

# Reports

# Talking Country with Reg Dodd at Finniss Springs

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MALCOLM MCKINNON

*Malcolm McKinnon is an Australian artist, filmmaker, curator and ghost-wrangler working mainly in the realms of social history and digital media. He has an abiding interest in the surprising labyrinths of living memory and the peculiar beauty of local vernacular. His films include The Farmer's Cinematheque, Making Dust and Seriously Singing.*

This story comes from Finniss Springs, a 2,000-square-kilometre patch of desert country bordering Lake Eyre, in South Australia's far north. For the Arabana and for many other First Nations people, Finniss Springs has been, at different times and in various ways, a homeland, a refuge, a battlefield, a university and a museum. For Reg Dodd (born in 1940), Finniss Springs is the cattle and sheep station taken up by his Scottish grandfather and his Arabana grandmother in 1918. It's the site of the Aboriginal mission where he went to school, but also the place where he learned Arabana lore and traditional bush skills from older members of his extended family – a place of 'growing up two ways'. And like many people of his generation at Finniss Springs, he can take you to the tree in the dry, sandy creek bed beneath which he was born.

For me, Finniss Springs is a place I've been visiting regularly for over 30 years. It's also where I learned to keep my mouth shut and to listen deeply and patiently. This wasn't an ability I developed quickly or easily, and it required me to unlearn several unhelpful habits; the habit of asking too many questions, of hurrying to a conclusion, of feeling obliged to offer up an opinion. Eventually, over many years, I learned to listen for and give consideration to the prominent silences that characterise the telling of stories about this place; to appreciate the implicit meanings in the things deliberately unsaid. I learned to be patient enough to allow different parts of a story to accrue and coalesce over time. And I came to appreciate that many of the

stories about this place are never fixed – that there are multiple, coexisting versions of a given story, perceived through many different lenses. Perhaps a little like the complex artesian aquifers that sit beneath its surface, the stories of this place are characteristically multilayered and not easily mapped.

I've worked with Reg Dodd and others from his mob on a series of projects over these past few decades, recording and interpreting first-voice stories about the history of this place, as well as stories about Country itself. We've made short films, exhibitions and audio programs.<sup>1</sup> Most recently we worked together over several years to write a book, *Talking Sideways*.<sup>2</sup> It feels like this work with Reg has effectively been a long, episodic conversation, based on friendship and mutual trust, as well as a shared (but respectively distinct) connection to the Country where the work is rooted.



**Figure 1** Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, Finnis Springs, 2018. Photograph by Malcolm McKinnon.

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- 1 These collaborative projects include a travelling exhibition *Working Together – Stories of Aboriginal involvement in the Overland Telegraph & the Old Ghan Railway* (Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute, 2001), an audio tour *The Living Oodnadatta Track* (Northern Regional Development Board & South Australian Tourism Commission, 2007) and a series of short films *Growing Up Two Ways* (Reckless Eye Productions & Marree Arabunna Peoples' Committee, 2008 – a sample film from that collection can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/254437077>).
  - 2 Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, *Talking Sideways* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Publishing, 2019).

My work with Reg has always happened on Country. This has been vital because Country itself is always central to the narrative. Country is more than a backdrop, and often more than merely a prompt for the telling of stories. Rather, Reg's stories involve Country as an intrinsic element, as an active agent. Quite often the distinction between people and Country appears insignificant. It's as Kim Mahood has observed: '(For some Aboriginal people) place is lodged in the body, as essential to its proper functioning as the circulation of blood and the apprehension of thoughts'.<sup>3</sup> And also Ross Gibson: '(Country) is shaped by persistent obligations, memories and patterns of growth and regrowth. Governed by this system of physical and metaphysical interdependence, *the country lives like something with a memory*, a force of the past prevailing in the landscape still'.<sup>4</sup> And so a fundamental thing to understand about this kind of storytelling is that history is embedded in Country, rather than being a matter of abstract chronology. Reg Dodd's manner of storytelling frequently and effortlessly collapses or juxtaposes events from deep Aboriginal time with events from more immediate living memory or from his own lived experience. Historian Ingereth Macfarlane describes this collapsing of chronological time as 'a heterogeneous now' – a simultaneous privileging of events and experiences from all different times. For Macfarlane, Reg's kind of storytelling conjures the metaphor of a marble cake, encompassing 'disparate elements combined through no rigid technique'.<sup>5</sup> There's a fundamentally different temporal logic evident here, at odds with the linear conception to which many of us are habitually attuned, and there's a significant cognitive shift required to accommodate it.

At Alberrie Creek, once the site of the railway siding on the old Ghan line closest to Finnis Springs mission, Reg walks around and points off in various directions, unspooling a string of stories from a dense web of memory:

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3 Kim Mahood, *Position Doubtful: Mapping Landscapes and Memories* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2016), 168.

