

# U.S. Environmental History

HIS 220 ▪ Spring 2016 ▪ Noyce 3821  
Mon, Wed, & Fri, 3:00-3:50



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**Spring Office Hours:**  
Tue: 10-11am; 2-4 pm  
and by appointment

## Course Overview

This course will introduce students to some of the central issues and debates in American environmental history, a relatively new field of scholarship that emerged in the 1970s seeking to explore the oft-neglected role of the natural world in shaping human history. While scholars of ancient or “pre-modern” societies have always been attentive to the impact of climate, geography, disease, and natural resources, these issues seem to virtually disappear from historical accounts of our own “modern” age. Yet, as we shall see over the course of the semester, the historical record reveals that we cannot understand the fabric of our social, economic and political world without understanding how much it has been shaped by our complex and evolving relationship to nature. To write history without any reference to water, plants, animals, climate, soils, energy, or microbes is to leave out some of the most interesting characters, conflicts, and developments that have shaped America. *And so the fundamental purpose of this class is to think critically about how we can reconstruct a more expansive and compelling story of American history, that incorporates nature into our collective understanding of the past.*

Some of the key topics that we will explore over the course of the semester include: the shifting patterns of land use among Native Americans and European settlers; the role of environmental forces in shaping early colonization; the ideological significance of nature, particularly “wilderness”, in nineteenth-century thought; the ecological transformations wrought by the market revolution, industrial capitalism, and modern agriculture; the role of energy and consumer culture in changing the landscape of twentieth-century America; and the corresponding growth of the conservation movement, the environmental movement, and the response of government policy-makers and regulators.

While the majority of our class time will be devoted to discussing the common readings, I will occasionally give short lectures to provide more context or to explore a particular issue in greater depth. There will be times, moreover, when I will bring in maps, historical documents, or focused projects that I will have you work on in small groups because they shed light on important themes connected to the day’s readings. But I want to emphasize that class discussion is really the heart of the course—it provides an opportunity for each student to examine the issues in a critical light, to move beyond just reading “comprehension” to a deeper level of

*analysis*, in which you identify the essential components of an argument and explore how they relate to one another, and to the larger issues of the course. By sharing our different questions, perspectives and insights, we all have an opportunity to develop a better understanding of the complex issues of the past. So I expect you to participate fully in the class discussions and group work throughout the semester.

## Required Texts

All required books are available for purchase at the Campus Bookstore. A copy of each text will also be available on two hour reserve at Burling Library. The books by Andrews and Valencius are also available as a free ACLS E-books (through the Library website). There are a number of scholarly articles, essays, and documents that are also required reading for the course which will be made available through our course module on Pioneer Web.

- ∞ *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (2nd edition)  
by Ted Steinberg, Paperback, 384 Pages, Published 2008 by Oxford University Press, 2nd edition; ISBN-10: 0195331826; ISBN-13: 9780195331820
- ∞ *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*  
by William Cronon, Paperback, 288 Pages, Published 2003 by Hill and Wang, Revised edition/20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition; ISBN-10: 0809016346; ISBN-13: 9780809016341.
- ∞ *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*  
by Thomas G. Andrews, Paperback, 408 Pages, Published 2010 by Harvard University Press; ISBN-10: 0674046919; ISBN-13: 9780674046917.
- ∞ *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and their Land*  
by Conevery Bolton Valencius, 412 Pages, Published 2002 by Basic Books, ISBN-10: 0465089879; ISBN-13: 978-0465089871.

## Course Requirements

### Class Attendance

If you are unable to attend a class because of sickness or for other reasons, please let me know as soon as possible. If you do not want the absence to negatively affect your participation grade, you may write a short response essay (1 page) addressing one of the discussion questions for that day.

### Class Participation

As mentioned above, class discussion provides our main opportunity to collectively examine and debate the key issues of environmental history. It is crucial, therefore, that students come to each class fully prepared to engage the questions at hand. This involves not only completing the assigned readings prior to class, but also taking the appropriate time to address the discussion questions, to organize your notes accordingly, and to jot down specific examples and passages you want to highlight in class. Remember that effective note taking and class participation will lay the foundation for a focused grasp of the material, and will allow you to succeed when you return to these topics later for a paper or for your final project.

