

HIST 352: Environmental History

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Course Description

This course offers an introduction to environmental history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We will discuss specific approaches of environmental history and will uncover the historical relationship between the human and nonhuman world. Our focus will be on both ideas about nature, and on the ways in which key developments, like the carbonization of economies, have altered the environment in fundamental ways. The human-induced changes to the natural world that some hailed as progress pose in the understanding of others a threat to romanticized landscapes as well as the ecosystems and climate that has allowed humankind to thrive. We will analyze changing ideas about the natural world, the history of the environmental movement, how modern societies have shaped the natural world, and how the natural world has in turn impacted history.

Course Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to

1. Identify key developments in global environmental history from the 19th through the 20th centuries
2. Identify the range of approaches of environmental history
3. Describe and explain how the environment has shaped history and how humankind has shaped the environment
4. Describe and assess the historical agency of non-human animals
5. Describe and assess the history of the movement to protect and conserve the environment
6. Describe and explain how ideas about nature and the environment have evolved
7. Analyze visual and textual primary sources and recognize biases inherent in them
8. Write analytical essays that make effective use of evidence
9. Define opinions with persuasive arguments and evidence in discussions
10. Prepare oral presentations
11. Provide constructive peer feedback
12. Enhance your ability to cooperate with colleagues effectively

Course Materials

Most of the materials for this course will be available online at no cost to you. You will find the links in “library reserves” in blackboard, which is located in the folder “Course Materials.” The readings are tagged by the title of each week (i.e. “A Nuclear Age”).

Assessment

- Participation: 150 pts total = 15%
 - Your participation grade will be determined by your active presence in the classroom: it is not enough to be in the classroom, your grade will depend on the quality of your oral participation and your written responses on the course’s discussion board.
- Current events presentation: 50 pts total = 5%
 - Select a newspaper article and prepare a brief oral presentation (3-5 minutes) in which you outline the article’s argument and how it relates to the topics discussed in this class. Formulate at least one discussion question to lead a brief discussion of the article you selected after your presentation. Post the article you selected on blackboard by Sunday, 11:59 PM.
- Review Essay: 150 points = 15%
 - This assignment assesses your ability to read and assess secondary literature. You are asked to read two secondary sources (monographs or edited volumes), summarize their arguments, critically assess the source base and how successful the authors make their arguments, and put the books in conversation with each other. What are potential weaknesses of the books under review? Do the authors’ arguments compliment one another or are they conflicting?
 - You have several options for your review paper. Please note that the library does not own all the books listed as an e-copy. If you intend to review a book that that is available only as a hard copy you will need to plan in advance and potentially purchase the book (recommended: used copies).
 - Gabriele Hecht, [*The Radiance of France*](#) [available as an e-book via the library] & Michael Bess, *The Light Green Society* [the library does not own an e-book]
 - Bathsheba Demuth, *The Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* [the library does not own an e-book] & Josephson, [*An Environmental History of Russia*](#) [available as an e-book via the library]
 - A selection of two of the following books: Mark Cioc, [*The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815- 2000 France*](#) [available as an e-book via the library] & David

Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* [the library does not own an e-book] & Sara Pritchard, *Confluence: The Nature of Technology and the Remaking of the Rhone* [available as an e-book via the library]

- Your own selection of two books in environmental history. Make sure to discuss your choice with me beforehand.
- Midterm: 200 pts = 20%
 - The midterm will consist of “Identification Terms” (IDs) from the first half of the semester, asking you to briefly describe and explain the importance of key concepts and developments. In addition, you will be asked to write one essay. The aim is to assess your understanding of the material covered in the course thus far, and your ability to write essays and make evidence-based arguments.
- Paper: 250 pts = 200 pts for your paper and 50 pts for providing peer feedback = 25%
 - Your primary sources in this assignment are nature documentaries. Work with a minimum of two documentaries or one documentary series (such as *Planet Earth* or *The British Garden*). Nature documentaries are an influential educational medium for young and old alike. What are the narratives that David Attenborough & Friends tell? How do they craft their stories (visuals, sound, commentary)? How has the genre of nature documentaries evolved over time? To what extent do these documentaries focus on topics like the modern biodiversity crisis or climate change? How do they balance the need to entertain with the aspiration to educate? [Make a research appointment](#) with a librarian to identify suitable sources and consult with me during office hours.
 - You will be asked to provide feedback to one of your peers to hone your skills in providing constructive feedback, to think critically about writing by learning from your peer’s successes and mistakes. 5% of your grade for this paper will be determined by the quality of the feedback you provide to your colleague
- Anthropocene Presentation (Voice Thread “Exhibition;” Group Work): 100 points = 10%
 - Consider the main ideas of the volume [Future Remains](#) (of which you will read a section in this last week of class: What is the “anthropocene,” what are criticisms of this term, and which object would you put on display in your museum of the anthropocene?
 - Prepare a presentation together with a colleague that reflects on this prompt. Create a visually appealing slide, upload it on Voice Thread and record your presentation (5-10 minutes). Consider this Voice Thread as an online exhibition of the anthropocene to which each of you are contributing. With your presentation you are guiding visitors

through this exhibition, presenting the particular section of the exhibition that you have created.