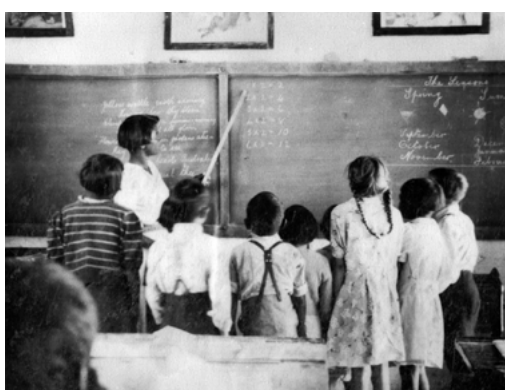
4 Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2002), 63, emphasis added.

5 Ingereth Macfarlane, 'Entangled Places: Interactive Histories in the Western Simpson Desert, Central Australia' (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2010), 71–72.

That hill over there – when I was a little fella, that’s where I killed my first *kadni* [bearded dragon] ... I used to walk along the railway line here, picking up cigarette butts that I’d take home to the old man so he could get the tobacco for his pipe ... When the first diesel train came through we all came up from the mission. We stood here and waved these little British flags as the loco came by.

And at Jersey Springs, a little further north up the Oodnadatta Track:

These two hills: our people used to dig *yalka* [bush onion] in that area, then they’d peel them and throw that brown onion skin away. So on one side there was a heap of those brown skins, and on the other there was a heap of the little white *yalka*. So that little brown hill that’s there at Jersey Springs now, we call that place Yalka-nyuri. And the little white hill, just beside the brown one, we call it Yalka-parlu. All of these places in our Country have stories attached to them, and they extend on and on ... The stories give us an identity and allow us to see the land in a different way, as a living being which is really a part of us, because our ancestors’ spirits are within that land and they’re very real ... The land is a living thing that you can relate to, just like you relate to a person.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2** School class at Finnis Springs, 1947, with Esther Dodd at the blackboard. Photograph courtesy of Marree Arabunna Community Centre collection.

Reg Dodd has spent all his life living and working in this part of the Country, and he knows it several overlapping ways. He has deep connections and inherited cultural knowledge through his mother’s Arabana lineage and also through storylines relating to his father’s Arrente heritage. But he’s also connected through several generations of European

<sup>6</sup> All quoted material by Reg Dodd is from Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, *Talking Sideways* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2019).

pastoralists, extending back to the 1860s. The experiences of his working life in the pastoral industry and in the railways, provide additional levels of knowledge and connection, as do the more recent decades of his working life in conservation and natural resource management and in cultural tourism. Perhaps most strikingly, the depth and intensity of his connection to this Country is the product of his constant presence. Reg makes me understand how ‘looking after Country’ may be most acutely a matter of being physically present, of monitoring with one’s own eyes, skin, hands and feet.

To me, if you care about this Country and you want to look after it, you can’t do that from Port Augusta or Adelaide or somewhere else. You have to be here, then you can talk to anyone who might come along. It’s your Country and you can speak for it. You’re part and parcel of this land, and that gives you a position of strength and authority that you can work from.

This perspective might seem problematic or challenging for many other Arabana people who, for various reasons, have spent much of their lives away from their traditional country. Many were compelled to relocate in search of employment when the pastoral industry shed much of its Aboriginal workforce in the late 1960s and ’70s and when the old Ghan railway closed down in the early 1980s. Alternatively, they may have left in order to access improved educational opportunities or better health services in a bigger town or city. People continue to claim a deep connection, despite their physical absence. But Reg contends that:

There’s a thin line, like a cord that connects you with this land. Once you’ve severed that cord and lost that continuity, then you might come back to visit but you don’t really have that same connection anymore. I can come out here and talk with that bush or that hill because I’m a part of this place ... It’s got to be a hands-on, practical thing that you have to immerse yourself in and feel in your heart.

Reg Dodd’s seeing Country is a discipline that he’s forever practising. For people unfamiliar with this place it might seem that he has extrasensory capabilities – his vision seems kaleidoscopic. He’s always noticing things from the corner of his eye,

spotting small movements and tiny elements within a large space. Of course, this is the kind of vision that you'd need for hunting animals and harvesting plants.

When you follow the tracks of an animal or a bird or an insect, you're looking at what that creature is doing, and in a sense you actually *become* that animal or that bird or lizard or insect. The track is telling you a story about what the creature is doing, and in following the track you're living that story. I follow a track and I find out what he's eating and where he camps, what he's hunting or what he's running away from. And a lot of the old people that I've known, that's how they used to hunt. They might have only had a spear or a tomahawk, but they could kill a kangaroo because they understood exactly how that kangaroo would behave.

It's a vision that renders Country as something infinitely rich and dynamic. Sitting one day out at Frome Creek, just north of Marree, Reg tells me about tracking a grasshopper in the sandy creek bed, close to where we're boiling the billy. Sometimes on all fours, sometimes lying flat on his belly, Reg had watched the grasshopper for a long time. Eventually, he witnessed a miraculous thing – the grasshopper defecated, ejecting a neat turd, which it then propelled away in mid-air with a perfectly timed kick from one of its powerful hind legs. Reg even tried to find the turd, just to see how far it had travelled, but without success. But this, we have to acknowledge, is real attention to detail.

