



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

Department of Geography

## MPhil in Anthropocene Studies

## MPhil in Holocene Climates

Two interlinked programmes of advanced study from the Department of Geography, offering theoretical, analytical and practical skills for understanding how climates have changed in the past, and for exploring the possibilities of human influence over earthly futures.



*Photo by Patrick Doyle*

## MPhil in Anthropocene Studies

An 11-month course studying, exploring and critiquing the idea of the Anthropocene

The scale of the environmental and social challenges facing today's world has grown enormously in recent decades, and will grow greater still in a world of scarce and unequal resources, growing population and unmet human development needs. The claim that we now live in the Anthropocene raises fundamental questions for and about humanity on a changing planet. This 11-month programme of advanced study and research will allow students to understand the origins, claims and politics of the Anthropocene, drawing upon the distinctive interdisciplinary strengths of geographical thought, analysis and practice.



*Photo by Maximilian Hepach*

## About the MPhil in Anthropocene Studies

This MPhil provides students with the necessary knowledge and skills to study, explore and critique the implications, tensions and challenges inherent in the idea of the Anthropocene: What does it mean for humanity to be considered a geological force? How might this change how people think about the environment, themselves and their actions in the world? How can the sciences, social sciences and humanities each contribute towards understanding the 'grand challenges' that the Anthropocene signifies? Who might promote, and who might resist, this proposed nomenclature signifying 'the age of humans'?

The MPhil is taught by academic staff in the Department of Geography, one of the world's leading and most respected geography departments.

### Who should apply, and why

If you are interested in exploring the idea of the Anthropocene, and its implications, from a broad range of perspectives then this course will be for you. You will learn to think, discuss and write critically about the Anthropocene – and you may even change your mind about what you think it signifies. We accept students from across the sciences, social sciences and humanities – you do not need to be a geographer.

[View the course Entry Requirements on the Postgraduate Admissions Office Website](#)



*"There are many ways in which one could scrutinize the many-sided and contested idea of the Anthropocene. Geography is a recognised interdisciplinary that accommodates and uses, creatively and critically, multiple ways of knowing the world and how humans experience and shape it. Geography is therefore ideally placed to offer a holistic Master's programme in Anthropocene Studies."*

*Mike Hulme  
Professor of Human Geography  
Course Director: MPhil Anthropocene Studies*



## MPhil in Holocene Climates

An 11-month course examining and explaining the histories of natural climate variation during the Holocene.

In October 2020 the Department of Geography launched an interdisciplinary MPhil in Holocene Climates, exploring and studying the material records of past climate variation. Climate occupies an uncomfortable place in historical enquiry. When studying the recent millennia, rich in documentary and archaeological sources, most historians and archaeologists have been reluctant to consider natural climatic change as a factor in understanding political, economic, social and cultural transformation. Much of the scholarship, and many educational programmes, addressing these complex relationships continue to be constrained by the disciplinary limits of individuals. This MPhil Programme of advanced study and research brings into focus a more integrated view of the climates of the Holocene and their interactions with ecological and social systems, at a multitude of spatial and temporal scales.



*Photo by Ulf Büntgen*

### About the MPhil in Holocene Climates

The MPhil in Holocene Climates will offer students expertise at the interface of climate and history in a new way, beginning with the premise that exchange and dialogue across disciplinary and epistemological divides must become habitual practice. Through its focus on the generation, interpretation and integration of different forms and lines of evidence, this programme will move beyond reductionist explanations to address critical questions: How and why has climate varied during the Holocene? How have such changes and subsequent environmental factors interacted with ecological and societal processes and systems? What can be learned from the past that may be of relevance for coping with future climate change?

The MPhil is taught by academic staff in the Department of Geography, one of the world's leading and most respected geography departments.

### Who should apply, and why

The programme will enhance careers both inside and outside of academia, in both public and private sectors, in national and international organisations, and in developed and developing world contexts.

You should apply to this MPhil if you are interested in the history of climate change and of humanity over the course of the Holocene, and are keen to explore the implications of this history for the modern world. It will equip you to think across disciplines and to approach evidence critically.

[View the course Entry Requirements on the Postgraduate Admissions Office Website](#)



*"With its academic expertise, sub- disciplinary breadth and state-of-the- art laboratory infrastructure, Cambridge's Department of Geography offers a unique opportunity to address a multitude of interrelated questions associated with the entanglements of the volcano-climate-human nexus throughout the Holocene. Due to their conceptual understanding of the complexity of past climate variability and human history, geographers are in the pole position to reach out to other disciplines within the natural and social sciences and even the humanities."*

Ulf Büntgen  
Professor of Environmental Systems  
Course Director: MPhil Holocene Climates

## Features of the MPhils

The two programmes are comprised of lectures, methods training, laboratory practicals (Holocene Climates only), small-group seminars (Anthropocene Studies only), dissertation residential and a research dissertation.

### Core Modules

#### Interdisciplinary Concepts

The syllabus covers theories of knowledge from natural and social sciences, methods and institutions for organising and communicating knowledge across disciplines— such as models, assessments and narratives and interdisciplinary concepts such as resilience, co-production and planetary boundaries. Interdisciplinary Concepts is a core module for students on both Anthropocene Studies and Holocene Climates.

*Example Interdisciplinary Concepts lecture topics (subject to change):*

The Global Imagination; Science, policy and decision-making; Policy and the politics of knowledges; Models; Nature-based solutions; A vulnerability-based approach to disasters; Assessing interdisciplinary knowledge; Islands and Climate Change; Forensic ecologies; Biodiversity and Islands; Creative encounters: Science and Film.