- Make a meaningful comment on the presentation of one of your peers (20 pts of your grade)
- Final Exam: 200 pts = 20%
 - The final exam will consist of “IDs” from the second half of the semester, asking you to briefly describe and explain the importance of key concepts and developments. Second, you will be given several quotes from the assigned readings and will be asked to identify the author and explain the meaning of the quote. Third, you will be given a primary source with a prompt and asked to write an essay answering the prompt and demonstrating your ability to work with primary sources.

Late Policy: For the discussion posts at the end of each unit as well as your final paper, late work will be penalized 10 points per day late. Extensions for assignments are only granted in documented emergencies. That said, I understand that these are unprecedented circumstances and I urge you to contact me as soon as possible in case of an emergency so that I can work with you individually. If you need to ask for an extension, make sure to do so before the deadline has passed.

Tutoring: Please take advantage of the resources at your disposal. In addition to the research appointments offered by the library, please consult with the Academic Success Center as needed. This center offers free, one to one writing tutoring through our Writing Center.

Tutors can help you with every step of the writing process and help you to become a better writer.

Upload Assignments on Blackboard & Save a Copy

It is your responsibility to save a copy of all your assignments on your device or whatever storage device you choose. To avoid difficulties with Blackboard, I strongly suggest that you type out your responses with a word processing program and then cut and paste them into Blackboard rather than the other way around. ONLY email essays or postings in the event of a Blackboard emergency.

Grading Scale

- A: 900-1000 points
- B: 800-890 points
- C: 700-790 points
- D: 600-690 points

F: 0-599 points

Course Schedule

Course Overview

The Course is broken down into three units and each unit has its own folder on blackboard.

I. Introduction: Visions of Nature and Environmental History

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: What is Environmental History

Week 3: Visions of Nature

II. Industrialization and its Discontents

Week 4: Industrialization & Carbonization

Week 5: Urbanization

Week 6: Agriculture

Week 7: War and Revolution

Week 8: Shades of Green

III. The Great Acceleration

Week 9: The Great Acceleration

Week 10: A Nuclear Age

Week 11: The Modern Environmental Movement

Week 12: "Spaceship Earth"

Week 13: Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

Week 14: Merchants of Doubt & The Trouble with Climate

Week 15: The Anthropocene

Detailed Overview

I. **Introduction: Visions of Nature and Environmental History (weeks 1-3)**

What is environmental history and how can an environmental history enlighten standard themes of European history? How have Europeans' vision of nature evolved, and how has nature helped Europeans to envision themselves as members of a nation and imperial powers?

Week 1: Introduction

Course overview and the big questions at stake

How to succeed in a history course: note taking; reading strategies; exercise in identifying good writing; how to work with the library

Week 2: What is Environmental History?

Assigned Readings:

- Donald [Worster](#) "[Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History](#)," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Mar., 1990), pp. 1087-1106 (19pp).
- William [Cronon](#), "[Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History](#)," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Mar., 1990), pp. 1122-1131 (9pp)
- William Cronon, "[A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative](#)," *The Journal of American History* (April 1992). *You can read the whole piece, but concentrate on pp. 1347-3453 and 1366-1376.* (16+ pp)
- Linda Nash, "[The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?](#)" *Environmental History* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Jan., 2005): 67-69 (3pp)

Week 3: Visions of Nature

Assigned Readings:

- Darwin, [On the Origin of Species](#) (1st ed.): peruse & focus on chapter 3 "Struggle for Existence"
- Kropotkin, [Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution](#), focus on introduction & chapter 1

Watch:

- Carolyn Merchant's Berkeley Graduate Council [lecture](#), which captures the main argument of her book *The Death of Nature*. How have Europeans' attitudes towards nature evolved? (40 min)

II. Industrial Europe and its Discontents (weeks 4-10)

This unit focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to the Second World War. We will examine the intertwined processes of industrialization and urbanization and the radical transformation of the environment that carbonization entailed. Not just capitalism, but communism, too, made an industrial modernity and a radical transformation of the natural world central to its vision of progress. While a closer look reveals consequential environmental changes, control over the land, sea, and the animals that call these habitats home remained elusive.