Reg takes photographs of his Country. I've heard people claim that the only effective way to picture this country is to adopt an aerial perspective, creating a type of mud map or sand painting. But for Reg, a depiction of Country has never involved that kind of perspective. Rather, he tends to make intimate pictures of the tracks made by mammals, reptiles and birds, pictures of flowering and fruiting plants, of particular sites of significance within the story of his family and Aboriginal mob. He focuses on the detail – perhaps the pattern of scales on a lizard's leg – not just for its own sake but to evoke a sense of the bigger country and the bigger story. Reg's photography, like his storytelling, is quite literally made from the ground up. These photographs are characterised as much by their *resolution* as by the perspective framed through

the lens. They convey a quite visceral sense of the living environment, revealing the erratic pulse of life in response to a highly variable climate.<sup>7</sup>

Coming to this particular Country on a regular basis and listening to people connected with it, I've developed an appreciation of its complexities. In particular, my ongoing conversations with Reg Dodd have given me intimations of a much deeper understanding, beyond my own instinctive grasp of this place. I've assimilated stories and knowledge existing on several different levels: aesthetic, ecological, historical, political and mythological, imparted through showing as much as through telling. Really, it's an ongoing education, focused within an expansive, shimmering horizon.

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7 Reg Dodd's photographs have featured in several prominent exhibitions, including shows at the South Australian Museum and Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute. Several of these exhibitions have been staged in collaboration with the painter Lyn Hovey.



# Gobernadora as a Site of Memory: Ecological Oral History on the US–Mexico Border

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LIGIA A. ARGUILEZ

*Ligia A. Arguilez is a doctoral candidate in borderlands environmental history and research assistant at the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas, El Paso.*

My work is set in the hot, arid desert region that straddles both sides of the US–Mexico border, from Texas to California and from Chihuahua to Baja California. It is a complex, layered place with a long history of human movement and cultural hybridity, of conquest and violence imprinted into the landscape. For many of us *fronterizo/a/es* (borderlands people) the border wall/scar is a constant reminder of the imposition of power from above. But, if we turn our gaze to the natural environment, we can see beyond geopolitics and borders to illuminate the ways place is made and nurtured as part of a shared history between human and non-human nature.

This is a story about a common desert shrub and the ways it has shaped the people and deserts of the region. Known as the creosote bush in English and *gobernadora* or *guámis* in Spanish, I treat *Larrea tridentata* as a site of memory, like a sacred landmark of a million little points spread out over the arid lands of the US–Mexico borderlands. It is a borderlands plant both because it grows along the US–Mexican border, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because it lives at the physical and metaphorical ‘edges’ of modern cultural knowledge and landscapes. It has been displaced in waves over centuries, pushed to the outskirts, yet it persists.

Despite the oft-repeated perception of the desert as a ‘wasteland’, seemingly devoid of water and life, the deserts here have nourished and nurtured human life for millennia. The creosote bush’s foremost identity has been that of medicine: it is arguably the desert plant with more historical medicinal uses than any other in North America. Additionally, and relatedly, there is a salient eco-sensorial identity to the plant that has further embedded it in place – its distinct smell.



**Figure 1** Range map of Creosote Bush, 20 May 2003. This dataset was uploaded to Data Basin and is available with additional information at: <https://databasin.org/datasets/a259c898644440c596e5d58d93e9eccc/>. Data provided by Kenneth L. Cole, George Ferguson, James Henrickson, Barry Prigge, Richard Spellenberg, Samantha Arundel, Tim Lowrey, W. Geoffrey Spaulding, Esteban Muldavin, Tom Huggins and John Cannella.

Sonoran Desert naturalist and ethnobiologist, Gary Paul Nabhan, famously asked a Tohono O’odham teen what the desert smelled like to him and the young man responded, ‘the desert smells like rain’.<sup>1</sup> This counterintuitive statement makes sense in the context of the creosote bush–filled deserts. Humidity in the air acts as a sort of activator for the many chemicals on the plant’s leaves. With exposure to water, these compounds are released into the air and produce a very distinct smell which communicates the coming of rain – life – to living things around it. This smell is often referred to as the scent of desert rain, something that people from the desert experience in very nostalgic ways that often ties them to home. Illogical as it may seem, ‘the desert smells like rain’, with all its associated meanings, is a specific place-based knowledge which is, like the identification of medicinal plants, born of lived and living, rather than abstracted, histories. In this way, memory and the senses, particularly the olfactory sense, bridge the ecological and the cultural, creating place.

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1 Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in Papago Indian Country* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), 5.



