



# La Nina belted convicts

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WHEN the First Fleet sailed from England to Australia in 1787-88, they were battered with storms, rain, strong winds and big seas.

Scientists have examined the log of the *HMS Sirius* and found the fleet of 12 ships encountered La Nina or wet conditions – just as we are experiencing now.

Meteorologists are digitising ships' logs, old newspaper reports and diary entries from around the world to construct more than two centuries of weather patterns.

They hope through this mammoth task, and combining other information such as tree rings, coral and ice-core records, to be able to separate natural climate fluctuations from human-induced climate change – a central argument in the debate over warming.

University of Melbourne climate researcher Joelle Gergis is leading an Australian Research Council-funded project to develop a climate history for southeast Australia using historical, palaeoclimate and weather data.

Dr Gergis said yesterday the detailed eight-month ship's log showed the epic voyage encountered nasty weather in the Indian Ocean and off Australia's east coast.

"Coming up along the east coast of Tasmania they even saw patches of snow," Dr Gergis said. "It was really cold at the height of January and they were battered by severe storms."

Dr Gergis said it was hoped that by posting observational plots on Google Earth, people outside the

science community would become involved and even help digitise some of the material.

The work was being used by organisations such as the Murray Darling Basin Authority so it could understand the droughts that had ravaged Australia's major food-growing region.

The trip got rough for the First Fleet when it started across the Indian Ocean, hitting storms that ripped sails and flooded bedding.

The weather was so bad when the fleet tried to leave for Port Jackson to look for fresh reliable water, it took them two days to get out of Botany Bay.

"It would have been a harrowing journey, by any measure," Dr Gergis said.