Week 4: Industrialization and Carbonization

- T. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, "Dying with their Boots on," pp. 122-156.
- Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, "Introduction," and "Machines of Democracy," pp. 1-42.
- William Stanley Jevons, *The Coal Question* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1866).
Concentrate on chapter VII "Chapter VII: Of the Economy of Fuel"

Week 5: Urbanization

Assigned Readings:

- <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/anthropocene/urbanization> (short)
- Friedrich Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*. Focus on the chapter "Great Towns."
- Timothy Beatley, ed., *Green Cities of Europe*. Please select one of the city portraits in this volume and prepare to speak about it in class. The choice is yours.

Watch:

- A Convenient Truth: Urban Solutions from Curitiba, Brazil. Watch the [trailer](#). The whole documentary, available for 4 USD on [vimeo](#).

Week 6: Agriculture

Assigned Readings:

- Sigrid Schmalzer, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution*, "Agricultural Science and the Socialist State."
- Venus Bivar, *Organic Resistance: The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France*: selection.

Week 7: War & Revolution

Assigned Readings:

- Edmund Russell, *War and Nature*, “Introduction,” and selection.
- Bathsheba Demuth, “The Walrus and the Bureaucrat: Energy, Ecology, and Making the State in the Russian and American Arctic, 1870–1950,” *American Historical Review* (April 2019): 483-510.

Week 8: Shades of Green

Assigned Readings:

- Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*: selection.
- Frank Uekötter, “[Green Nazis? Reassessing the Environmental History of Nazi Germany](#),” *German Studies Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (May, 2007), 267-287.

I. The Great Acceleration (weeks 9-15)

The post-war era of economic miracles evokes images of plenty. As we will examine in this final unit, consumption and populations in Europe grew in unprecedented ways. So did pollution.

Environmental issues became increasingly prominent and mobilized populations on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Europeans grew concerned about acid rain harming forests and terrified by the news of the Chernobyl nuclear disasters that poisoned wide swaths of land in 1986, only to learn about the even greater threat of the greenhouse effect and a heating climate. We will conclude the semester with a consideration of the fraught politics of climate change and a discussion of the anthropocene.

Week 9: The Great Acceleration

Assigned Readings

- J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014), “Introduction” and “Energy and Population”

Week 10: A Nuclear Age

Assigned Readings

- Rabl, Thomas. "[The Nuclear Disaster of Kyshtym 1957 and the Politics of the Cold War.](#)" Environment & Society Portal, Arcadia (2012), no. 20. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. (Short)
- Kate Brown, *Plutopia*: selection
- Gabriele Hecht, *Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*, "Introduction" and "Nuclearity at Work," pp. 1-10 and 219-258

Watch

- [A is for Atom](#) (general electric)

Week 11: The Modern Environmental Movement

Assigned Readings

- Donatella H Meadows et al, [The Limits to growth](#); a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind (New York: Universe Books, 1972).
- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*: selection
- Bill Kovarik, "[The origins of Greenpeace](#)," *Environmental history timeline*. [short]

Online exhibition

- Stoll, Mark. "[Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, a Book that Changed the World.](#)" Environment & Society Portal, Virtual Exhibitions 2012, no. 1 [updated 6 February 2020]. (optional)

Week 12: "Spaceship Earth"

Assigned Readings

- Perrin Selcer, *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment: How the United Nations Built Spaceship Earth*: selection

Week 13: Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

Assigned Readings:

- Benjamin Chavis, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States of America*: selection.
- Shroeder, Richard; Kevin, St. Martin; Wilson, Bradley; Sen, Debarati, "Third World Environmental Justice". *Third World Environmental Justice*. 21 (2009): 547-55.

Week 14: Merchants of Doubt

Assigned Readings:

- David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable,” *New York Magazine Earth*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>

Watch

- “Merchants of Doubt.” This documentary is based on Oreskes’ & Conway’s eponymous. You can rent it for 4 USD on [youtube](#) or [itunes](#), for example. In addition (but optional), you can listen to Naomi Oreskes lecturing on this topic (f. ex.: [NYU Gallatin School](#) or her lecture at [BYU](#) (with slides)).

Week 15: The Anthropocene

Assigned Readings:

- [Future Remains](#) (on the idea informing the volume *Future Remains*, eds. Gregg Mitman et al; this is a short blog post)
- Rob Nixon “[The Anthropocene](#): The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea,” in *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*, edited by Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero, and Robert S. Emmett (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2018), pp. 1-18.