

**COM 119/J346F/J362F/J395**  
**Reporting on our Changing Environment: Queensland, Australia**  
Spring and Maymester 2014  
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**COURSE RATIONALE:**

Global climate change is arguably the most important issue of our time and represents one of the “hottest” topics in both the fields of science and environmental journalism. Add in intricate and associated environmental challenges, such as changing weather patterns and extreme events; impacts on agriculture, infrastructure and species survival and adaptation; and changes in water supply and quality and their related health impacts, to name a few impacts and you’ve got a journalism beat that is interesting, demanding and very important to society. The way media report about these issues influences both short-term and long-term decisions made by individuals, corporations and governments. While an abundance of peer-reviewed research occurs in many fields related to global climate change, most people on the planet will hear about and understand this complex topic not through direct experience with that research, but rather through the filter of media reporting. In this course students will work directly with scientists conducting primary research, read their research and learn how to translate that to the lay audiences and participate first hand in field studies leading to that research.

Global climate change will impact all regions of the world, but in different ways and as a topic it is also comprehended and approached in a variety of ways based on politics, culture, personal experiences and a sense of place. Course materials covered in the one credit spring COM 119 class before arriving in Australia will focus on the basic science of climate change and the more familiar U.S. method of framing and interpreting what is often viewed as a controversial topic in American discussions and media reporting. That is not the case in most other countries, including Australia, which shares a common English language and research orientation but as a country and a culture does not view climate change in a scientific debate frame. One of the main reasons for this is how Australian media report on the topic, so in addition to working directly with scientists this course will also facilitate interaction with Australian journalists who cover the topic there to identify their strategies in reporting this complex news story.

The “environment” is where we live, but the environment is conceptualized very differently among individuals and cultures and it varies tremendously from place to place. This seminar will examine the environment of one of the most exotic, isolated and ecologically diverse places on Earth: Australia. Australia is almost exactly the size of the continental United States, with a population only one-tenth of the U.S. clustered mostly along its southeastern coasts. It is one of the most urbanized countries on the planet and it is also one of the most environmentally unique. Hundreds of species ONLY exist on this continent and like the Arctic, Australia is one of the first places on Earth to be experiencing dramatic impacts of a changing climate and this course will make excursions with science experts into three distinct ecosystems experiencing those impacts: a tropical rainforest, an inland desert and the most extensive coral reef on Earth and the class will be charged with reporting on all three.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Like many other journalism classes, the class will operate as an intensive reporting and writing seminar with the goal of producing content across all media platforms for publication on the course website (tentatively entitled: UT Austin Reporting on our Changing Environment: Queensland Australia). First there will be a

lot reading in the spring COM course to get up to speed on how the scientific method works. Since your professor has a Ph.D. in climate change, much of these basic fundamentals will be instilled in readings before you land down under, but will also be reinforced by scientists in the field and in analyzing peer-reviewed research.

You will be writing every day, sometimes responding to readings, or in response to an in class assignment and there will also be three major assignments that will tackle particular environmental topics in each of the three Queensland ecosystems we visit. These news stories will go through an intensive editing process with multiple revisions. Building on the model developed for the new capstone Portfolio course in the School of Journalism, students will work in teams to work across platforms and rotate assignments to contribute a variety of content, including video packages, audio podcasts, interactive graphics and text stories.

The class structure will be discussion oriented and will focus on further development of critical thinking skills. Classes will consist of group projects, press conferences with scientists, extensive field trips, group lead discussions, and lots of writing. We will develop a dynamic and synergy that hopefully will make each person feel challenged in their thinking and secure in sharing openly with the group. You must be prepared to participate fully in class meetings. In addition to various writing assignments, we will also review and critique examples of award winning environmental journalism to get a deeper understanding of how the best in the business do their work.

In addition to the unique environmental issues Queensland, Australia provides other overarching themes will also be integrated into class lessons. The goal will be to hone your storytelling skills across media platforms while sharpening your understanding about science and environmental issues. Goals for this course include:

1. Strategies for interviewing scientists
2. Interpreting and evaluating peer-reviewed research
3. Understanding the concepts of scientific certainty and uncertainty
4. Understanding the challenges faced by both scientists and journalists
5. Communicating complex science to lay audiences
6. Understanding the science of climate change and effectively communicating that science
7. Understanding elements and structures to good science/environment storytelling
8. Using all your senses to enhance your storytelling
9. Demonstrating skills across media platforms (video, web, audio, graphics, text)
10. Creating informative, engaging environmental stories on deadline for global audiences

## **COURSE EVALUATION**

All work must be turned in on deadline. No late work will be accepted. This is a hard reality of all journalism. The three major projects will be evaluated on both the first drafts and then the revised versions with more weight on the revised work and on the final projects. These projects will be graded on both journalistic style and presentation and scientific content and accuracy. Each student will also research specific environmental issues related to one of the three ecosystems and make presentations as “deep background” on the topics for the entire class.