*Nicholas Koenig Anthropocene Studies 2022*



## Anthropocene Studies Module

The syllabus covers the contested histories and politics of the Anthropocene idea, contemporary manifestations of the Anthropocene in innovation, environmental practice and creative representation, and the imaginative, ethical and political significance of the Anthropocene. For students on the Holocene Climates MPhil, Anthropocene Studies lectures are optional but highly recommended.

*Example Anthropocene Studies lecture topics (subject to change):*

Historicising the Anthropocene; Pluralising the Anthropocene; Political Geology; Capitalocene/Plantationocene; Rewilding; Anthropocene Climates; Growth in the Anthropocene; Infrastructure and Citizenship; Food and the Anthropocene; Indigenous peoples, the Anthropocene and Colonialism; Urban Natures; Geopolitics; Picturing the Anthropocene; Future visions of Eco-tourism.



*Olivia Horne, Anthropocene Studies 2022*

## Holocene Climates Module

The syllabus includes critical review of the full suite of interpretations of the causes (volcanic eruptions, solar activity, changes in land use/land-cover, greenhouse gases) and consequences (ecological and societal) of natural and anthropogenic climate change as reconstructed from a wide range of proxy archives and simulated by climate models for most of the Holocene. For students on the Anthropocene Studies MPhil, Holocene Climates lectures are optional but highly recommended.

### *Example Holocene Climates lecture topics (subject to change)*

From the late Glacial into the early Holocene; 'Ice-cores: timescales, synchronisation and records; Geochronological applications in Holocene climate reconstructions; Ice sheet and sea level changes in the Holocene; Volcanic Eruptions; Tephra and tephrochronology; Climate modelling; Natural and anthropogenic forcing of Holocene climate; Global carbon cycle and temperature feedback; From Holocene to Anthropocene; Forest ecology and remote sensing.



*Qintian Yao, Holocene Climates 2022*



## MPhil Course Components

### Research Dissertation

A 15,000-word dissertation requires students to identify, design and independently execute a small, empirically grounded research study related to the course. Students will be supervised through the process from initial question identification through to the design and execution of research. Students may apply for funding from the Department and/or their Colleges to support their dissertation research.

### Dissertation Residential

The Dissertation Residential consists of an intense few days of individual and group learning, focused on developing the dissertation proposal and oral presentations.



*Dissertation Residential at Madingley Hall*

### Postgraduate Training Programme and Department Groups

The Department of Geography offers Postgraduate training workshops, which develop important research, presentation, publication and employment skills. Students are additionally encouraged to attend the lectures, research seminars, workshops and small-group seminars that make the Department a lively centre of intellectual activity.

## Anthropocene Studies Components

### Social Science Research Methods Programme (SSRMP)

Students will complete a range of research methods courses, selecting from qualitative and quantitative research methods, and from basic training to advanced statistical analysis. Visit the [SSRMP webpage](#) (courses subject to change).

### Small-group seminars

Regular small-group seminars will take place during term-time, allowing students to read together and then to think and discuss critically through a number of core texts relating to the Anthropocene.



*Dissertation Residential Seminar, 2022*



## Holocene Climates Components



*Qintian Yao, Holocene Climates 2022*

### Natural Science Laboratory Classes

Regular laboratory classes will take place during term- time, allowing students to become familiar with different proxy data and then to work through a small number of methodological challenges associated with the reconstruction of Holocene climate variability.

### Natural Science Research Methods

Paleoclimatic research methods training take place in our labs, seminar rooms or online. Students will complete a range of research methods modules, selecting from qualitative and quantitative research methods, and from basic training to advanced statistical analysis



*Benjamin Samingpai, Holocene Climates 2022*



## What do our students say?

*"The MPhil in Holocene Climates has provided me with so many lessons, skills and opportunities. I was able to write a dissertation on cryptotephra, which was a massive interest of mine! I have met a range of academics, staff and other students, all of whom have made me feel so welcomed and at home in the Geography department. If you have an interest in this area of study, I would highly recommend you to apply for the course!"*

*Benjamin Samingpai – MPhil in Holocene Climates 2022*

*"I am honoured to be part of the inaugural cohort of the MPhil in Anthropocene Studies... my one-year immersion into the MPhil equipped me with tools to bring the discourse of the Anthropocene into wider policy spaces whilst I worked as a consultant for climate change policy in the Philippine government. It has also been pivotal to my PhD work now as a Gates Cambridge Scholar on international law & techno-utopias. This work is a direct elaboration of my MPhil dissertation, and I expand on ideas I nursed during my time at the MPhil to investigate how futurism expands, challenges, and deconstructs foundational legal constructs in the wake of existential risk. I recommend the program to the young researchers who, like myself and my peers, want to explore the breadth and depth of discussions on the future of humanity."*

*Catherine Tan – MPhil in Anthropocene Studies 2021*

## How to apply:

For details of how to apply, deadlines and course requirements can be found on the Postgraduate Admission Office website:

[Apply for the MPhil in Anthropocene Studies](#)

[Apply for the MPhil in Holocene Climates](#)



*Photo by Lizzy Kaye*

For more information about the courses and Department of Geography, please [visit our website](#).

For queries related to the MPhils, please contact: [anthropoceneholocene@geog.cam.ac.uk](mailto:anthropoceneholocene@geog.cam.ac.uk).