**Figure 2** Image of creosote bush in Chihuahuan desert near Sierra Blanca, Texas. Photograph by Ligia A. Arguilez.

My PhD research explores the environmental and cultural history of this borderlands desert plant. As such, it intersects with histories of colonisation, development and urbanisation of these desert spaces, as well as with memory and place. Written historical sources often describe the creosote bush as a despised plant, harbinger of the worst possible land; called useless, foul-smelling and invasive (although it is a native plant). But oral history presents alternative perspectives. In its ability to highlight cultural specificity, oral history is essential in documenting

local, place-based knowledge about nature. I adopt a personalised ecological, or environmental, oral history approach that utilises the olfactory sense – I start by asking the interviewees to smell a sprig of creosote bush. This often elicits very strong memories that speak to *emplacement*. Ecological oral histories reveal stories, memories and knowledges that are often not found in written documents.<sup>2</sup> They are invaluable perspectives that afford a more complete historical picture of the plant.

The following section features excerpts from three oral histories that help flesh out the ways that people and the creosote bush have intersected and connected in the US–Mexico desert regions.

Carolina Sandoval Máñez, a Mexican woman from Chihuahua remembered:

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2 See A. Nightingale, 'Oral History, Ecological', in Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Elsevier Science, 2009); also Kathryn Newfont and Debbie Lee, *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).



**Figure 3** Portrait of a creosote bush with a hand, Franklin Mountains State Park, Texas May 2020. Photograph by Ingrid Leyva, [ingridleyva.com](http://ingridleyva.com).

We would put the little flowers in our ears, as if they were earrings. Then, at night, we would catch fireflies and put them on our foreheads. And, we loved it, we loved playing and we also really enjoyed watching how the birds would arrive, and rest on that plant, that later we learned it was called *gobernadora*. We were little, we just watched over the plant, because we liked to see the birds arrive, the swallows, and they would nest there ... And my grandmother would tell us that ... the *gobernadora* – that ugly little plant – was very warm and they could use it as a little home, a nest. So we loved seeing it, and the village *curandera* [a Mexican traditional/spiritual healer] would come and would always ask permission to forage some of the plant on our land ... and that plant was very, very important to her because it was what she healed with ... Everything they learn is inherited from their grandparents, their ancestors and ... my grandmother, when she started talking with her, well she taught her what it was used for.

Well, at the end of the day, I believe I have faith in all plants. But, the *governadora* is ‘the *governadora*’. It is called ‘the governess’ for a reason, after all. And, that is how I came to know it, and, to this day, something happens and you call my grandmother, you call my mother, or my cousins, or sisters: ‘Listen, do you have any *governadora*? Because ...’ I don’t know, whatever ailment, a scrape, a cut, a pain, rheumatism, and, well, you learn about all this stuff in your childhood, and so you keep growing that way.<sup>3</sup>

Guadalupe Hall, a Mexican woman from Chihuahua and Durango, recalled that,

My mother was a person who believed strongly in nature. And she utilised everything there was available around us ... We moved to the outskirts of Juarez ... and obviously there is a lot of this plant [*la guámis*] – but an extraordinarily exaggerated amount! You cannot walk a couple of steps without finding another one of these plants. So then, we started to hear about its medicinal benefits.

And it has an aroma that’s, well, peculiar, right? So, yes, I remember that my mother, she would boil it as if for tea, and she would drink it to cleanse her digestive system ... She would make a tea with the herb [*guámis*] and she made her cures that way.

The solutions that we arrive at with herbs or herbalism also have to do with the environment where we are developing, growing. For example, for us, it [*la guámis*] was part of our ‘environment’. We breathed it – you *smelled* it all around you. The scent would come when the wind blew and everything, ‘oh, it smells like *governadora*’. We burned it to make little fires, and, we utilised it all these ways, so that it was, it was part of us, *ours*, of what affected our life, of what made up our own existence ... it helped to form us as people.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Carolina Sandoval Máñez, interviewed by Alejandra Zavala, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, 14 November 2012, recording and transcript held at Institute of Oral History, University of Texas, El Paso.

4 Guadalupe Concepción Hall, interviewed by Ligia A. Arguilez, El Paso, Texas, 17 July 2018, recording and transcript held by author.





**Figure 4** Image of creosote bush in Chihuahuan Desert near Sunland Park, New Mexico. Photograph by Ligia A. Arguilez.

Rosemary Martínez, a Yaqui/Mexican woman from El Paso, Texas, remembered,

Being a little girl and having nightmares, or just being afraid. And my grandmother always wetting the branches of the *gobernadora* and she would spray me with the water. And that was one of the first memories, cause I knew that that was gonna take care of everything. [During a health crisis with rheumatoid arthritis] ... we had been taking a drive out in the country. And I said, I wanna stop and get some that bush. And – cause I remembered the smell.

