

U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

HIS 220 ▪ Fall 2018 ▪ JRC 209
Mon, Wed, & Fri, 9:00-9:50am



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Fall Office Hours:
Mon & Thur: 2-3:30
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 recent decades to explore the centrality of nature in shaping our modern world. While scholars of ancient or “pre-modern” societies have always been attentive to the impact of climate, geography, disease, and natural resources, modern historians tended to ignore such factors in favor of studying political institutions, ideologies, and economic systems. But as we shall see (over the course of the semester), the historical record reveals that we cannot understand the fabric of America’s social, economic or political order 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 over centuries. *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 There will be times, moreover, when I will bring in maps, historical documents, or focused projects that I will have you work on in small groups because they shed light on important themes connected to the day’s readings.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

The two required books are available for purchase at the Campus Bookstore. There are also a number of required readings for the course (i.e. scholarly articles, essays, and primary sources) that will be made available through our course module on blackboard (p-web).

- ∞ Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*, 1st, 2nd or 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008 or 2012).
- ∞ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

Course Requirements

Class Attendance

Please email me if a medical or personal issue legitimately prevents you from attending class. Under these circumstances, I allow students to make up such absences by emailing me an informal response to the readings for that particular day, which I then count towards their participation grade. Students may do this 3 times over the course of the semester (although exceptions may be made for students facing special circumstances). Students who will be absent because of college sponsored activities or sports are excused if they provide documentation.

Class Participation

Given the discussion-based nature of the course, it is crucial that students come to each class fully prepared to engage the readings/topics at hand. This involves not only completing the assigned readings prior to class, but also taking the appropriate time to address discussion questions, to organize your notes accordingly, and to *note specific examples and passages you want to analyze in class*. While I like to let conversations evolve naturally, with students choosing to “jump in” at their own pace, I will also do a fair amount of calling on students to ensure that everyone is participating, and that the conversation is not confined to a narrow circle. Calling on students is also important in terms of allowing me to evaluate how everyone is processing the material, analyzing the issues, and engaging with the viewpoints of others.

Class participation accounts for 25% of your overall grade, and I take this evaluation seriously. I record a participation grade for each class session, and will make these available to you (via blackboard) on a daily basis so that you can track how you are doing in this aspect of the course. The same applies to when we break up into small groups for either discussion or for in-class exercises/projects. If you have questions or concerns about participation, I would encourage you to come by my office hours or schedule an appointment early in the semester so that we can discuss these issues.

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 may 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 Sept 24th and Nov 29th

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 (5-8 pages), due Nov 2nd

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. During the two weeks preceding Fall break, you will learn to use a variety of archival & digital sources, learning how to combine such 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 (5-8 pages) developing a historical argument about the topic you've chosen. Further guidelines will be distributed closer to the time.

Final Project (6-8 pages), due Dec 20th

This assignment will require you to synthesize the course material, demonstrating a strong command of the issues (both substantive & methodological) we have covered over the semester. 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 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 5pm, December 21st, 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	Sep 24	15%
Local Hist Project	Nov 2	20%
Paper #2	Nov 29	15%
Final Project	Dec 20	25%
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.
- In thinking about which medium to choose for course readings (i.e. digital versus print), I would encourage you to look over Ferris Jabr’s article “The Reading Brain in the Digital Age,” posted on blackboard.

Fri (Aug 31st): **Introductions**

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

Week 2 Nature & Narrative

Mon (Sept 3): **Analyzing Stories**

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

Optional: Cook, Miller, Seager, and Hansen, "Amplification of the North American 'Dust Bowl' Drought through Human-Induced Land Degradation," *PNAS* 106:13 (2009), 4997-5001.

Wed (Sep 5): **Deep Time & the Pre-historic Past**

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

Skim Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York, 2002), excerpts.

Fri (Sep 7): **Steinberg's Narrative**

Reading Due: Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York & Oxford, 2009), preface, prologue, ch. 1-2.

Week 3 The Environmental History of Colonization

Mon (Sep 10): **Landscapes of Want & Plenty**

Reading Due: William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 2003), xv-53.

Wed (Sep 12): **Property Regimes**

Reading Due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, ch. 4.

Fri (Sep 14): **The Transforming Hand of Commerce**

Reading Due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, ch. 5-6.

Week 4 The Rhythms of Pre Industrial Life

Mon (Sep 17): **The Ecology of Capitalism**

Reading Due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, ch. 7-8.

Wed (Sep 19): **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.
Skim Steinber, *Down to Earth*, ch. 3.

