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**History Through a Florida Estuary**

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## INTRODUCTION

Right now, we're living in the Anthropocene - a period which Oxford Dictionary defines as "the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment"<sup>1</sup>. Most of us acknowledge that our actions as humans, particularly in the last few hundred years, have changed or damaged our environments on a global scale. A couple examples of these actions include large-scale agriculture, the industrial revolution, and climate change. However, the Anthropocene creates more than just large-scale physical events. It's also changed our perception of nature and distanced us from our local environments.

I believe that the further we move away from natural areas that have directly influenced how we live today, the harder it will be to comprehend or even care about something as vague and non-direct as something like the climate change. It's difficult to care about the environment globally if we don't care about our own local environment, but it's even harder to care about our own environment if we don't even know that it's there. In *History Through a Florida Estuary*, I'm addressing why understanding our local environments is a necessary step for understanding how we can live in our current age of environmental change.

Static resources and substances such as plant life, water, and geological formations have important roles in our lives. Understanding how the natural world has influenced human lives throughout history is essential for the public's understanding of our complex relationship with the natural world. If we can acknowledge these natural things have been important in shaping communities, then we can work towards making sure they continue to exist alongside us. Every group of people has experienced this era of environmental change differently and no two places will have had the same historical experience with nature. As someone who has lived within the community of Tampa Bay, Florida, this particular project will focus on Tampa Bay and its estuary environment.

I will use this project to communicate the environmental history of my own environment in Tampa Bay. *History Through a Florida Estuary* is a series of artist's books which use natural objects found within an estuary landscape to educate people about the environmental history of Florida. Through presenting Florida's natural objects as paper specimens within three book volumes, I will explain and illustrate the history of these objects as they relate to human activity in order to promote greater understanding of and connection with our environments.

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1. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "The Anthropocene."

## CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

### Learning from Nature

I am inspired by concepts from the field of environmental history, where historians assert that the history of people and the history of our environments cannot be separated. We've relied too heavily on our environments to provide us with everything we need to build our cultures, economic systems, food and trade networks to just disregard the critical role it has and will forever play in human lives. Learning about the history of human interactions with the natural world over time, especially around places we are familiar with, can be a great introduction to why we should care about the role the environment plays in our lives today. William Cronon was my first introduction into this field of history, and he sees the role of environmental historians as storytellers who can "tell stories that carry us back and forth across the boundary between people and nature to reveal just how culturally constructed that boundary is—and how dependent upon natural systems it remains"<sup>2</sup>. Asking people to fully understand how ecosystems work in their natural areas is not realistic for anyone without a scientific background, but we can all find something to relate to in the stories of other people. Environmental history, especially when rooted in familiar places, can be a great introduction to why we should care about the role the environment plays in our lives today.

Before starting this project, I knew that since I cared about the future of our planet's environment, caring about the environment of Tampa Bay should be important to me too. However, I didn't understand that there was such a difference between 'I care about this environment because it's the right thing to do' and 'I care about the health of this environment because I understand why it's important to the people living there'. Only after reading about Florida's environmental history through books such as *Paradise Lost?: the environmental history of Florida* and *The Gulf* by Jack E. Davis's did I realize how big of a role estuaries play in Tampa Bay and in Florida as a whole. Historical accounts in *The Gulf* helped me understand why Florida's history is heavily intertwined with natural features of the state, and essays within *Paradise Lost?* reflected on the environmental change that helped turn Florida into what it is today. Davis's writings showed me the impact that awareness of history and the natural world can have on my own relationship to my home environment.

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2. Cronon, "Kennebec Journey," 33.

## Using Art to Process the Anthropocene

It's important to remember that scientists, researchers, and politicians aren't the only people who are reacting to the Anthropocene. Who would be better at changing people's perceptions around the natural world or at processing large scale changes than artists? Tsing, Swanson, Gan, and Bubandt highlight the importance of social science and personal stories in their collection of essays titled *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. They make arguments about how revitalizing curiosity, observation, and transdisciplinary conversation is key to our "arts of living" within the Anthropocene, all skills that are critical in artists making creative and engaged work<sup>3</sup>. In Etienne Turpin and Heather Davis's book *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, they've assembled a collection of projects, conversations, and essays discussing redefinitions around climate change that take those arguments from *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* even further by suggesting that it is time for creative fields to address climate change in innovative ways. Alongside radical essays from activists and theorists, the artwork discussed in this book address how scientific knowledge can be presented in alternative ways which connect personal narratives with things like geological scales of time. Through contemporary art, ideas around climate change are presented in ways that deal with emotion, sensation, and representation in order to redefine boundaries and create new interfaces of dealing with ecological crises.

