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Report on Global Engagement Scheme Semester 2 (2024-2025)

CCGL9080: Societies on the Water

This course guides students through a socio-cultural anthropological approach - ethnographic theory, its application, and adaptability of said theory and application to the diverse contexts around the world - to studying, understanding and learning from societies, their interactions with environment and non-human agents, interactions within societal units, and most importantly their relationships with water bodies, water resources, and the myths that water inspires.

The World Archaeological Congress is hosted every four years and is a chance for archaeologists and anthropologists to meet, discuss, network and converse on current issues and concerns, especially about heritage, societal dynamics, and the power to reform that archaeology can have.

This year's congress, WAC-10, took place in Darwin, Northern Territories, Australia. The Larrakia people are the traditional owners of Darwin, they refer to themselves as 'Saltwater People', they are a water society that has centuries of water myths that create a deep and intricate mythos. Their culture was celebrated and integrated throughout WAC-10 in the form of conference theme artwork, booths that featured traditional Larrakia handiwork, and talks on Auntie Eileen Cumming's book - 'I am the Daughter They Stole'.

Dr Rivera and I were thus honoured at the opportunity to present our paper "Shifting Tides: Recent Advances in Island and Coastal Human Bioarchaeology" in the session "[A Multitude of Landscapes, Rivers, Seas and People: Developing Pluralistic Perspectives on Indian Ocean Cultures and Interactions](#)" at WAC-10.

In what follows, I recount my experiences at WAC-10, in Darwin, of being given the privilege to be accommodated on Larrakia land and deepen my understanding of a water society in such varied contexts, and be able to corroborate my ideas and learn from other academics in the field, and the water societies they come from.

Day 1 (22/06/2025): Reception at the Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territories

I arrived at Darwin Airport and made my way to Charles Darwin University's Danala campus, where the congress was held. The bus ride to the university itself set the tone for the congress as it was coloured with many conversations with archaeologists from all over the world.

After registering for the conference, Dr Rivera guided me around Darwin City, debriefed me on where all the essentials are, and we sat and discussed our agendas (what talks and sessions

we were interested in, what recent advances in the field piqued our curiosities the most and who we wanted to meet and discuss them with) over a lunch of local seafood.

We then made our way to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory where the reception for the congress was held. Before the reception began, we were given a chance to socialise with fellow academics and scholars where I was able to discuss with scholars such as Ningnung Jakoinao (who works on reconstructing the ecology and environmental contexts of ancient sites) and Yezad Pardiwala (who focuses on Middle Paleolithic Archaeology) from IISER Mohali, and Dr Natali Pearson, a DECRA fellow who teaches museum and heritage studies at the University of Sydney.

The reception then began with acknowledgements from Huge Heggie, administrator of the Northern Territories, Adam Worrall, Director of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territories, and Claire Smith, Professor of Anthropology at Flinders University, the institution that organised the event, of the fact that we were convening on sacred Larakkia land.

I felt especially humbled and privileged at being able to attend a performance by Youth Mill's Edwin, a traditional Larakkia man who is an excellent vocalist, able to blend Larakkian values and melodies with bluesy inflections, Lenny, a skilled Didgeridoo player, and Teyk, a delicate vocalist whose background vocals laid the groundwork for Edwin's call to all the people in the audience who represented different communities around the world to feel proud and represent their respective cultures.



Attending Youth Mill's performance at the reception

Day 3 (23/06/2025): First Day of Congress and an Archaeology of Tolerance

I was excited to attend my first session of the day, “Synchronicity or Causation? Exploring Deep-Time Human-Climate-Environment Legacies in South Asia”, as the papers discussed the various ways in which Climate Change has acted as a crucial catalyst for evolution and cultural advancements in ancient in the context I hail from- the Indian subcontinent and the water body that connects these contexts- the Indian Ocean.

I had the pleasure of meeting other scholars from UPSA's Zooarchaeology Lab and its director, Juan Rofes during morning tea. I was also able to discuss IISER's work on prehistoric archaeology and the academic experiences in publishing and engaging in a South Asian context with academics from IISER Mohali.

Dr Rivera presented his paper “Male Allyship in Archaeology and the Pursuit of Gender Equity” in the afternoon in the session “[Archaeology While Female: The Challenges of Bias, Inequity and Backlash for Women in Professional Archaeology](#)”. I attended and was sensitised to the various issues experienced by women in archaeology and related fields, and also to proactive approaches that can be taken to address these issues. After he presented his paper, he and I were able to take part in very robust discourse with scholars from other parts of the world in these issues, and I felt that it led to the production and expression of seminal ideas on the matter.

At night, I was riveted by Dr Alfredo González-Ruibal and his ideas on the archaeology of hospitality and tolerance which was inspired by his experiences in the Horn of Africa and throughout with indigenous people and their generosity towards outsiders, juxtaposed by how rare it is to find a similar experience in the ‘civilized’ world.



Dr Rivera presenting his paper on Male Allyship



Taking part in discourse regarding Gender inequity in Archaeology



Discussing with Dr Alfredo González-Ruibal after his keynote session

Day 3 (24/06/2025): Second Day of Congress and Restorative Archaeology

In the morning, I was enthralled by papers and ensuing discussion on land reclamation, and the various approaches to define and study its various natures and contexts as it situates in and creates societies by the water. This related to the course in exploring through an ethnographic lens how these dynamics then influence the societies that inhabit urban reclaimed land.

