create a different future.

A crucial part of history's influence is that historians don't just write for their academic peers; they also write books for the general public. If your book gets on someone's bedside table, they are probably reading it for some time and possibly deeply; or at least they are reading it when their minds are more tender, open, and receptive.

There aren't many policy papers on bedside tables. They are generally read briskly in bright office-light by hurried, closed minds, and they often skip off the surface into oblivion.

One way we can influence public policy is simply by being the best historians we can be. And we should encourage our students and one another to generate the most diverse and original inquiries into past experience. Curiosity-driven research and a healthy, even random, diversity of scholarship gives us a better chance that we will have knowledge to mobilize when public debate shifts suddenly and unexpectedly, as it often does. In other words, we can often exert greater influence on public policy by trying *not* to be too relevant. When the Australian historian and archaeologist, John Mulvaney, gave the Kenneth Myer Lecture in Canberra in 1994, he titled it *The Wisdom of Non-Relevance*, and he argued passionately against the rising tide in universities of technocratic utilitarianism. Mulvaney's own scholarship radically changed the way the Australian public understood Aboriginal people and their history. Today there is a danger that academic historians all face in the game of grantsmanship, which constantly asks us to show relevance, address national research priorities, and to look for what we already know. Grant seeking could be making us less adventurous, more conservative, and ultimately less influential.

Interestingly, in Australia, real action on climate change is coming *not* from the politicians but from the people themselves. It is the ordinary householders, the business people, the innovators and entrepreneurs, the scientists and scholars, and the local community leaders who are leading cultural adaptation and the transition to renewable energy. Australia's national government is being left behind. It is in the grip of vested interests, stubbornly resisting change. The people are moving faster on this issue than their government; they are doing it for their grandchildren, and because they see opportunities. It makes sense, then, for scholars to empower people with good stories, clear words, effective imagery, and persuasive insights.

A second example concerns the history of bush fire in Australia. Following the Black Saturday firestorm in Victoria in February 2009, when 173 people died, the residents of one of the suffering communities turned to historians for help. Residents explained that they didn't need any more infrastructure, material things, or soft toys, and they certainly didn't want any more hugs; but they did very much want to make sense of what happened. They had a deep hunger for history, both recent and long-term; they yearned for meaning, explanation, and story. They wanted to be listened to in their uniqueness and particularity and in their distinct ecological setting; and they wanted help in understanding

how their experience reflected patterns across time. We—the historians who were invited into their community—worked with survivors and produced two books and a film (**Black Saturday at Steels Creek**, **Living with Fire**, and **Afterburn**), all released within five years of the firestorm, and all shared with community members and then made available to fire authorities, the government, and the general public.

As historians we know, in our practice, that our work has a highly significant role to play in people's lives. History is a human instinct. But our work can also lead to very practical policy advice. In our fire histories, we showed why the authorized bushfire safety book was dangerous in that bioregion; where the Royal Commission into the fires succeeded and failed; why the edifice of research underpinning the recommended survival strategy was flawed; why fire refuges are so important to safety in the mountain ranges of Victoria; how to identify a potentially fatal fire day; what path a firestorm is likely to take and how it is likely to behave; what aspects of community tend to work in a crisis and what don't; how the lives of humans and trees are interdependent; and why local fire history is your best survival guide.

History is holist and eclectic, but not so uncertain that it can't help us to make better choices.