Although I'm outlining these themes and aspects of how art can be used for change, I want to acknowledge that widespread or global change doesn't necessarily have to be the goal for artistic projects. Phillip Zimmermann's *Landscapes of the Late Anthropocene* is an example of using illustrations to present his fantastical dystopian perspective on how natural forces can change our landscapes in the future. On the other hand, Lou Cabeen's *The Herbarium of Useful Plants* highlights how her creative process helps strengthen her relationship to her local environment by collecting and reflecting on useful plants and her awareness of "fellow life forms" during climate uncertainty<sup>4</sup>. While these two projects were made to be personal reflections, they capture how observation, curiosity, and personal narratives can make artwork to help us contemplate the potential futures that the Anthropocene can bring.

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3. Tsing, "Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene."

4. Cabeen, "Botanizing the Anthropocene."



Lou Cabeen, Herbarium of Useful Plants, 2016-present. Source: loucabeenart.com

## Embracing Nature through Book Art

While all art forms have great potential to address the arts of living in the Anthropocene, book arts have especially interactive, educational, and narrative qualities. If interaction and personal understanding is important to create a positive relationship to our environments, using an expressive form with individual interactive qualities like book arts provides is incredibly useful. Julie Chen's book *Chrysalis*



Julie Chen, *Chrysalis*, 2014. Source: flyingfishpress.com

emulates the natural form of a butterfly's chrysalis, which unfolds to reveal a small narrative book. As a book artist, she views reading as an intimate act and often challenges what a book

can be by using unexpected physical forms. Other book artists also use sculptural forms that emulate or directly use natural materials to strengthen environmental messages or reflect personal experiences with nature they are trying to get across.



Diane Jacobs, *Mount Hood Wilderness*, 2013. Source: [dianejacobs.net/work/262](http://dianejacobs.net/work/262)

Diane Jacobs' *Mount Hood Wilderness* found sticks, onsite sketches, wool felt, lichen, and a tin book to express her experience in nature. Melanie Mowinski's *Tree Portraits* or *Wanderlust* also reflect her practice of observing the natural world. My project connects with this type of book art by directly combining the natural world with narrative and sculptural forms.

## METHODOLOGY

### Concept Mapping & Brainstorming

While my project lives within the context of book arts, the fundamental ideas that drive this project's content are part of the field of environmental history. In order to translate and express independent aspects of history and environmental science into my creative work, I had to figure out what concepts were most important for my audience to understand and what I wanted to use as an example of those concepts. For the developmental stages of this project I used brainstorming and concept mapping to sort my thoughts into categories of what I knew, what I needed to learn, and what I wanted to express. Since my primary goal centered around understanding and connecting with the environment by understanding how people interact with nature, my project began by brainstorming keywords such as:

maps, natural environment, natural resources, wildlife, human past, human present, construction, tourists, locals, how they sustain themselves, photos, notes, interviews, artifacts, prized possessions, seasons, changes, futures



From these keywords, I started collecting and compiling environmental information such as lists of species of plants, notes about mushroom growth patterns, mangroves' role in their ecosystem, and geological formations around the Gulf of Mexico. After an initial round of information gathering, I looked over my notes and identified a problem: I had no specific focus except vaguely around 'the environment'. From this point on, I limited my research within the three categories of rocks, plants, and water. These are all things that people generally see as inanimate and unimportant as individual objects, species, or bodies, so I wanted to highlight how they could be important and interesting. Within my three areas of research, I brainstormed potential directions of focus including scales of individual natural systems and the passage of time, figuring out how to relate human emotions, histories, and values into rocks, plants, and water, and bringing life to academic studies and arguments as an opportunity for connection between people and parts of the natural world. None of these directions stuck out to me in particular, and so my next step was to brainstorm 50 potential ideas that all incorporated natural aspects of rocks, plants, or water alongside ways of displaying information and educating people through interaction.