10%-Presentations/Writing Assignments/Leading Class Discussions

10%-Draft First Multimedia Project

15%-Revised First Multimedia Project

10% Draft Second Multimedia Project

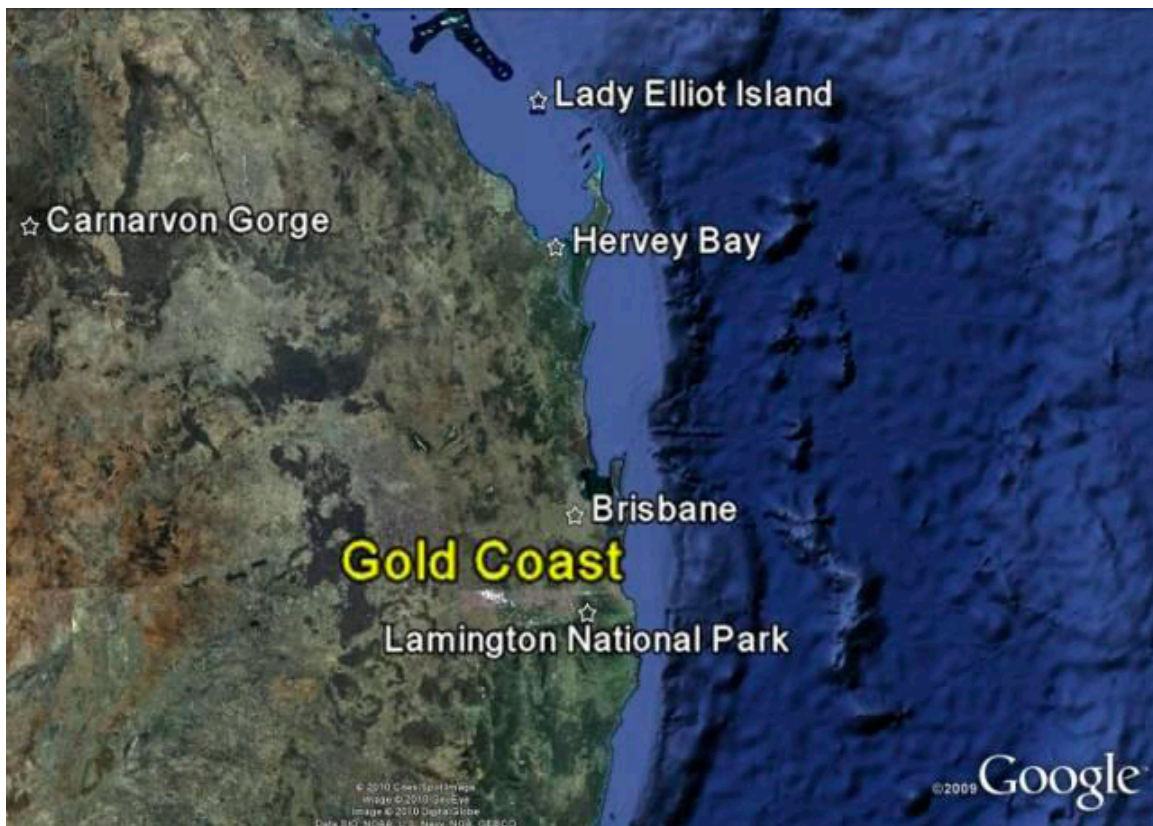
15% Revised Second Multimedia Project

15%-Draft Final Multimedia Project

25%-Revised Final Multimedia Project

## COURSE STRUCTURE

This seminar will explore the state of Queensland, often nicknamed the Sunshine State, as it enjoys over 300 days of “fine” weather a year and a coastline almost continuously graced by white sandy beaches. Queensland offers more than just beach culture, however, hosting some of the oldest rainforests in the world, uniquely Australian marsupials, the marine diversity of the Great Barrier Reef, and the Outback and its Aboriginal communities. The state also contains five World Heritage listed areas and we’ll visit three of them. As the second largest state in Australia, Queensland measures three times the size of Texas and occupies the northeastern section of the mainland. The population concentrates mainly in the state’s southeast corner, with the capital city of Brisbane just over 2 million people (similar in size to the Austin metro area). Brisbane will serve as the hub for this seminar and will function as our multimedia newsroom. Within walking distance of the Brisbane River and downtown, the classroom lab will be our “home base” that will begin and end the program and also be the space we return to in between each of our three excursions, that will each examine unique ecosystems.



The first excursion will be to **Hervey Bay and Lady Elliot Island**. Approximately 50 miles northeast of Bundaberg, the 100 acre coral cay sits at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef. Located within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, the island teems with live hard and soft corals, numerous fish species and manta rays, the island’s iconic logo. As a result, Lady Elliot receives the highest possible classification of Marine National Park Zone. Carefully guided by our field experts to avoid any damage to this unique ecosystem, we walk the reef at low tide when you can weave through the lagoon to see marine life, especially echinoderms like sea cucumbers and blue linckia sea stars. During this time, you will also work on your group data collection sets and interview coral reef experts. Encounters with green sea turtles,

loggerhead turtles and black tipped reef sharks will highlight group snorkels. However, not to be forgotten are the abundance of angelfish, damselfish, grouper, wrasse, parrotfish, surgeonfish and clown fish. You will learn the characteristics and behaviors of each in a part of the world famous Great Barrier Reef that is seen by very few and through the eyes of those who study it first hand.