Class participation accounts for 25% of your overall grade, and I take this evaluation seriously. I record a participation grade for each and every class session, and you will be able to follow your grade online throughout the semester so that you are fully aware of where you stand in this respect. I will also give short in-class writing exercises on occasion that will count towards your participation grade (allowing students who might not get a chance to raise their hand every class to demonstrate their knowledge and engagement with the reading). Feel free to come by my office hours or schedule an appointment early in the semester if you have questions or concerns about participation.

Two Short Papers (3-5 pages), due Feb. 14<sup>th</sup> and May 2<sup>nd</sup>

These papers will require you to engage critically with a specific historical issue or debate, drawing upon multiple course readings to craft your own analytical argument. I will post the topics and additional guidelines on p-web at least 10 days before each deadline. *Note that you will have the option of revising either or both of these assignments and submitting them for new grades, if you choose.*

Local History Project (5-10 pages), due April 8th

Learning to work with primary sources, and to use them creatively to build sophisticated arguments, lies at the heart of the historian's craft. This local history project, therefore, is designed to give you a more cohesive and "hands-on" experience of working with sources from a particular time & place. In our case, this will involve three townships in Poweshiek and Jasper counties in the late nineteenth century. A group of faculty and students have been working over the past few years to begin building a digital archive and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) database of material relating to the environmental history of this area. During weeks 7& 8, you will learn to work with a variety of these sources, and our class sessions will focus on how you can combine this material with spatial tools of analysis (like aerial photographs, GIS, and maps) to pursue interesting questions about the environmental history of the area. You will choose the topic of your local history project, and write a short research paper (5-10 pages) developing an argument about this issue. Further guidelines will be distributed closer to the time.

Final Project (6-8 pages), due May 19<sup>th</sup>

This assignment will require you to synthesize the course material, demonstrating a strong command of the issues we have covered over the semester (both methodological and substantive). Students will choose their own topic, and develop a narrative timeline that identifies the essential elements of a larger story they want to tell about the environmental history of America. An interpretive essay will accompany this timeline, explaining how these narrative points fit together into a compelling story, and how it relates to the work of other historians in the field. I also allow students the option of creating an exhibition catalogue that would tell a similarly cohesive story about the environmental history of America, but through maps, paintings, photographs, or other visual media. I will distribute more detailed guidelines for the final project on pioneer web.

Extensions & Late assignments: Late papers will receive a deduction of 1/3 of a letter grade per day. Exceptions may be made for extraordinary medical or personal issues. Each student is also allowed **an extension of seven days** to turn in a written assignment late without incurring any penalty. You should email me in advance so that I am aware that you plan to use your extension for a particular assignment. You may use the entire week, or a particular number of days (reserving the remainder to use later in the semester). Weekends count as one day, so a paper due on Friday, for example, can be turned in on Monday using one extension day. But please note

that no final projects will be accepted after May 20<sup>th</sup> since the college requires that ALL coursework be submitted by the end of exam week (unless you are taking an incomplete in the class).

### Religious Holidays

Grinnell College “embraces the religious diversity of its faculty, students and staff,” and therefore the college’s policy on religious observance emphasizes that the “Faculty and students *share the responsibility* to support members of our community who observe religious holidays.” I take this responsibility seriously, and I’m happy to work with any students to make sure that class requirements do not conflict with their religious holidays/observances. But students have the responsibility to let me know *in advance* when these potential conflicts may occur (preferably at the beginning of the semester), so that we can formulate alternative solutions to missing class or assignment deadlines.

### **Grades**

Grades will be assigned according to the following formula:

Assignment	Date	Percentage of Total Grade
Paper #1	Feb 14 <sup>th</sup>	15%
Local Hist Project	Apr 8 <sup>th</sup>	20%
Paper #2	May 2 <sup>nd</sup>	15%
Final Project	May 19 <sup>th</sup>	20%
Document Exercises	***	5%
Class Participation	***	25%

### **Class Schedule & Reading Assignments**

- *Please bring a copy (either print or electronic) of the readings along with your notes to each class so that we can have a focused and grounded discussion. Everyone should be prepared to cite specific examples or passages from the texts, and to examine them together.*
- Readings available through Pioneer-Web are marked **(P)**

#### **Week 1 Nature & Narrative**

Mon (Jan. 25<sup>th</sup>): **Introductions**

Reading Due: Jennifer Price, “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.” *The Believer* (April, 2006), part I (P).