Detail image of 50 sketches and written ideas. Ideas #17-24.

I wrote out and sketched these ideas onto pieces of paper, and numbered the pieces, and glued them onto a large brainstorming sheet on my studio wall. This way, I could organize my thoughts and start thinking practically about what my ideas might look like. These ideas included #17, a rock cut in half containing a small book of instructions about how to read physical information off of the surface and layers making up the rock. Idea #19 illustrated how rolls of paper would be attached together in the shape of a head of corn, where each roll of paper tells you a piece of the story of human history surrounding our evolving relationship with corn. Idea # 43 is a collection of herbarium sheets bound together, all using clippings of plants found in everyday yards or gardens to create a profile about the selection of plants we willingly keep. This display of ideas was helpful for thinking about various ways I could present my research topics visually and physically, but after completing this process, I chose to narrow down my topics within environmental history through research exploration.

## **Research Exploration**

Alongside my brainstorming methods, my research focusing on Florida's natural history and Tampa Bay's history is what led to the further development of my project. Initially, I explored ideas around environmental history like William Cronon's concept of "reading landscapes", which is essentially a method of using landscapes as a primary historical resource by reading information directly from the physical environments<sup>5</sup>. This type of physical research that Cronon talked about relied on the historian or researcher being intimately familiar with the environment they were studying. Although I was far away from the types of environments I am most familiar with in Florida, I began trying to incorporate this concept into my project. Florida's landscapes became the focal point of this project, and I gathered contemporary and historical documentation around a variety of Floridian environments. I started to research Florida's natural history so that I could experiment with using the images and textual information in various book forms.

Through narrowing down my research into Florida natural spaces, I found myself in familiar territory where I could rely on my own memories and experiences with Florida's environments, and I could get personally invested in the information I was collecting. I started to brainstorm lists of things I was familiar with and passionate about, and natural objects that I thought would interest people who were both familiar and not familiar with Florida's

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5. Cronon, "Learning to Do Historical Research: Sources How to Read a Landscape."



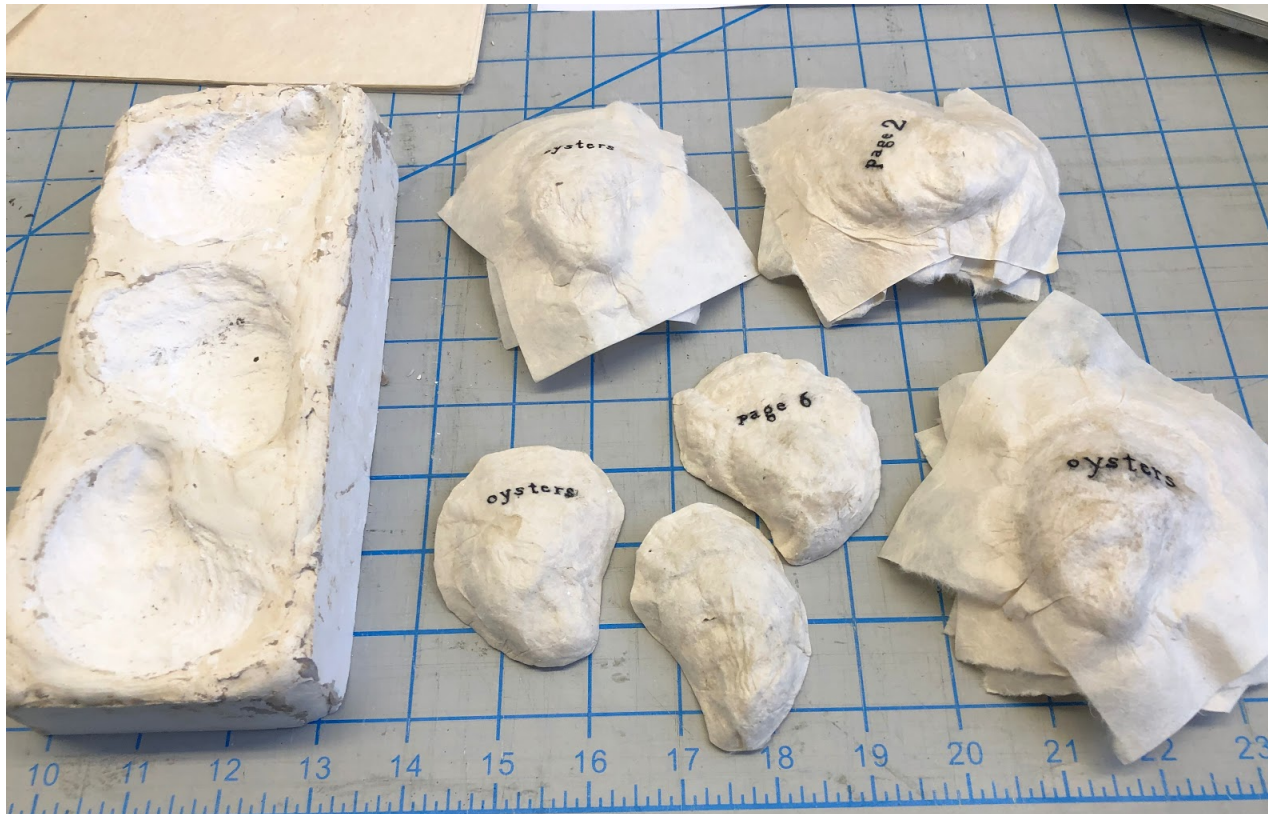
environments. My list included everything I could think of with an interesting history and relevance to people: palm fronds, mangrove seeds, mollusk shells, limestone, phosphate, spring water, spanish moss, cotton, sand, sea grass, concrete, orange trees, etc. I wanted to make sure I had a good variety of things to build a natural narrative of Florida's history. This list continued to shrink as I continued to research more about the objects I had chosen and the roles they had played in Florida's history. Particularly through reading books and articles about the environmental history of Florida, I gradually narrowed my area of focus to South Florida environments, and then to estuaries, and finally to Tampa Bay estuaries.

