

Introduction to North American Environmental History

American History 111
Spring Semester, 2005
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Course Overview:

The study of history helps us to not only better understand the people and places of the past but also to better understand ourselves. Historians use a range of evidence and skills to understand the people of the past on their own terms. We will ask how peoples' choices long ago shape the world we live in today. How did things come to be the way they are? What are the historical roots of our cultural beliefs and values? Historians often approach these questions by telling stories about people. The natural world, however, has played an important role in shaping the world we inhabit today. The primary goal of this course is to explore the links between human history and natural history.



This course is an introduction to the field of environmental history. We will move chronologically and topically through important periods and issues in the emerging field of environmental history. This course is not a comprehensive study of the field or U.S. history; neither is it a history of the environmental movement. Broadly, environmental history examines the relationship between people and the natural world and how that relationship has changed over time. Geographically, this course focuses largely on the area now bounded by the continental United States. Some topics extend into modern

day Canada and Mexico, while others are global. As we will see, one of the interesting things about the study of environmental history is its ability to bring seemingly distant places into its stories.

Chronologically, this course spans a large range of time, from colonial America to the emergence of the modern environmental movement. We will focus on the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Course Prerequisites:

This course is an introductory survey. It does not require previous coursework in history, environmental studies, geography, or environmental science. It assumes a basic knowledge of United States history. Your instructor and teaching assistants also assume you bring college-level reading, writing, and speaking skills with you to the course. Please consult the “Resources” sheet at the end of the syllabus for help with writing and study skills.

Course Goals:

This course will cover many issues surrounding the way people and place, human and non-human nature, have interacted over the course of North American history. We intend that this course will give you the tools to think critically and creatively about the past, about your world, and about your place in it. This class, then, should help you to:

- 1) communicate your ideas. Both through written work and through classroom discussions, history classes like this one intend to develop your critical thinking skills. We will emphasize developing arguments and presenting evidence to support those arguments.
- 2) understand that ideas about nature are shaped by history and culture. The course will help you to become more aware and critical of your own assumptions about the natural world. We will also discuss the historical roots of some current environmental debates.
- 3) think about your community and your place in the world. I hope this course will give you some of the tools to think about where you are from and the relationship that you and your community have with other places.

Course Assignments:

Each week includes reading assignments. Please come to section each week prepared to discuss the readings.

You will often have short written assignments due in section. These are noted in the syllabus, and specific instructions will be discussed in section.

This course includes one take-home exam and one final research paper.

Research Paper:

Your final paper for this course is a 6 to 8 page research paper. Your paper should focus on a particular species. It should accomplish the following things: provide an explanation of the characteristics of your chosen species, describe the relationship between people and the species, and – most importantly – show how that relationship has changed over time. Your paper must have a clear thesis statement, a logical structure, and it must engage both primary and secondary sources.

Final Project (Advanced or Honors Students):

You are a tour guide on an environmental history tour of campus. Your assignment is to narrate one of the stops on a campus tour. You will have approximately 10-15 minutes to relate to your group the significance of your place to environmental history and its connection to the larger themes of the course. You must submit a written version of your presentation that includes citations, a bibliography, and any other supporting materials.

Readings:

Many readings will be available on-line. Your required texts are available at UW Bookstore, however, you may be able to purchase them on-line at significantly lower cost.

- ❑ *Major Problems in American Environmental History Documents and Essays*, 2nd edition, edited by Carolyn Merchant (2005) [Note the edition (the earlier edition of this book is significantly different)]
- ❑ Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*
- ❑ Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*
- ❑ Louis Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America*
- ❑ *Conservation in the Progressive Era: Classic Texts*, David Stradling, editor.
- ❑ Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980*

Course Outline:

Week 1: Definitions, Getting Started

Section Assignment: "Where I'm From" Poem [see appendix]

Reading: Gerda Lerner, "The Necessity of History" from *Why History Matters* pages 113-129.

Begin *Ecological Indian* reading for next week.

Lecture 1: Meditations on the Wiener Mobile: Making a Place for Environmental History

Lecture 2: Different Ways of Knowing Nature

Week 2: The Pristine Myth and Ecological Imperialism

Reading: *Ecological Indian* pages 1-28; 73-122.

Section Assignment: Investigating Primary Sources

Come to class with an answer to one of the following questions. If you can't find an answer, provide a short description of how you attempted to find the answer and why you looked in the places you looked. If you do find the answer, write a short paragraph on how you found it. Please make use of the many resources available to you on campus. If you are having trouble, each question has a "hint" on the course web page.

1. *Where in Madison is Murphy's Creek? Hint: The Wise Walls of Science Hall*
2. *Civil War soldiers used it for target practice on campus. Where is it?*
3. *What was the view like from Muir Knoll when Muir might have studied there?*
4. *What was the temperature during the first riot (Dow Chemical) on the UW campus?*

Lecture 3: North American Places

Lecture 4: Co-Invaders: The World Europeans Brought With them

Week 3: Early American Environments

Section Assignment: What types of sources do Cronon and Donahue use? What questions do they ask about colonial New England? Do they come to the same conclusions?

