

Institution: University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: 27		
Title of case study: Generating concern for the natural world through creative engagement with British nature writing		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017-19		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Graham Huggan	Chair of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures	2004–present
Professor David Higgins	Professor of Environmental Humanities	2006–present
Dr Pippa Marland	Postdoctoral Research Assistant	2017–19
	Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow	2019–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-ongoing		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>'Land Lines: British Nature Writing, 1789–2014', a collaborative research project funded by the AHRC (2017-19), produced impacts in three key areas: (1) increased engagement with nature writing; (2) developed amateur nature writers; and (3) deepened public engagement with and concern for the natural world. Two follow-on projects, also AHRC-funded, centred on two of Natural England's nature reserves, Lower Derwent Valley and Humberhead Peatlands, and Castle Howard Estate, a national cultural heritage site. These led to a fourth impact: extended opportunities for access to the natural world, which has improved public awareness of, and involvement in, local and national conservation initiatives amongst schoolchildren and older adults.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Funded by the AHRC [RG1], 'Land Lines' encompassed three University of Leeds researchers – PI Professor Graham Huggan, Co-I Professor David Higgins, and PDRA Dr Pippa Marland – alongside two other researchers, Dr Will Abberley (University of Sussex) and Dr Christina Alt (University of St Andrews).</p> <p>The research aims were to explore how nature writing has changed over the last two hundred years or so, and to see what contemporary examples might reveal about our relationship with the natural world today, particularly in the contexts of global warming and rapid biodiversity loss. More specifically, the research involved a pioneering critical investigation of modern British nature writing, from Gilbert White's seminal study <i>The Natural History of Selborne</i> (1789) to Helen Macdonald's award-winning memoir, <i>H is for Hawk</i> (2014). The investigation was significant in overturning the orthodox Romantic view of nature writing as a <i>celebratory</i> form, concerned with giving lyrical voice to the wonder and beauty of nature, arguing instead that it is a quintessentially <i>conflict-ridden</i> form which articulates a linked set of modern crises: environmental crisis, the crisis of representation, the crisis of the alienated self. Also significant was its view of nature writing as an emotionally wrought, intensely <i>personal</i> form that reflects individual experiences of nature but, in seeking to share these experiences, opens up opportunities for non-specialist engagement with an increasingly threatened natural world.</p>		

Higgins' research, in particular, revealed that Romantic-period authors were self-conscious about the inherent problems of representing the natural world in verbal language. Romantic nature memoirs generate a creative tension between writing's capacity to express the inner self and its capacity to evoke plants and animals through intense observation and description. This tension continues to trouble and inspire authors to this day [1]. **Huggan** argued in the contemporary context that animal writing, while revealing our (human) interdependency with animals, is less likely to reach out to non-human others than to reveal our otherness to ourselves [2]. In stressing the importance of modern nature writing as an ecological form involving the complex entanglement of human and non-human agencies, the project also built on a longstanding body of humanities-based environmental and human-animal research at the University of Leeds, represented by **Huggan, Higgins** and **Marland**. **Huggan** has published extensively on environmental topics that range from the relationship of the 'new nature writing' to earlier literary/cultural traditions, to the rise of today's animal-endorsing 'celebrity conservationists' [3, 4]. **Higgins** has explored how representations of 'English nature' in Romantic writing reveal conflicting ideas around personal identity, and how even the most apparently parochial texts are inflected by imperial, global contexts [1].

Marland's most recent work has exposed the blindness to difference that is a legacy of class-bound, able-bodied paradigms of encounters with nature (e.g. the 'solitary walker'), while examining both early and more recent egalitarian alternatives [5]. Finally, through their own reflective writing, interviews and blog posts [6], **Huggan, Higgins** and **Marland** have stimulated important public debates around the politics and ethics of nature writing, and human relationships with the natural world. The 'Land Lines' website, and particularly its associated blog, have created an informal dialogue with the public, allowing researchers to communicate their findings beyond a traditional academic context in innovative ways, and providing key public platforms for disseminating project research.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Higgins, David. (2014). *Romantic Englishness: Local, National and Global Selves, 1780–1850*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Huggan, Graham. (2020). 'Affective Animals: Transspecies Encounters in Modern British Animal Writing', *Humanimalia*, 12, 1, no page numbers (online journal).
3. Huggan, Graham. (2016). "'Back to the Future": The New Nature Writing, Ecological Boredom, and the Recall of the Wild', *Prose Studies* 38, 2, 152–171.
4. Huggan, Graham. (2013). *Nature's Saviours: Celebrity Conservationists in the Television Age*, London: Routledge/Earthscan.
5. Marland, Pippa, David Borthwick, & Anna Stenning (eds). (2019). *Walking, Landscape and Environment*, London: Palgrave.
6. Land Lines Project <<https://landlinesproject.wordpress.com/blog/>> [Website]. Curated and edited by Marland.