At this point in time, I had shifted away from Cronon's idea of reading landscapes, and I was just researching estuaries and Tampa Bay's environmental history in order to incorporate that knowledge into artistic book objects. I wasn't physically in Florida, and so in order to convey the feeling of Tampa Bay as a place and estuaries as their environment, I needed to figure out how to bring plants, rocks, and water that were present in estuaries into my project. To do that, I started exploring with materials and imitating mangroves, sea grass, and shells with paper.

### **Material Exploration**

While my research and brainstorming drove the conceptual aspect of this project, the physical making process began after I had reached the decision to work from a Florida environment. Through experimenting with paper forms and replicating a variety of Florida's natural objects, I determined the range of plants and shells that this project would focus on. The list of plants, rocks, and shells that I had generated from my research had identified which objects could be conceptually interesting and important, but I only realized which of those objects were possible to use through the process of attempting to incorporate those objects into book forms. I tried to acquire as many of the objects on my list as possible, and from this step alone I realized that many materials would be too large, too expensive, or simply unavailable to incorporate into my project. From the objects I was able to get, I started the process of experimenting with how I could attach information to my materials. I tried writing information directly onto objects, turning the objects into paper replicas to write information on, attaching paper tags or looping strips of paper through the material, and constructing informative containers for objects I couldn't incorporate paper into. Of my experiments, the most interesting tests were by turning my objects into paper replicas. I created paper replicas either by directly casting wet paper onto shells or seeds themselves, creating plaster molds that held

the impression of the object's surface, and by sculpting paper copies of the materials when making molds and directly casting was not possible.



On the left: a plaster mold holding three individual impression of oyster shells. On the right: molded paper oyster shells cast from the plaster mold on the right. The paper shells are in various stages of completeness.

In order to make these paper objects into something that could hold information and be book-like and interactive, I decided to make clamshell boxes, which look like book covers, in order to store the paper objects. The paper replicas would act as 'pages' of the book and use tags to link relevant environmental history information to the objects themselves. Based on the material explorations and experimentations with making these objects sturdy and easily handled, I started to see the paper objects as artifacts that are representative of their natural counterparts. As artifacts, they are stored and labeled as objects we can learn from, similar to how objects would be stored or displayed in a natural history context. However, as paper objects instead of real natural objects, there is a degree of separation from reality that can signal to readers that these are more than just a representation of a mangrove seed or an oyster shell.