And I said, at least, I just wanna feel better. You know? ... [healing from her rheumatoid arthritis crisis] wouldn't have been possible without the memory of my grandmother and the medicine behind it, there would be no way ... you know, *peyote* [a sacred medicinal cactus of the Chihuahuan Desert] grows underneath the shade of the *gobernadora*. It grows under the shade, so it's protecting other medicine. So, she's like the mother to these other medicines, too. And, that is a very sacred medicine now, that we hold also.

This is a part of us, what makes us *us*, what's in our DNA, what is in our memories, what – we hold our grandmothers' memories, of course we do. How else would we know these things?

It doesn't work if it's not connected to your ancestors and if it's not honoured in that way and I think that's such an important part of that ingredient is to be respected and honoured that way because that plant is an entity. To me

it's an entity of good health, it's a knowledge, it's so much rolled up into that little plant. And, it's attached to our history.<sup>5</sup>

Methods of ecological oral history help reveal the way place is created – through what Keith Basso referred to as the enigmatic nature of human attachments.<sup>6</sup> Carolina, Guadalupe and Rosemary all speak to some extent about landscapes of healing, of the senses, of childhood, family and shared knowledge. Those memories in turn speak to themes of self-formation that show the ways that the environment seeps into our identities. As Guadalupe explained, ‘it was part of us, *ours* ... of what made up our own existence’. The creosote bush – deeply rooted in the landscape of the desert – also then becomes rooted in the people who come to know it, facilitating a profound attachment to place, like a vegetal ‘placemaker’.

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5 Rosemary Martínez, interviewed by Ligia A. Arguilez, El Paso, Texas, 9 December 2017, recording and transcript held by author.

6 Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), xiv.

# Experiences of Environmental Change: An Intergenerational Approach

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SIOBHAN WARRINGTON

*Siobhan Warrington is a senior research associate with Newcastle University's Oral History Unit and Collective, currently working on the Living Deltas Research Hub. She has over 25 years' experience of collaborating with civil society across the globe to record and communicate the expertise and experiences of those living with poverty, environmental change and displacement.*

The Living Deltas Hub (2019–2024) seeks to deliver research and related activities that will contribute towards sustainable and equitable futures for those living in the delta regions of the Mekong and the Red River in Vietnam and the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) river system (including the Sundarbans)<sup>1</sup>. Coordinated by Newcastle University, it is a partnership of academic institutes from Vietnam, India, Bangladesh and beyond, consisting of over 100 researchers.

Graham Smith and Siobhan Warrington from the Newcastle University Oral History Unit and Collective (NUOHUC) in the UK, are working with colleagues in Vietnam, India and Bangladesh to design and implement participatory oral history work in each of the delta regions to document older people's experiences of and responses to environmental change over time and their hopes and concerns for the future. We are initiating this work in the Mekong Delta and currently working with colleagues from across the Hub to design a program of intergenerational participatory research with two rural communities that will combine oral history, photography and mapping.

The Mekong Delta of Vietnam is facing multiple threats and challenges including sea-level rise, land salination, seasonal flooding and drought, and significant sediment loss, brought about by multiple hydropower projects upstream and the sand-mining industry. In the extensive body of literature concerned with changing socio-ecological systems in the Mekong Delta, there is little recognition of older people; much

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see <https://www.livingdeltas.org/>.





**Figure 1** View of Bin Thien Lake in An Phu district, An Giang Province. Members of the community who live alongside the lake will take part in the research. Photograph by Thuy Mai, An Giang University, Vietnam.

of the literature fails to take gender or age differences into account when discussing vulnerability and risk, or livelihoods and resilience. Vietnam has a rapidly ageing population due to significant reductions in the birthrate and mortality alongside increased life expectancy and most older people live in rural areas. An understanding of the relationship between older people and environmental change is, however, missing from the research and policy documents relating to ageing. Our oral history work will contribute to a greater understanding of older people's relationship to a changing delta environment. As we enter the UN's Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030), we hope that our work will contribute to an increased awareness of the rights and capacities of older women and men in programs and policies that relate to responding to and adapting to environmental degradation and climate change.

We do however recognise the value of an intergenerational approach and our combined oral history and visual methods will involve younger and older generations exchanging knowledge, experience and ideas about their relationship with the environment, environmental change, and their response to that change. We hope to

explore rural women's and men's relationship with their changing environment in terms of their knowledge, agency and priorities, and to provide varied and in-depth accounts of delta lives, past, present and future. The research takes a 'beyond livelihoods' approach, recognising systemic challenges and opportunities, as well as exploring cultural and emotional relationships with natural resources. It will also explore the potential for younger and older generations to co-create inclusive and sustainable imagined futures, drawing on their distinct and shared knowledges and aspirations.



**Figure 2** Research coordinators from An Giang University meeting community researchers in Lieu Tu commune, Soc Trang province. Photograph by Lan Nguyen, Center of Monitoring and Technology Environmental Resource An Giang Province, Vietnam.