Wed (Jan 27<sup>th</sup>): **Analyzing Stories**

Reading Due: William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78 (1992), 1347-1376 (P).

Jared Diamond, “The Evolution of Guns and Germs,” in *Evolution: Society, Science and the Universe*, ed. A. Fabian (Cambridge, 1998), 46-63 (P).

- Fri (Jan 29<sup>th</sup>): **Deep Time & the Pre-historic Past**  
 Reading Due: Skim Daniel Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, 2008), 1-11 (P).  
 Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York & Oxford, 2009), 3-7.  
 Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York, 2002), excerpts (P).

## Week 2 The Environmental History of Colonization

- Mon (Feb 1<sup>st</sup>): **Landscapes of Want & Plenty**  
 Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 1  
 William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 2003), xv-53.
- Wed (Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>): **Property Regimes**  
 Reading Due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, ch. 4.
- Fri (Feb 5<sup>th</sup>): **The Transforming Hand of Commerce**  
 Reading Due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, ch. 5-6.

## Week 3 The Rhythms of Pre-Industrial Life

- Mon (Feb 8<sup>th</sup>): **The Ecology of Capitalism**  
 Reading Due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, ch. 7-8.
- Wed (Feb 10<sup>th</sup>): **Sustainable Farming?**  
 Reading Due: Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven, 2004), xiii-xi, 23-35, 155-196 (P).
- Fri (Feb 12<sup>th</sup>): **Working with Nature**  
 Reading Due: Group A: Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York, 1995), ix-29 (P).  
Group B: Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 1-2, 5-8, 49-68, 81-101, 107-117 (P).  
Group C: T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton, 1985), xi-xiv, 17-23, 40-83 (P).

## Week 4 The Market Revolution: Putting Nature to Work

### Mon (Feb 15<sup>th</sup>): **The World of Commodities**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 4.  
William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), excerpts (P).

**First Paper due Monday, February 14<sup>th</sup> at 6:00pm**  
*submitted electronically through p-web*

### Wed (Feb 17<sup>th</sup>): **The Frontier & the American West**

Reading Due: Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Report of the American Historical Association* (1894), excerpts (P).  
Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 8.  
Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford, 1985), excerpts (P).

### Fri (Feb 19<sup>th</sup>): **Another Look at King Cotton**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 5 & 7.  
Edmund Russell, *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth* (Cambridge, 2011), ch. 9 (P).

## Week 5 Call of the Wild: The Politics of Nature in Antebellum America

### Mon (Feb 22<sup>nd</sup>): **Romanticism & the Embrace of Nature**

Reading Due: Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (P).  
Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" *The Atlantic Monthly* 9 (1862), 1-24 (P).

### Wed (Feb 24<sup>th</sup>): **Landscape Paintings and the Hudson River School**

Reading Due: Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *The American Magazine* (January, 1836), 1-12 (P).  
Image Gallery of Nineteenth-Century Paintings (P).  
Michael Heiman, "Production Confronts Consumption: Landscape Perception and Social Conflict in the Hudson Valley," excerpts (P).

- Fri (Feb 26<sup>th</sup>):     **The Cultural Battles over Nature, Work, and Class**  
 Reading Due:     Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch: The Famous Jumper* (New York, 2003), ix-xiii, 41-77 (P).

**Week 6   The Environment, Health, and Western Expansion**

- Mon (Feb 29<sup>th</sup>):     **Reconstructing a Forgotten Worldview**  
 Reading Due:     Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and their Land* (New York, 2002), 1-84.

- Wed (Mar 2<sup>nd</sup>):     **The Geography of Health**  
 Reading Due:     Valencius, *The Health of the Country*, 85-158.

- Fri (Mar 4<sup>th</sup>):     **The Malleability of Land & People**  
 Reading Due:     Valencius, *The Health of the Country*, 191-258.