Dr Rivera and I met Dr Natali Pearson again during afternoon tea, and she was very fascinated and interested in hearing about Dr Rivera's course methodologies in teaching this course about water societies and how it could be adjusted or applied in her work in teaching postgraduate museum studies.

A highlight for me was Dr Kisha Supernant's (a Métis/Papaschase/British archaeologist) keynote session on the restorative judicial power indigenous archaeology and her discussions on her experiences in using archaeological fieldwork not with a view to publish papers and further research but to restore dignity to indigenous communities by ensuring proper reburial of Métis children who have been the victims of the violence of residential schools in colonial Canada.



Dr Kisha Supernant delivering her keynote session



Exchanging pedagogical methods and philosophies with Dr Natali Pearson, an instance of the collaboration on teaching methodology that took place between different institutions throughout the conference

Day 4 (25/06/2025): Rock Art at Burrungkuy and Ubirr, and Talk at Madjebebe

Thanks to Dr Rivera, I was able to attend a mid-congress tour to various places in Kakadu National Park. The Rock Art at Burrungkuy and Ubirr was nothing short of transcendent, as it detailed the myths of the Kunwinjku people, and their life histories as evident in depictions of the water resources they collected during the Wet Season in the form of a variety of plants, such as waterlilies, and as many as 70 types of animals including goanna, fish, freshwater mussels and birds.

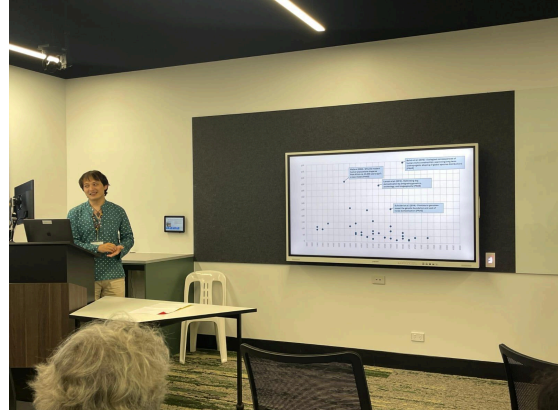
As part of the tour, I was able to attend at Madjebebe, Australia's oldest site, and discussions of reconstruction of ancient sites through bioarchaeological and material evidence served as a backdrop that inspired more discourse with other global scholars that attended the tour with me.



Dr Rivera, Ningnung Jakoinao (IISER Mohali) and I at the Ubirr and Burrungkuy Rock Art Sites

Day 5 (26/05/2025): Presenting our Paper and Indian Ocean Archaeology

My morning began with Dr Rivera pacing me, guiding me through my first paper presentation at an international academic conference of such scale. I felt confident, as our research was rigorous and the weeks that came before was marked with introspection and constantly questioning ourselves on how we could present and analyse our findings in a way that was applicable and encouraged action towards more robust, equitable and collaborative study on water societies.



Dr Rivera and I presenting our bibliometrics study, the findings it yielded, and our analysis



Ray Ma, from the Antiquities and Monuments Office, attended our session and wanted to learn more about our study afterwards

What was most rewarding was attending papers by South Asian scholars who each discussed an aspect of archaeology in the Indian Ocean and surrounding contexts. Examples are experimental archaeology and how it can help in understanding the life histories and evidence they leave in water societies in West Bengal, how indigenous communities pass down traditional knowledge frameworks based off of understandings of astronomy, tidal patterns, and how depth varies relative to littoral regions in South India, and the reconstruction of a Pattanam site that could have acted as a port with multiple access points, or a ferry-repairing site.

The discussion that followed these papers helped me make genuine connections with a convenor of our session, Dr Kaushik Gangopadhyay, regarding his work in Archaeology in coastal contexts, and many other researchers from West Bengal and South India who all worked on present and past water societies.

Personally, learning about traditional boat-building practices employed by families with surnames that have endured centuries made me homesick and actually made me appreciate my own hometown riverine context a lot more.

Day 6(27/06/2025) and 7(28/06/2025): Final Day of Congress, Farewell Party, and Flying Back to Hong Kong

Having been sensitized to Biological Anthropology and Bioarchaeology, their colonial legacies, and current scholars working to amend those legacies, I was honoured to meet scholars such as Dr Michael Blakey and Dr Rachel Watkins. I attended their sessions and panel on current issues in ethics in Bioarchaeology and was thoroughly humbled and grateful. I genuinely feel privileged at being able to attend discussions involving people at the forefront of addressing these issues and feel affected to the point of reflecting on how I can encourage similar discussions in my own context in an engaging manner.

There was a farewell party for the congress and this gave me a chance to meet some more scholars whose work I found enthralling. One of them was Shumon Tobias Hussain, and I thoroughly enjoyed discussing his work investigating the epistemology of Archaeology, and what that might mean for the field in the future.

As my flight was in the evening, Dr Rivera joined me one last time as we went to a herpetarium with a focus on crocodiles and other aquatic reptiles to learn more about biodiversity and ecological distribution in the Northern Territories. This ecological information supplemented what we learned about the water societies in Darwin throughout the congress and how they interact with their environment and non-human species.



Bearded Dragon and Crocodile Skeleton exhibits at the herpetarium we visited