Grants

- RG1: 'Land Lines: Modern British Nature Writing, 1789–2014', AHRC AH/P004865/1, GBP230,595, April 2017–March 2019.
- RG2: 'Nature Writing Beyond the Page: Tracks, Traces, Trails', AHRC AH/T002115/1, GBP94,638, October 2019–October 2020.
- RG3: 'Tipping Points: Cultural Responses to Wilding and Land Sharing in the North of England', [AHRC AH/T012358/1], GBP98,460, February 2020–January 2021.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research increased engagement with British nature writing and developed amateur nature writers. It also deepened public engagement with the natural world and opened up new opportunities for access to it.

(i) Increased engagement with nature writing

The 'Land Lines' project aimed to discover what British nature writing means to people, to ask why they read it, and to consider how it might influence the way they think about – and act upon

– an increasingly threatened natural world. Given the contemporary democratisation of nature writing – its opening up to an increasing range of writers and readers – it also examined why nature writing is such a popular form today. Between October 2017 and January 2018, the research team collaborated with the AHRC to design and administer an online public poll to find Britain's favourite nature writer, with **Huggan's** research on the 'new nature writing' [3] – a modern form of the literature of conscience that responds to the current environmental crisis – feeding directly into it. Most shortlisted writers were contemporary, and the crisis-ridden nature of their work was noted by many voters and by members of the adjudicating panel, including **Huggan** himself. **Higgins'** research on nature writing as an autobiographical form also contributed to the poll, which both encouraged and attracted a wide variety of personal responses. **Marland's** work on equality and inclusion was also reflected in some of the choices made, including that of the winning author, Chris Packham, who has explicitly linked his autism to his championing of the diversity to be discovered in the natural world.

The poll attracted 770 nominations from the public, comprising 278 titles by 213 different writers, and its online reach was matched by a similarly high level of broadcast media coverage, including the BBC Radio 4 Today programme and BBC2's Winterwatch, resulting in a total reach of over 30 million people [A]. A shortlist of 10 titles was drawn up and 7300 public votes were cast. The poll's result was revealed on the BBC2 programme Winterwatch (31.1.18) and was subsequently widely reported in local and national press and social media platforms. Two books in particular came to prominence in the poll. The announcement of Chris Packham's *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* as the winning publication triggered a 1107% increase in UK customer orders [C], generating economic impacts for its publisher, Penguin, and evidence of increased readership. Packham himself acknowledged the value of the poll in recognising his work, observing that 'until this point, all of the attention on the book was about the Asperger's. I put an enormous amount more effort into the nature writing than the Asperger's. I worked really hard on all of the analogies and similes, making sure they were unique, that they were in a style that was novel' (*Guardian* 31.1.18). The book also entered the top 10 best-selling non-fiction paperbacks in the UK for the following three weeks (*Sunday Times* 11.2.18; 18.2.18; 25.2.18). Packham's book, a mixed narrative form that shifts time frames and is witty, profound and heart-breaking all at once, encapsulates project research findings highlighting the complexity of nature writing as a literary form. The poll continues to be used as a marketing tool by publishers Penguin and also by Hutchinson, the publisher of Rob Cowen's *Common Ground*, which came third. An additional 3000 copies of *Common Ground* were printed in January 2018 alone, and the publisher has since amended the book's subtitle to reflect its selection in the poll and the media coverage it attracted at the time [C].