Between April and July 2021, we will be working closely with our colleagues at An Giang University to implement a learning and research program that will engage a group of 12 student and community-based researchers. This program consists of several cycles of workshop sessions, individual learning, and site visits to the selected two communities. Key sessions will be

delivered remotely but will aim to retain a strong practical and participatory ethos. Reflective practice will also be critical for everyone involved, both learners and those supporting the process. We are very aware of the numerous challenges (and opportunities) presented by remote teaching and learning, and the cultural, geographic and linguistic differences at play between some of us involved. This challenging process provides an additional 'site' of research, our experiences of this process, which will not only inform our subsequent work in the other three deltas, but should also add to the body of literature on oral history pedagogy and participatory approaches.

We also hope this work will contribute to the wider field of oral history and the environment. In addition to Living Deltas, NUOHUC is also engaged in Wastes and Strays – an interdisciplinary study of urban commons.<sup>2</sup> We take inspiration from Sue

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2 For more information see <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/wastesandstrays/>.

Bradley's recent article, 'Hobday's hands', which calls for a more inclusive vision that recognises the interconnectedness of human and non-human animal lives.<sup>3</sup> As our engagement with this theme builds, we are actively participating in the Oral History Society Special Interest Group on Environment and Climate Change, and also value what we learn from others who are engaged in oral history and environmental change across the globe.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Sue Bradley, 'Hobday's Hands: Recollections of Touch in Veterinary Oral Histories', *Oral History* 49, no. 1 (2021), 35–46.

4 For more information see <https://www.ohs.org.uk/information-for/environment-and-climate-change/>.

# Window in Time, a Community Oral History Project: Its Challenges, Shortcomings and Lessons Learnt

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BIANKA VIDONJA BALANZATEGUI

*Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui is an adjunct lecturer at James Cook University, a historian and historical consultant. Her research fields are the Australian sugar industry and migration history.*

Ingham in the Hinchinbrook Shire, North Queensland, is a small country town whose economy depends on the cultivation of sugar cane. Due to waves of Italian migration, it is referred to as 'Little Italy'. In 1995 the first Australian Italian Festival (AIF) was held to celebrate the cultural diversity of the Hinchinbrook Shire. The festival has been held annually since, excepting 2020 due to COVID-19. While the festival's focus is on the Italian culture, it recognises that there is a rich tradition of shared cultures including other immigrant nationalities and the traditional owners, the Warrgamay, Bandjin and Nywaigi peoples. In that spirit, the project, Window in Time, was instigated by the AIF in 1998 to capture the memories of elderly people who had a long connection with the district. The project was also designed to add to festival visitors' experience. The story of this evolving project highlights the challenges faced by small communities seeking to record oral histories but lacking professional resources and funds. It also emphasises the need for amateur oral history initiatives to consider how these oral histories will be preserved for perpetuity.

The Window in Time oral history project came about because of individual initiative and passion, Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF) grants and voluntary input. A RADF grant was secured in 1998, and an interviewer and photographer were commissioned to work on the project. Unfortunately, the interviewer dropped out and local professional photographer, Dr Ann Vardanega, took on both tasks. This was the days before digital formatting and when the photographs, both originals and copies of old photographs, were taken on 35mm film and the interview

transcripts were typed up with word processor software. Short versions of the interview transcripts together with photographs were mounted and framed for display.

The 19 people who were interviewed were selected for the longevity of their residence in the district. The average age was mid-eighties to mid-nineties. Countries of origin included China, Finland and the British Isles, though the majority were from Italy and Sicily. The subjects were from all walks of life, many from very humble origins who came to Australia with nothing. Their remarkable stories told of back-breaking work, hard-won success, sacrifice and loss.



**Figure 1** Ann Vardanega and interviewee May Keys, 1998, with exhibition piece created by Ann. Photograph courtesy of Australian Italian Festival Committee.

This first Window in Time project came none too late as within 12 months a good number of those interviewed had died. This was sobering, and impressed on those involved in the project the fragility of oral history sources and the urgency to continue the project. After being exhibited at the AIF, the display went on to be exhibited at the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville.

In 2000 another four interviews were conducted by Dr Vardanega on a voluntary basis. They were produced using the same analogue tools and methods. Once again, the oral histories featured in a historical display at the AIF. In 2009 another 11 interviews were completed.

These interviews were conducted by Dr Vardanega and funded by a RADF grant. Those interviewed included immigrants from Sri Lanka, Germany, Malta and Spain, though again most were from Italy. Some earlier interviews were refreshed and reformatted. By this time, digital tools were employed with a much more professional result.

In 2011 the Herbert River Museum Gallery (HRMG) in nearby Halifax, instigated another oral history project. This project was again funded by RADF, and the 12 interviews were conducted by a HRMG member assisted by Dr Vardanega as photographer. Because of a lack of coordinated curatorship of this and the Window in Time project, some of the subjects were those who had been previously interviewed by Dr Vardanega. Also, several of the narratives were not first-person accounts but compilations of the stories of early plantation families with oral accounts supplied by descendants. Nevertheless, this project now comes under the umbrella of the Window in Time series.

