

U.S. Environmental History

ES299/HIS299
Wellesley College
Spring 2007

Course Description & Goals

This course examines the complex relationship between nature and society in American history. The course will consider topics such as the destruction of the bison, the rise of Chicago and the American West, the history of natural disasters, and the environmental consequences of war. There are three goals for this course: First, we will examine how humans have interacted with nature over time and how nature, in turn, has shaped human society. Second, we will examine how attitudes toward nature have differed among peoples, places, and times and we will consider how the meanings people give to nature inform their cultural and political activities. Third, we will study how these historical forces have combined to shape the American landscape and the human and natural communities to which it is home. Ultimately, a working knowledge of environmental history will help you develop the ability to reason through and analyze the complexity and contingency of our relationship to nature.

How will we do this? This is a history class, which means there is a substantial reading load (not that this isn't true of other courses too!). I've chosen the readings carefully, with an eye toward readings that represent excellent works of environmental history and are particularly engaging. I hope you'll find them enjoyable on both counts (I'll be interested to hear your thoughts). Making sense of history also offers an opportunity to develop your skills as a writer. Each week, I ask that you turn in a response paper before class. You also have the opportunity to write two papers, each of which will be structured to help you think through the meaning of and value in environmental history. Through discussion, writing, and interactive exercises in class, I hope you'll develop your appreciation for the complexities for our historical relationship to nature (and its relationship to us) and come away with tools and ideas you can apply to illuminate how you as an individual and we as a society understand and value the environment around us everyday.

Course Meetings

This course meets once a week on Wednesday evenings from 6:30pm to 9:00pm. The second week of class, I'm speaking to the U.S. Forest Service in Colorado; I propose rescheduling class that week for Tuesday, February 6th. The fifth week of class I am presenting a paper on the history of modern environmentalism at the annual American Society for Environmental History; there will be no class that week (but your first paper is due instead).

Contacting me...

Nuts and bolts: Jay Turner, jturner@wellesley.edu, Pendleton Hall East 133, x2820, (h) 508-655-1832 (before 9pm). I look forward to speaking with and working with you outside of class. I encourage you to come by my office after class, during my office hours, T/Th 1:30pm-3pm, make an appointment to see me, or, come by if my door is open.

Readings

Some of the readings will be posted on electronic reserves through First Class. (They are marked with an asterisk on the course schedule.) The following books for the course are recommended and available for purchase in the bookstore and on reserve in Clapp:

Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History* (2003)

Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (2000)

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991)

Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1982)

Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Insects and Chemicals from WWI to Silent Spring* (2001)

Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (1995)

Alfred Crosby, *Children of the Sun: A History of Humanities' Unappeasable Appetite for Energy* (2006) → Don't buy this book yet!

Course Requirements

My hope is that you will actively engage in the readings, class discussions, and assignments, and that the combination of those will make this a productive course for you.

Weekly Reading Responses (20%). The response paper is your thoughtful consideration of the week's readings. This is not meant to be a summary of the week's readings. **It is your opportunity to respond to the readings, relate them to other readings, raise questions about them, and offer your own arguments based on them for consideration during class discussion.** Most important, it is your opportunity practice thinking like an environmental historian. Response papers should be 1-page in length, single-spaced. Please post your response papers as Microsoft Word documents before noon the day of class to First Class.

Papers (40%). To encourage you to formalize your skills as an environmental historian, I ask that you write two papers for this course. The first is a 5-6 page paper due on February 28 exploring the goals of environmental history. The second is a 7-9 page paper due in the second half of the term. More specific assignments will be provided in advance.

Exam (20%). This course will include a take-home exam. It will test your ability to reason like an environmental historian more than your ability to recall facts and figures.

Participation and Presentations (20%). Your active involvement is important to the success of this course. I will give you participation grades and feedback on March 14, April 18, and at the end of the term. You will make 1 to 2 during the term, which count toward participation. Since this is shaping up to be a rather large seminar-style class, participation on FirstClass will also count toward your participation grade.

Participation

A-range Comments are thoughtful, draw upon the readings, and enhance discussion. Comments engage other students in substantive discussion (not just directed toward the instructor).

B-range Comments generally enhance discussion. Comments generally engage other students in substantive discussion (not just directed toward the professor).

C-range Comments fail to reflect familiarity with readings.

D-range Participates infrequently in class discussion.

Late Work

Reading responses must be turned in on time, for obvious reasons. My expectation is that you will turn in other assignments on time too. I realize that circumstances may arise which make this difficult. If this is the case, please discuss this with me ahead of time. If you are judicious in requesting extensions, I'll be reasonable in granting them.

Course Schedule

Week 1: What is Environmental History?

We 1/31 No Readings.