(ii) Developing amateur nature writers

Since the 'Land Lines' project began, its website has received over 50,382 views from 138 countries, with 26,884 in 2020 alone. Its blog (<https://landlines.project.wordpress.com/blog/>) has helped to re-awaken concern for the natural world among a wide range of amateur contributors and emboldened them to express and share their views, many of them for the first time. Reflecting project research by **Marland** among others, that shows that nature writing has always had a demotic strand, the blog has explicitly encouraged non-specialists to try their hand at nature writing. As one contributor wrote, 'I had never really thought of myself as a nature writer [and the blog] has given me the confidence in my voice in this area of writing' [B]. Another asserted that although she had not yet been prompted to do anything differently, contributing to the blog had opened her eyes to the importance of addressing the global environmental crisis, giving her fresh hope of changing things, 'respecting nature, like indigenous people do, as sacred', rather than succumbing to resignation or despair [B]. In keeping with project research by **Higgins** and others that sees nature writing as an important, ethically charged mode of personal self-expression, the ongoing development of amateur writers through the guest blog has helped participants shape an understanding of their own personal connections to nature and consider their behaviour in relation to it. In line with the aims of the project, the website has also been used more generally as a resource to stimulate nature writing in a wide range of contexts. This includes supporting emerging nature writers from underrepresented backgrounds in the context of the new Nan Shepherd Prize (<https://nanshepherdprize.com/resources/what-is-nature-writing/>), where the 'Land Lines' website is cited as a valuable resource.

(iii) Deepening public engagement with the natural world

In March 2019, and in partnership with the AHRC and Natural England, the 'Land Lines' team orchestrated a crowd-sourced Spring Nature Diary, which drew 420 entries from across the UK and is estimated to have reached more than 5 million people worldwide via the Twitter #SpringNatureDiary hashtag [A]. In an attempt to return nature writing to its popular roots, the initiative revived the democratising format of the personal diary, drawing on **Higgins'** work on nature memoir and **Marland's** wide-ranging research into early forms of non-specialist nature writing. Entries were made available as a 73-page e-book, with some selected for publication in spring 2020 in a book edited by nature writer Abi Andrews. The diary continues to grow, with the 2020 edition attracting even greater media attention: 1433 page views on the blog; a full-page *Guardian* article (17.4.20); coverage on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme; and 61 media mentions reaching a global audience of 23 million [A]. In 2020 alone, **Marland** was invited to discuss the project's enduring themes in 19 radio interviews, including for the BBC Radio 3 Free Thinking programme (July 2020), and was interviewed for the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten (20.8.20) and the US conservation online platform Mongabay (4.5.20). Such widespread interest shows nature's value in the context of the Covid-19 virus, which has re-awakened public interest in reconnecting with, but also protecting, the natural world <https://landlinesproject.wordpress.com/2020/04/17/the-crowd-sourced-diary-and-the-covid-19-spring/>. The Spring Nature Diary is now an annual event, hosted by the National Trust, whose Communications Director recently confirmed that the Trust, which is keen to 'help people access the [physical and mental] benefits' of encounters with nature, is proud to 'support a lasting legacy of amateur nature writing in the UK' through continued engagement with the Spring Nature Diary [D].

(iv) Extending opportunities for access to the natural world

'Land Lines' and its subsequent follow-on projects reached new audiences through an extensive public engagement programme that offered researchers opportunities to disseminate their findings. In the original project, these included a panel discussion chaired by **Marland** (23.1.18) at Redland Library, Bristol (50+ audience); a public talk by **Higgins** (10.8.17) outlining his research on Romantic poets' responses to birds at the Booth Museum, Brighton (50 participants); a public reading at Leeds City Library (28.2.19) that reflected **Huggan's** research into contemporary nature writing and the phenomenon of writers focusing on particular iconic animals (90 participants); and a sea-themed family weekend (14/15.9.17) at Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Living Seas Centre in Flamborough, hosted by **Huggan** and featuring a beach clean-up by a group of 120 scouts from Barnsley, who would later write about their experiences, and a public reading and children's workshop, both of them acknowledging **Huggan's** and **Marland's** research, by the maritime writer Philip Hoare.

Some families attending the sea-themed workshop subsequently signed up as members of the YWT, while the Living Seas Centre Manager declared an interest in running nature-writing workshops in the future [E]. Attendees of the Leeds Library reading stated that the event had inspired them to 'read more books on nature', 'go fearlessly into wild places', and 'start a watercolour/nature diary of my local area' [F]. The Marketing and Communications Officer confirmed that the reading had 'helped bring the Leeds Library to a new academic audience' and had cemented a 'true partnership between Land Lines, the Leeds Library, and the Leeds Big Bookend', a local literary festival [G].