By 2020, Dr Vardanega was employed as festival director and applied for a RADF grant to employ a historian to conduct another five interviews; 20 years on she is still driven by the urgency to capture the stories of elderly residents which otherwise would be lost. The interviewees included an Italian woman married to a Serbian displaced person and a Nywaigi man. This time the interviews were digitally recorded.

The format traditionally used to preserve and display these oral histories highlights a critical impermanence of this method. The AIF committee is a voluntary body overseen by a paid festival director whose role is a part-time one. The careful curation of this oral history collection has, understandably, not been a priority of this committee, with the result that for a number of years some display items went missing. The quandary was always what to do with the display items after the AIF wrapped up for the year. Some were displayed on the walls of a historic hotel, but the idea to install the rest in local businesses came to nothing. Rather, they were stored in boxes at the festival office. Later they were moved to the HRMG, where some suffered water damage.

Compounding these issues was the fact that the earlier interviews were conducted using an analogue dictation recorder. Those tapes have since been misplaced, while the transcripts had not been meaningfully collated and stored securely. Also, the quality of the solicited accounts was inconsistent, varying from the very detailed ones recorded by Dr Vardanega to the brief ones recorded by the HRMG interviewer.



The current Window in Time project has addressed some of these issues. Firstly, Dr Vardanega has updated, reformatted and remounted the original interview narratives. All the transcripts are stored digitally and backed up, and the interviewees will be provided with copies of the narratives and the digital recordings. Most importantly, copies of all of the narratives and their accompanying photographs will be forwarded to the Queensland State Library for safekeeping.

All the interviewees have, either directly or indirectly, been associated with the sugar industry with many of them – both women and men – having laboured in the cane fields. The latest Window in Time project will feature at the 2021 AIF in an exhibition titled *Seasons of Change* dedicated to the labour of sugar cane cultivation upon which the district's economic prosperity has been founded.

# **‘I Don’t Want to Live in a Gas Field’: Creating and Using Environmental Oral Histories in the GLAM Sector**

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ANNI TURNBULL WITH JOHANNA KIJAS

*Anni Turnbull is a social history curator currently employed by the Powerhouse Museum.*

*Johanna Kijas is a consultant historian in environmental and community history, specialising in oral history practice and methodology.*

This paper is a version of a talk given by Anni Turnbull at the Australian Oral History Conference October 2019. It examines the creation and use of oral interviews in the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector, using a case study from an oral history project about Coal Seam Gas commissioned by the State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW). Anni was a curator at the SLNSW when the interviews were commissioned. They were conducted by Jo Kijas in 2017.

## **BACKGROUND**

Artists are the canaries at the edge of the coal mine, and oral historians are the ones to record those canaries and play their voices in exhibitions. Telling stories in galleries, libraries and museum exhibitions has come a long way in the past 20 years. There has been a shift from the passive to the active, creating a place for community dialogue and social engagement. There is an understanding in the GLAM sector that one can get a broader sense of society by hearing the multiple voices from within it, whether covering social or environmental history.

Traditional ways of display within GLAM have included material culture such as costume, art, objects, labels, quotes on the wall, interactives and videos of documentaries. Sometimes they included oral histories. At the State Library of NSW, one recent example is the five-part web and podcasts series *The Bridge: The Arch that Cut the Sky*, using oral histories conducted in the 1980s with men who built the Sydney Harbour Bridge.



One of the environmental themes of our time is global warming and climate change, where the use of art is likely to engage people on an emotional level. International art exhibitions are increasingly focusing on environmental themes. A recent exhibition is *Equilibrium*, an art-science exhibition in Venice in June 2019. The Australian Museum in 2009 presented an exhibition called *Climate Change: Our Future, Our Choice*. As part of their renewed focus on climate change, a new display, *Surviving Australia*, was installed within the permanent exhibition in 2020 with a series of video interviews. *Inside the Murray Darling Basin* at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney (2019), was an exhibition where artists explored the impact of climate change, government policy and overuse on the river through prints, photographs and painting. Curated by Gavin Wilson, this show was aimed at raising consciousness and was a lament for a damaged and at-risk landscape. As the focus on the environment increases, how many curators use interviews or oral histories as part of their interpretation tool kit?



**Figure 1** Showcase highlighting environmental protest in *Ecologic: Creating a Sustainable Future* exhibition. Photograph by Jean Francois Lanzarone, Powerhouse Museum, 2001.

