

Engineering Nature and Nature's Engineering: Reconstructing the Gippsland Lakes, 1860s-1950s

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In 1889 an engineered shipping channel was opened between the Gippsland Lakes and Bass Strait in eastern Victoria. Following this meeting of European technology and the environment, an entangled relationship evolved where the boundaries between the human and non-human worlds blurred, and the channel became a component in the waterscape of the Lakes.

This paper considers the period from the 1860s to the 1950s when the Lakes became a site of convergence for competing ideas about technology, politics and the environment. From the colonial parliament to the professional world of engineers and surveyors, political considerations as well as engineering theories were embedded in the construction of the channel project. Beyond the period of construction, a contested understanding emerged of 'the Entrance', as it came to be known, which was divided between a perspective of it as the cause of widespread environmental destruction on the Lakes, and the view that it was an environmentally benign, engineering asset.

The sustained debate about the environmental impact of Entrance over this long period offers potential insights for an analysis of the relationship between technology and the environment in other settings. Debates about the Entrance in up to the 1950s evolved into this binary understanding of human technology as a positive or negative force. In the pre-construction period by comparison, while there was an overreaching optimism about the benefits of European technology, there was equally – albeit on the periphery of the debate – a greater awareness of the environment as a force to disrupt technological change.

Bio

David Harris is an honorary research fellow in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University. He has published on different aspects of Victoria's history including heritage conservation, public housing and early-twentieth century social reform, and the nineteenth-century environmental history of the Gippsland Lakes. He recently contributed a chapter on nineteenth-century commercial fishing and angling to an edited collection of essays, *Earth and Industry: Stories from Gippsland* (Monash University Publishing 2015). His current research interests are in Australian colonial fisheries, acclimatisation and the spaces where politics and technology intersect with the environment.