In 2019, **Huggan**, **Higgins** and **Marland** were awarded AHRC follow-on funding to work with Natural England on a 12-month project [RG2: October 2019–October 2020, since extended by 3 months as a result of Covid-19 disruptions]. This project explored ways of encouraging Yorkshire-based primary schoolchildren and older adults to revive increasingly lost connections with the natural world. Taking **Higgins'** work on Romantic birdwatching and **Huggan's** on modern conservation as starting points, the project engaged new audiences with the natural world with activities ranging from bird-tagging and tracking at the Lower Derwent Valley (LDV) nature reserve to co-devised, conservation-conscious educational materials on birds. These activities provided new experiences of nature (nocturnal birdwatching, illuminated nature trails) with demonstrable educational benefits. As the Principal of one of the participating schools, Hatfield Woodhouse Primary, Doncaster (HWP), remarked, seeing the animals first-hand at LDV as well as researching them online 'brought to the children's attention the dangers of litter to our

wildlife. [The children in] Year 4 [were all] keen to take a more active role in changing this and have taken part in a litter-pick outside the immediate locality of the school. As a school, we are using the children's enthusiasm to learn more about the natural world to develop a Forest School area at the bottom of the playing field' [H]. Ties to HWP were maintained during the Covid-19 crisis through artwork featured in 'Nightjar Nights' (June 8–13 2020), a week-long programme of virtual events and activities involving British nature writer, Stephen Moss, alongside providing development opportunities for emerging nature writers Sara Hudston and Anita Roy. The programme attracted more than 3000 views on the 'Land Lines' website, for which interest peaked during the lockdown months, representing a 150% increase on the previous year.

Enthusiasm for the project was shared by Natural England staff at the two participating reserves, LDV and Humberhead Peatlands (HP). An illustrated children's book on the nightjar, *The Mysterious Bird in the Moonlight* [ISBN 978-1-5272-7829-5], co-produced with the participating schools and now in the process of being commercialised, has become a model that will be copied in other NE reserves, while the educational materials developed together with the schools will be used in other parts of the county. As the LDV Senior Reserve Manager remarked, 'we are excited by the potential to roll out [a book series] across the Yorkshire region' and have 'already identified four sites ... each featuring an iconic species that could be highlighted in a new book'. Moreover, he said, working together with the 'Land Lines' team had generated 'renewed interest among visitors to our reserves in elusive avian species', while its greatest benefit had been 'the multiple opportunities it has given us to fulfil our joint aims to empower old and young alike to learn more about the natural world' [I].

A second Yorkshire-based follow-on project [RG3], equally embedded in 'Land Lines' research, is ongoing at the time of submission (December 2020), having likewise been given an extension of 3 months. This project revolves around contemporary conservation and land-use initiatives, with a key role being played by the Castle Howard Estate (CHE). The estate, a major cultural heritage attraction, recently committed itself to the rewilding of some of its land and, at the time of writing, former 'Land Lines' researchers, notably **Huggan** and **Marland**, are in the process of organising a series of Covid-delayed art-based activities designed to draw attention to these new conservation initiatives and the democratising principles on which they are based (e.g. the idea, explored in **Marland's** research, that even privately owned land can at least in part be shared). As with the first follow-on project, these activities are designed to consolidate conservation work at the estate and other fledgling rewilding sites while also expanding the demographic involved in it. As the Curator of CHE confirmed, '[Our] collaboration [with the 'Land Lines' team] has been a valuable opportunity for us to review our contemporary understanding of the estate as [both] an amenity and a working landscape'. This has allowed 'wider audiences to respond to the variety of experiences in the landscape', while also leading to an enriched awareness of 'the complementarity between built and natural heritage, [which] has been central to our drive for greater public understanding of Castle Howard, past, present and future' [J].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Emails from Head of Public & Stakeholder Engagement, AHRC (4.7.18-21.4.20).
- B. Land Lines blog contributors' questionnaire responses & consent forms, October 2019.
- C. Emails from Publicity Officer, Penguin/Random House (22.11.18) and Publicity Director, Hutchinson (21.12.18).
- D. Testimonial from Communications Director, National Trust (27.11.20).
- E. Email from Manager, Living Seas Centre, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (12.10.18).
- F. Feedback from participants at public reading, Leeds City Library, (28.2.19).
- G. Email from Marketing & Communications Officer, Leeds City Library, (3.3.19).
- H. Testimonial from Principal, Hatfield Woodhouse Primary School (27.3.20).
- I. Testimonial from Senior Reserve Manager at Lower Derwent Valley (19.11.20).
- J. Letter from Curator of Castle Howard Estate (30.11.20).