### THE CASE STUDY: THE FIGHT AGAINST CSG

Jo and I worked together at the State Library of NSW in 2017 on an oral history project collecting interviews from those involved in challenging the state's Coal Seam Gas industry. Twenty people told their stories in 14 interviews. Interviewees were chosen to provide a cross-section across geographic location, political affiliation,

gender, age and type of participation. Individuals, collaborations and separate locations produced various reasons for people's active challenge to Coal Seam Gas (CSG) and unconventional gas. For example, threats to the Great Artesian Basin (GAB) galvanised action across the North West region of the state, while in the Northern Rivers region the threat to productive agricultural land and the landscape itself helped rally 87 per cent of voters to say 'no' to CSG. In Sydney, climate change and opposition to coal have been central to people's activism, while the Illawarra people's activities centred on the threat to the water supply. In Gloucester, the specificities of the geology and evidence that the mining company, AGL, could not safely dispose of the wastewater from its drilling focused locals' attention.

However, there were common themes across all these locations that united disparate individuals and communities with their different family backgrounds, education, generations, political alignments, philosophies, gender and race. They include environmental concerns around fresh and wastewater, land degradation, toxic chemical contamination and climate change; the potential to destroy or compromise farmland and the food bowl; the failure of politicians to support local communities, particularly in rural regions and instead their support of the mining industry; the place of scientific evidence; and residents who argued that they did not want to live in a gas field.

### A SAMPLE STORY

Anne and Neil Kennedy are farmers on black soil country 18 kilometres outside Coonamble in the North West region of NSW. (While the interviews were conducted in 2017, their situation remained the same in 2020). Neil is a fifth-generation farmer in the region. Anne grew up in Melbourne and then Sydney before meeting Neil and marrying at the age of 20. They bought 'Yuma' from Neil's parents where they run organically raised cattle and sheep and farm some crops. Their son owns his own farm close by with his wife and three children, running this and the other family properties with his father. He will inherit the properties once Neil retires. One of Anne and Neil's many concerns if CSG mining proceeds is that the farms will become worthless and therefore leave their son with an impediment rather than an asset. At the time of the interviews, Anne was 70 and Neil was 75. For the previous

10 years, their fight against CSG and unconventional gas mining in the Pilliga State Forest had overtaken their lives.

It was Anne, in particular, who put her life ‘on hold’ in fighting CSG and safeguarding the water of the GAB. She is regarded across the region as one of the key organisers in the North West Alliance fighting CSG.

Both Anne and Neil described themselves as coming from conservative, apolitical backgrounds where, 10 years before, they would never have discussed politics around the kitchen table. Anne described how, since arriving in the region, she has worked to conserve groundwater, including with GABSI – the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative and various committees that has resulted in capping and piping of the GAB’s free-flowing bores. This billion-dollar program has resulted in the rise of the bore pressure and saving of vast amounts of water. Her research and passion to conserve the GAB water led to her incredulity that CSG mining could be sanctioned in a region where the only available water is groundwater from the GAB.

Anne and Neil described a series of events and meetings, from the Queensland gas fields to Canberra, that unfolded as they researched the industry. They felt that once they could provide their National Party representatives with enough scientific evidence and legitimate community concern, that the party would support the growing anti-CSG sentiment amongst the farming communities in the North West region. They have always been Country/National Party voters, as had generations of Neil’s family. Eventually, however, they came to believe this was naivety and that their party had turned their back on the farmers. Neil, especially, expressed his ‘bitterness’ at this. As Jo noted, there was a deep sense of loss among interviewees – in part for a known political world they felt had abandoned them.

Anne and Neil were active in the protests, including Neil ‘locking on’ (that is, a person locking on or attaching themselves to a building, object, fence or another immobile object, particularly at blockade-style protests), as well as Anne’s tireless political lobbying. She commented:



**Figure 2** Anne and Neil Kennedy photographed at 'Yuma' 2017. Photograph by Johanna Kijas for the State Library of NSW, 2017.

I always thought I was a desperately conservative farmer, never thought to protest ... They refuse to listen, and you see the drilling and the irreparable damage to the groundwater. People power is the thing to do now ... I'm amazed now that I have done the things I have done ... We have done everything correctly. But now we have been forced to act this way – to get our democratically elected representatives to listen to

our case. When all other methods fail, something is very wrong when we have to take this action.<sup>1</sup>

The State Library commissioned the project to build the library's collection of environmental protest and active community responses to contemporary issues. In anticipation of the future diverse uses of such a collection in the GLAM and other sectors, each interviewee was asked final wrap-up questions that could ideally be used for a media grab or quote in an exhibition or article. The NSW State Library has all the anti-fracking interviews available online.

There is nothing like communities seeing and hearing themselves reflected in cultural organisations. It says their voices and their stories matter. There is still room for the GLAM sector to increase its use of intangible cultural heritage including oral histories. Not only do the passionate individual voices from interviews add value to exhibitions, but by having their interviews online, in some cases they honour the wishes of the interviewee. As Anne Kennedy comments, 'we have intergenerational responsibility to inform not just current generations, or my 13 grandchildren but the future generations for hundreds of years'.

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1 Neil and Anne Kennedy, interviewed by Johanna Kijas, Coonamble, 21 September 2017, Oral history interviews documenting community responses to coal seam and unconventional gas mining in New South Wales, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ref 9627798.