After lab and editing time back in bustling Brisbane, the second field excursion explores **Lamington National Park**. As part of the World Heritage site Gondwana Rainforests of Australia, Lamington National Park is 50 miles south of Brisbane. Lying on the Lamington Plateau, the National Park stretches from the southern side of the Scenic Rim to the crest of the McPherson Range that forms the border between Queensland and New South Wales to the south. Lamington was established in 1915 with over 100,000 acres, thanks to locals pursuing the area's preservation from logging. In 1994, Lamington was listed as a World Heritage Area and named after Lord Lamington, Governor of Queensland from 1896 to 1902. Rugged mountains, cascading waterfalls, lush rainforest and tall forests here provide some of the best hiking in Southeast Queensland. During four days exploring this unique temperate rain forest experts in a variety of disciplines will serve as both sources and field guides and students will hike to waterfalls, view the elusive platypus and identify more than 150 bird species that inhabit the region all of which experience on-going climate threats. We will be staying at the Binna Burra Lodge in the middle of this one of a kind rainforest.

The final journey goes into the interior Outback of Australia. In the middle of the Great Dividing Range, **Carnarvon National Park** spans 750,000 acres and offers 12 miles of graded tracks. Over 183 bird species have been recorded in the Park and hundreds of plant species grow in the fertile area, including giant Angiopteris ferns dating back 300 million years. An abundance of mosses, lichens, palms, cycads and eucalyptus trees line the main feature of Carnarvon Gorge and its creek. With its sandstone formations and Aboriginal rock stencils and engraving, Carnarvon Gorge is a natural monument to the force of water, wind and time. The dramatic landscape, the ecological diversity, the significant cultural landmarks and the permanent water supply make the Gorge a highly distinguished national park.

We'll be staying at Takarakka Bush Resort's cabins with communal barbeques and fire pits where locals hang out and share bush stories at night and where in the mornings kangaroos can be found sleeping surrounding the elevated lodgings. The ecologically diverse hikes expose distinct geologic formations not found anywhere else on Earth with Aboriginal cave paintings and engravings exemplifying the life patterns and spiritual beliefs of the Karingbal and Bidjara people. One major goal of exploring environmental issues in Australia is to compare and contrast environmental beliefs and attitudes across cultures and the different ways of adapting to climate change.

Over 80 percent of Australian mammals are nocturnal, so we'll venture out after sunset to encounter some of these at Carnarvon: such as owls and frogmouths, kangaroos and wallabies. Far from the light pollution of Queensland's large cities and towns, Carnarvon's clear skies create incredible night skies for stargazing. We will observe differences in the Southern Hemisphere from the Northern Hemisphere (including the Southern Cross) by looking at the stars, constellations and galaxies with the naked eyes, binoculars and telescopes.

By exploring these three distinct sites, all day trips from urbane Brisbane, we will report on the rich diversity of environmental issues that only Australia affords to tell these stories to the rest of the world through our multimedia reporting that showcases both our understanding of the science and how best to report these intricate issues through a variety of media platforms.

A return to Brisbane to write, edit and upload our final stories to our multimedia website ends the program along with more free time to explore the Gold Coast (think South Beach combined with world class surfing!) and other amenities in the Brisbane area.

## **READING MATERIALS**

“A Field Guide for Science Writers.” Edited by Deborah Blum, Mary Knudson and Robin Marantz Henig. Oxford Press, 2006.

“Communicating Nature: How We Create and Understand Environmental Messages.” Julia B. Corbett, Island Press, 2006.

“Covering the Environment: How Journalists Work the Green Beat.” Bob Wyss, Routledge, 2008.

“The Weather Makers : How Man Is Changing the Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth.” Tim Flannery (one of Australia’s most prominent scientists).

Other assorted readings available on our Blackboard site specific to each of the three ecosystems we’ll be exploring.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

According to research, environmental stories are consistently among the most important and interesting topics to the audience. Research also tells us the public learns about these complex and challenging issues primarily from mass media reporting and not directly from the scientists who conduct the scholarship. The way media report about these issues does more than just inform and entertain, quality environmental journalism has the potential power to shape public policy. Many journalists feel intimidated by the often complex nature of science and environmental issues. By the end of the course you should feel comfortable reading and writing about both science and environment, including the challenges of working with numbers and intricate and often esoteric terminology and concepts.

Additionally, Australia is one of the most unique and exotic places on Earth to study these environmental issues and challenges. As we report on this rich and diverse continent it provides us unparalleled opportunities to tell one of a kind stories about life on our shared planet. Australian media also operate very differently than their U.S. counterparts, especially about the issue of climate change, which provides yet another opportunity to consider the role of media as environmental educators. Armed with digital cameras, audio recorders, computers and notepads in the company of excellent scientific experts and field guides will facilitate one of a kind storytelling.

Being able to understand science and environmental concepts AND being able to communicate effectively about these complex topics also has the potential to create an exciting career that makes a positive impact in our world. This class will allow us to explore some of the most important issues facing our society and how good journalism can provide the public with information it needs to respond to these issues.