Week 2: Approaching Environmental History: Critiques and Directions

Tu 2/6 This week's readings provide an overview of the current debates and directions for environmental history as a field. In reading them, the goal is to begin to consider the big issues in environmental history — nationalism, race, gender, and ethnicity, and cultural values. During the rest of the term, we'll be interested to what degree the articles and books we read reflect these approaches.

Steinberg, "Preface," in *Down to Earth* (2004)*

Cronon, "The View from Walden," in *Changes in the Land* (1982)*

Merchant, "Shades of Darkness: Race and Environmental History" (2003)*

Sutter, "What can U.S. environmental historians learn from non-U.S. environmental historiography?" (2004)*

Week 3: Encounters

We 2/14 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 1-92.
Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 34-53.

Note, could someone volunteer to research the "myth of the ecological Indian" and report to the class this day. To do so, see Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*.

Note, could two volunteers research the reception of Isenberg's book, one

focusing on how it was received by historians and the other focusing on how it was received by scholars of Native American studies?

Week 4: The Commons and Markets

We 2/21 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 93-163.
Price, "Missed Connections," in *Flight Maps*, 1-57.

Note, could two students volunteer to research the Popper's proposal for a "buffalo commons" on the Great Plains and prepare a 10-minute presentation for class and lead a discussion?

No Class! American Society for Environmental History Conference

We 2/28 I'm participating in the annual environmental history conference this week. I'll share my experiences at the conference with you on 3/7.

Paper #1 is Due. Note, for this paper, you'll want to review some of the entries in the roundtable on "What's Next for Environmental History?" available at:
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/eh/10.1/index.html>

Week 6: Urbanization

We 3/7 First, everyone should read Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, xv-xix, skim chapter 1, and read chapter 2.

Second, everyone will read one of chapters 3, 4, or 5, which will form the basis for class presentations.

Note, could someone focus on chapter 1 and research Frederick Jackson's frontier thesis, and relate it to Cronon's book?

Note, for this class, students will be working in small groups to make presentations on the history of the commodization of grain, meat, and timber.

Week 7: Industrialization

We 3/14 Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, chapter 7.
Price, *Flight Maps*, chapter 2.

Note, could someone volunteer to research the reception of Cronon's book, giving particular attention to various scholarly book reviews and report back to class? (I can point you in the right direction.)

Note, for this class, your response paper should take the analytical tools important to Cronon's book and apply them to a place or a commodity of your choosing. We can talk about this more in class.

No Class! Spring Break

Course Schedule — Second Half of Term

Week 8: Capitalism, Agriculture, and Progress

We 3/28 Worster, *Dust Bowl*, read the Introduction, skim chapter 1 and read chapters 2, 5, 10, 12, and epilogue

Note, could someone volunteer to do some research on the state of federal agricultural subsidies and report back to class?

Note, could someone volunteer to do some research on the state of the Ogallalla aquifer and report back to class?

Week 9: Warfare

We 4/4 As Russell explains, “this book is an effort to rethink the relationship between war, nature, and human history. Long cultural traditions have given us little practice thinking about them at the same time.” ... “Its thesis is that war and control of nature coevolved: the control of nature expanded the scale of war, and war expanded the scale on which people controlled nature.” We’ll consider how this book helps inform our understandings of other conflicts.

Russell, *War and Nature*, chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8.

Note, could someone volunteer to read the beginning of Michael Klare’s book *Resources Wars*, and offer a brief summary for the class about how he sees “nature” figuring into contemporary and future military conflicts?

Week 10: *Silent Spring* and Environmentalism

We 4/11 This week we’ll be considering Carson’s *Silent Spring* in its historical context. What did it mean to be a woman and to write *Silent Spring*? How was the book received in the 1960s? How does considering this history affect our understanding of how *Silent Spring* is understood today? The readings include both primary (cartoons, news articles, and editorials from the time period) and secondary materials (articles by historians or other scholars).

Russell, *War and Nature*, chapter 11.

Materials on Carson, *Silent Spring* posted to FirstClass.

Week 11: Environmentalism(s)

We 4/18 This week's readings consider a variety of approaches to environmentalism... middle-class, working class, African Americans, and, thanks to Price, the plastic pink flamingo (and what it says about modern environmentalism). As you read, think about these different meanings and approaches to environmentalism.

Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*, chapter 1, 2, (3, 4, or 5), 6 and epilogue
Price, *Flight Maps*, chapter 3.

Note, could someone volunteer to read the following article and report back to class on how Melosi's description of environmental justice contrasts complements our readings on the environmental movement? Melosi, "Environmental Justice, Political Agenda Setting, and the Myths of History" (2000)

Week 12: The Big Picture

We 4/25 Crosby, *Children of the Sun*, read all.

Week 1x: Environmental History and Hurricane Katrina

The final week of readings will focus on New Orleans, the Mississippi River, and Hurricane Katrina. These readings will be the subject of the take-home final exam, which will focus on New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina.

Readings to be posted to FirstClass.