Fri (Sep 21): **Work, Knowledge, and Nature**

Reading Due: Group A: Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York, 1995), ix-29.

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.

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.

Mon (Sep 24): **The World of Commodities**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 4.

First Paper due Monday, September 24th at 6:00pm
submitted electronically through p-web

Wed (Sep 26): **Little Market on the Prairie: Chicago & the Grain Trade**

Reading Due: William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), excerpts.

Fri (Sep 28): **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), excerpts.

Mon (Oct 1): **Romanticism & the Embrace of Nature**

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

Wed (Oct 3): **Landscape Paintings and the Hudson River School**
 Reading Due: Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *The American Magazine* (January, 1836), 1-12.
 Skim Michael Heiman, “Production Confronts Consumption: Landscape Perception and Social Conflict in the Hudson Valley,” excerpts.
 Image Gallery of Nineteenth-Century Paintings (p-web).

Fri (Oct 5): **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.

Saturday (Oct 6): **CERA Fieldtrip (10am-12:30pm)**

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, maps and digital resources.

Each student will be responsible for developing their own focused research project that will be pursued during the week before Fall Break. This project will culminate in a short paper of 5-8 pages, that will be due the first Friday when we return from break (November 2nd). Further guidelines and instructions will be distributed in class (and on p-web).

Mon (Oct 29): **No Class**
 Reading Due: Work on your Local History Project Worksheets (due 6pm, Tuesday, Oct. 30th submitted online through the drop-box on p-web).

Wed (Oct 31): **In-class Peer Work Groups**
Bring a copy of your worksheet to class on Wednesday, where you will be presenting your project in small groups (based on similar topics & themes) for feedback from classmates.

Fri (Nov 2): **No Class on Friday**

Mon (Nov 5): **The Western Frontier & American Character**

Reading Due: Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," (1894), excerpts.

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 8.

Local History Project due Monday, November 5th (6:00pm)
Submitted electronically through p-web

Wed (Nov 7): **The Conservation Movement: Reform or Rationalization?**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 9 & 10.

Fri (Nov 9): **The Gender Politics of Conservation**

Reading Due: Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*, 57-109 (P).

Mon (Nov 12): **The New World of Coal**

Reading Due: Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 1-86.

Wed (Nov 14): **Labor & Energy in a Global Age**

Reading Due: Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, ch. 3.

Skim 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.

Fri (Nov 16): **The Industrial Ecology of Breweries**

Reading Due: Harold L. Platt, *Shock Cities: The Environmental Transformation and Reform of Manchester and Chicago* (Chicago, 2005), xiii-xvi, 232-72.

Week 12 Work & Nature in Industrializing America

Mon (Nov 19): **Workscapes & Company Towns**

Reading Due: Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, ch. 4-6, epilogue.

Wed (Nov 21): **Historical Perspectives on Thanksgiving**

Reading Due: Neil Prendergast, "Raising the Thanksgiving Turkey: Agroecology, Gender, and the Knowledge of Nature," *Environmental History* 16:4 (2011), 651–677.

Thanksgiving Break (November 22-25)

Week 13 The Affluent Society and its Discontents

Mon (Nov 26): **The Moveable Feast**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 11-12.

Wed (Nov 28): **The Rise of Suburbia**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 13-14.

Second Paper due Thursday, November 29th at 6:00pm
submitted electronically through p-web

Fri (Nov 30): **The Cultural Politics of Lawns**

Reading Due: Price, "The Natural History of the Plastic Pink Flamingo."

Weeks 14 15 The Rise & Struggles of Modern Environmentalism

Mon (Dec 3): **The Environmental Agenda of the New Deal**

Reading Due: Harold Ickes, "Saving the Good Earth: The Mississippi Valley Committee and Its Plan," *Survey Graphic* 23 (February, 1934).
The Civilian Conservation Corps (American Experience Documentary, PBS, 2009) <https://vimeo.com/150192017>

Wed (Dec 5): **The Birth of Environmentalism**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 15.

Fri (Dec 7): **Shades of Green**

Reading Due: Select one of the documents to read from the folder of primary sources in p-web.

Mon (Dec 10): **The Revolution that Never Happened**

Reading Due: Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, UK, 2001), 221-270.

Wed (Dec 12): **The New Global Order**

Reading Due: Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 16

Fri (Dec 14): **Explaining the Roots of the Climate Change Debate**

Reading Due: Group A: Paul Sabin, *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and the Our Gamble over Earth's Future* (New Haven, 2013), excerpts.

Group B: Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming* (New York, 2011), excerpts.

Final Project: Due Thursday, December 20th (6:00pm)

Submitted electronically through p-web