## CREATIVE WORK



Three artist's books laid open on a sandy shoreline in Tampa Bay. Each book contains information on the inside cover about one of three estuarine habitats: mangrove forests, oyster reefs, and seagrass beds.

This project uses paper representation of natural objects found in Tampa Bay estuaries, such as mangrove seeds, oyster shells, and sea grasses, to communicate the important roles these natural objects played in the human history of the Tampa Bay area. Tags attached to these paper objects include information about Tampa Bay's environmental history alongside information about the specific plant or shell and their role in this estuary. These paper objects are separated into three 'books' or boxes, which represent both three significant areas of Tampa Bay's estuary - mangrove shores, oyster beds, and sea grass groves - as well as three significant time periods of the Bay's human history - early Native American settlement up to early 19th century, the beginning Florida's large-scale resettlement from late 19th century to early 20th century, and the population and industrial boom in early to late 20th century. These time periods are reflected within the labels for each book, "Volume I: 40th Century BCE to the Early 19th Century", label 2: "Volume II: 19th Century to the Early 20th Century", label 3: "Volume III: Early 20th Century to the Late 20th Century". The information about these time periods are





Detail image of the first book, labeled on the outside spine as “Volume I: 40th Century BCE to the Early 19th Century.” The left side contains information about mangroves and their ecological role in an estuary. The right side contains tagged paper versions of red mangrove seeds, mollusk shells, and an oyster shell.



Attached to each paper specimen is a corresponding tag carrying fragments of historical information. The specimen tags detail how natural life within Tampa Bay’s estuaries have been impacted by the rise and fall of human settlement in the area, and how the natural world has impacted the lives of the people who live there.

displayed within the specimen tags attached to each paper object, while information about Tampa Bay's environment is displayed on the inside cover of each book.

These natural objects are displayed within three book-like boxes in order to mimic objects that are labeled and tagged within a natural history collection. Natural objects are usually collected, tagged, and cataloged in a museum context because they hold some sort of value to researchers or the public, so this presentation is meant to reproduce the same feeling that these objects are valuable within both natural and historical contexts. These paper objects are displayed within boxes that look like books to signal to viewers that the content within the tags and on the boxes are informational and should be read as if they were pages of a book. Each specimen within the boxes are assigned a number 1-6, like page numbers, and each box is labeled as a volume 1-3, so readers know what order to read the tags and understand in what order the historical information should be read box-by-box.



Detail image of all three books with labels attached to the spines. Label 1: “Volume I: 40th Century BCE to the Early 19th Century”, label 2: “Volume II: 19th Century to the Early 20th Century”, label 3: “Volume III: Early 20th Century to the Late 20th Century.”



## CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of making this project, I have developed a better relationship with Tampa Bay, the place I call home, and have come to understand how the environmental history of this place has influenced how I and many other people live in the area today.. I also grappled with figuring out ways to convert the information and lessons I've learned from my historical and environmental research into practical packages of information that people can use to connect how the history of an area is directly tied into that area's environment. While this project is a personal exploration of history for me specifically and might not be as meaningful to people who aren't familiar with the Tampa Bay area, I hope that it can still serve as an example of and present concepts from environmental history in a way that is more engaging and interesting than a research paper or block of academic text.

I started this project hoping to experiment with book forms and ways of displaying historical information, and through the process of researching artists working within an environmental context or working within book art, I have identified several areas of study I would like to explore in the future. During the time I was molding paper into replications of natural objects, I was introduced to multiple paper casting techniques that opened up a whole world of ideas about intersecting paper sculpture and books. From casting paper pulp in molds to casting paper directly off of natural objects, there are a lot of interesting techniques different from the process I used in my project. Additionally, the creative research involved in this project introduced me to artists who combine art with scientific processes and presentations in interesting and compelling ways. Specifically, Mark Dion's work motivates me to combine my background working in museums with historical and natural science collections with my creative work. While I learned about these artists and creative processes too late in my creative process to incorporate into this project, I am hopeful that I will be able to use inspiration from them to continue to make work addressing environmental topics within the field of book arts in the future.



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