**Week 7-Week 8   Making the Corn Belt: The Environmental History of Iowa**

These two weeks, will focus on the environmental history of Iowa in the nineteenth century—particularly, the rapid transformation of our local area into one of the most intensively farmed sections of the country. In just a few decades, the tall-grass prairie was replaced by some of the nation's most productive farms (in fact, Iowa was America's leading agricultural producer until the 1920s, when it was finally overtaken by California). We will spend week 7 reading about the ecology and history of the region while also learning how to use an array of primary sources, land records, and maps. There will also be some introduction to the uses of GIS and other digital technologies from the staff of DASIL (the Data Analysis and Social Inquiry Lab), which is currently building a larger database of records and maps pertaining to the environmental history of this area.

Each student will be responsible for developing their own focused research project that will be pursued during the week before Fall Break (i.e. week 8). This project will culminate in a short paper of 5-7 pages, that will be due the first Friday when we return from break (April 8<sup>th</sup>). Further guidelines and instructions will be distributed in class (and on p-web).

**Spring Break: March 21<sup>st</sup> through April 1<sup>st</sup>**

## Week 9 The Rise of Conservation & Progressive Reform

- Mon (Apr 4<sup>th</sup>):      **The Conservation Movement: Reform or Rationalization?**  
 Reading Due:      Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 9.  
                               *The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920* (Library of Congress Website)
- Wed (Apr 6<sup>th</sup>):      **The Gender Politics of Conservation**  
 Reading Due:      Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*, 57-109 (P).
- Fri (Apr 8<sup>th</sup>):      **The Cost of Cleanliness: Debating Urban Reforms**  
 Reading Due:      Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 10.

**Local History Project due Friday, April 8th (6:00pm)**  
*Submitted electronically through p-web*

## Week 10 Fossil Fuels and the Energy Revolution

- Mon (Apr 11<sup>th</sup>):      **The New World of Coal**  
 Reading Due:      Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 1-86.
- Wed (Apr 13<sup>th</sup>):      **Labor & Energy in a Global Age**  
 Reading Due:      Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, ch. 3.  
                               Edward D. Melillo, "The First Green Revolution: Debt Peonage and the Making of the Nitrogen Fertilizer Trade, 1840-1930," *American Historical Review* 117 (2012), 1028-1060 (P).
- Fri (Apr 15<sup>th</sup>):      **Workscapes**  
 Reading Due:      Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, ch. 4.

## Week 11 Industrial America & Agribusiness

- Mon (Apr 18<sup>th</sup>):      **Space, Power, and the Company Town**  
 Reading Due:      Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, ch. 5-6.
- Wed (Apr 20<sup>th</sup>):      **Remembering Ludlow**  
 Reading Due:      Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, ch. 7 & epilogue.



Fri (Apr 22<sup>nd</sup>):      **The Moveable Feast**  
 Reading Due:      Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 11-12.

### Week 12    The “Dirty Thirties” and the New Deal

Mon (Apr 25<sup>th</sup>):      **The Menace of Erosion**  
 Reading Due:      H.H. Bennett, “Facing the Erosion Problem,” (P).  
                              Group A: *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, documentary film (P).  
                              Group B: *The River*, documentary film (P).

Wed (Apr 27<sup>th</sup>):      **A New Environmental Consciousness**  
 Reading Due:      Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (P).  
                              Online Gallery of FSA & WPA images (P).

Fri (Apr 29<sup>th</sup>):      **The Promise of Planning**  
 Reading Due:      Report of the National Resources Planning Board, excerpts (P).  
                              Stuart Chase, “The New Deal’s Greatest Asset” (P).

### Week 13    The Affluent Society and its Discontents

Mon (May 2<sup>nd</sup>):      **The Perfect Consumer Society**  
 Reading Due:      Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 13-14.  
                              Price, *Flight Maps*, excerpts (P).

**Second Paper due Monday, May 2<sup>nd</sup> at 6:00pm**  
*submitted electronically through p-web*

Wed (Dec 4<sup>th</sup>):      **The Green Revolution**  
 Reading Due:      Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 15.  
                              “Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights,” (P).  
                              Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston, 1962), excerpts (P).

Fri (May 6<sup>th</sup>):      **The Diverse Roots of Environmentalism**  
 Reading Due:      Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology*  
                              (New York, 1971), excerpts (P).  
                              Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York, 1968), excerpts (P).  
                              *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, 1968, (P).

Week 14 TBA

**Final Project: Due Thursday, May 19<sup>th</sup> (5:00pm)**  
*Submitted electronically through p-web*