Reading: William Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, pages 1-33; 127-170

Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow*, “The Ecological Structure of Colonial Farming” and “Epilogue: Beyond the Meadows,” pages 155-196; 221-234.

Lecture 5: Please Fence Me In: Property and Nature in Colonial America

Lecture 6: The Center or the Periphery?: Disease and Gardening in Early America

Week 4: The Grid in the Country

Section Assignment: Bring in an idea for your final paper to section.

Reading: Begin Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*

Lecture 7: No More by Metes and Bounds: Measuring America

Lecture 8: Annihilating Space and Time: The Transportation Revolution of the 19th Century

FIELD TRIP and CAMPUS TOUR

Week 5: Envisioning Nature and Then Eating It; Consuming Nature

Reading: Jennifer Price’s *Flight Maps*, pp. xv-109.

Lecture 9: Painting Nature: The Meaning Behind the Pictures

Lecture 10: Who Owns Nature?: Buffalo Wings, Salmon McNuggets, and Whale Stix

Week 6: The City and the Country

Reading: Begin Louis Warren, *The Hunter’s Game*

Lecture 11: The Extractive Industries of Lumbering and Mining: Production and Consumption

Lecture 12: Attack of the Killer Tomatoes: Changing Tastes and the Garden

Week 7: The American Ways of Hunting and Dying

Reading: *The Hunter’s Game*, continued.

Lecture 13: A New Kind of Hunt: Manly Mountaineers and Boy Scouts

Lecture 14: A New Kind of Park: Death and Nature in American Cemeteries

Midterm Exam

Week 8: Urban Environmental History: Class and Trash

Reading: Judith Leavitt, *The Healthiest City*, "The Politics of Health Reform: Garbage," pages 122-155

Section Assignment: *Keep a list of EVERYTHING you throw away in a single day.*

Lecture 15: Disease and Reform: Municipal Housekeeping

Lecture 16: What Smells?: The History of Trash in the United States

Week 9: National Parks and Conservation Controversies

Reading: The National Parks Act (1916)

Conservation, Preservation and Hetch Hetchy (Primary Documents from Stradling, *Conservation in the Progressive Era*)

Louis Warren, "Blackfeet and Boundaries at Glacier National Park," *The Hunter's Game*

Lecture 17: National Parks, National Anxieties

Lecture 18: Progressive Conservation in Focus: Hetch Hetchy

Week 10: Environmental Devastation and Reclamation

Reading: Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, "Taxonomy: The Flow of Power through History;"
Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: Introduction, Okies and Exodusters, and What Holds the Earth Together*

Complete reading #1 or #2:

1. Newlands Act of 1902 or the Reclamation Act and Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* excerpt
2. Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams* excerpt, "Mexicans Go Home! Mexican Removal Programs during the Great Depression" pages 77-94.

Lecture 19: The Dust Bowl and the Rise of Ecology

Lecture 20: A New Deal for the American Environment

Week 11: Problems and Solutions

Readings: Aldo Leopold, excerpt from *A Sand County Almanac*, "Part IV: The Upshot (The Land Ethic, Wilderness, The Conservation Esthetic) pages 237-395

Edward Abbey, excerpt from *Desert Solitaire*, "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks;"
William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness"

Lecture 21: War On Nature

Lecture 22: Aldo Leopold and the Land Ethic

Week 12: Our Greatest Fears: What Science Fiction Tells Us about Ourselves

Reading: María E. Montoya "Landscapes of the Cold War West" in *The Cold War American West, 1945-1989*

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* excerpt

Section Assignment: Final Paper Outline due

Lecture 23: Silent Spring and the Atomic Café
Lecture 24: Thinking Big: Population and Politics

Week 13: The View from Aeroplanes, Submarines, and Space: Environmentalism Comes into Its Own

Reading: Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*, “A Brief Natural History of the Pink Flamingo,” pages 111-166;

Begin Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*

Section Assignment: Drawing on your “Where I’m From” poem, write a short paragraph on a theme from the course that is connected to your home.

Lecture 25: Changing Perspectives

Lecture 26: Environmentalism with a Capital “E”: Earth Day

Week 14: Energy Crisis, Social Crisis, Political Crisis

FINAL PAPERS DUE

Reading: *Environmental Inequalities*, continued.

Daniel C. Wigley & Kristin S. Shrader-Frechette, “Environmental Racism and Biased Methods of Risk Assessment” (Commissioned by the United Church of Christ).

Devon Peña and Joseph Gallegos, “Nature and Chicanos in Southern Colorado” from *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*

Lecture 27: Environmental Racism, Environmental Justice

Lecture 28: It’s a New Morning in Madison