

U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

HISTORY 3230

Summer 2016

Dr. William D. Bryan

“All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts...That man is, in fact, only a member of a biotic team is shown by an ecological interpretation of history. Many historical events, hitherto explained solely in terms of human enterprise, were actually biotic interactions between people and land...Is history taught in this spirit? It will be, once the concept of land as a community really penetrates our intellectual life.”

—Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

What does American history look like when we make animals, plants, and natural processes historical actors? This is the key question that will guide us in this course, as we explore the environmental history of the United States from the early settlement of North America to the present day. Environmental history is the study of how we, as humans, have fit into the natural world, how our lives have been shaped by daily interactions with the environment, and how we have reshaped nature to satisfy our ever-changing needs and desires. As historian Donald Worster explains, environmental history “rejects the conventional assumption that human experience has been exempt from natural constraints, that people are a separate and ‘supernatural’ species, that the ecological consequences of their past deeds can be ignored.” Over time, humans have gone from seeing nature as something to be feared to something that should be preserved. As we explore this important shift, we will consider how technology and science have altered relationships with the natural world, how new ideas about the production and consumption of goods have transformed uses of natural resources, and how nature has shaped the social, political, and economic development of the United States. These questions will take us from the whaling grounds of the North Atlantic to the lawns of suburban homes throughout the United States, and beyond.

Course Goals:

This course will introduce you to the methods that environmental historians use to understand the connections between the natural world and human history. We will grapple with accounts from people of different backgrounds living in different contexts, and will consider how important issues have changed over time. Besides providing an introduction to the questions and techniques used by environmental historians, this course will teach you strategies for distilling down large amounts of information, working through conflicting accounts by weighing the value of each source, and coming to original conclusions that you can defend. My hope is that this will make you a critical reader and a good writer—skills that are valuable outside of the classroom.

Required Materials:

There are three books required for this course. Each book has been published in multiple editions (available for more or less money), but any edition of the three books will be acceptable for this course. The full text of John Muir's *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* is also available online for free, as indicated below. All three are available at the GSU bookstore, and I have placed copies of each book on reserve in the library if you do not want to purchase them.

- ❖ Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*.
- ❖ John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*. *Full text is also available online:*
http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/a_thousand_mile_walk_to_the_gulf/
- ❖ John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*.

Grading Policy:

The class grade will be formulated from one take-home exam (20%), a short place paper (15%), two brief reading responses (15%), your contributions to a class project (25%), and class participation (25%).

The **exam (20%)** will consist of a series of essay questions pertaining to the materials we have read and talked about in class. Each question will have you draw on evidence from lecture and the readings to answer a broad question pertaining to the topics covered in class. You will be tested primarily on your ability to analyze historical information, come to your own conclusions about it, and defend these conclusions with evidence. This will be a take-home exam. It will be due at the beginning of finals week, by the end of the day on **July 26**.

Reading Response Papers (15% total): You will complete two brief reading response papers during the semester, which will require you to respond to a prompt about our two book-length readings (Muir and McPhee). An electronic copy of your response will be due to an online dropbox through D2L/BrightSpace by the start of each class indicated in the course schedule. Your responses should be no more than one page, double-spaced (with one inch margins around and twelve-point font). Late papers will be penalized 10 points for every business day that they are late.

Reading Response #1 (Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*): June 23

Reading Response #2 (McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*): July 12

Place Paper (15%): This project will give you an opportunity to research and explore the environmental history of a place or landscape that you are familiar with. You will discover how the landscape of this place has changed over time, and will put together a project explaining how we should interpret the environmental history of this location. We will talk more about this project in class, and I will provide you with some useful library/research resources to get you started. The place paper/project will be due at the beginning of class on **July 7**.

Contribution to Digital Project (25%): Over the course of the semester we will be working on a class-wide digital project that traces the complex history of Proctor Creek—a watershed in

west Atlanta that has been the site of some of the city's most severe environmental problems, reaching back to the nineteenth century. Our project will be to write the first environmental history of the Proctor Creek neighborhood/watershed using a variety of archival tools and conducting oral history interviews. We will compile our findings into a digital project accessible to the public that can help residents, environmental advocacy groups, businesses, and policy makers as they work to solve the severe environmental problems still faced by residents. This project will entail several different elements, which we will talk about more in class. Your contributions to the project will be due on **July 21**.

Class Participation (25%): The summer session is renowned for its long classes, so most classes will be a combination of lecture and discussion. All required readings are listed in the syllabus, and they should be completed for the class period that they are noted under in the course schedule. I expect you to have read the material and to come to class prepared to discuss it. I also require that you bring all assigned materials to each class. Participation is a critical part of your grade (25%) and will be evaluated mostly on the quality of your observations in class. At times participation may also involve writing about a particular topic for an in-class assignment, taking a quiz on the reading, or participating in small group discussions.

All grades will be calculated using GSU's grading scale:

A+ (97-100), A (93-96), A- (90-92), B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D (60-69), F (0-59).

If you ever have questions or concerns about your performance in the course, please don't hesitate to speak with me!

Attendance:

Attendance is critical to success in this course, and you are allowed one unexcused absence for the term. More than one unexcused absence will negatively affect your participation grade. Excused absences—such as illness, family emergencies, religious observances, and university-approved curricular and extra-curricular activities—should be properly documented, and must be cleared by me beforehand. You are responsible for scheduling a time to make up any assignment that you miss as a result of an excused or unexcused absence prior to missing class, and for catching up on all lecture material and readings. Tardiness is grounds for being marked absent at my discretion.

Academic Integrity:

Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated, and may result in failure of the course and disciplinary action. Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the instructor, or tampering with the academic work of other students. Not knowing the university's academic integrity policy is no excuse for plagiarism. Take time to familiarize yourself with the university's policy on academic dishonesty, available at:

<http://codeofconduct.gsu.edu/files/2013/03/2014-2015-Section-II-Academic-Conduct-Student-Code-of-Conduct.pdf>.

Disability Access:

Students who wish to request accommodation for a disability may do so by registering with the Office of Disability Services. Students may only be accommodated upon issuance by the Office of Disability Services of a signed Accommodation Plan and are responsible for providing a copy of that plan to instructors of all classes in which accommodations are sought. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please tell me as soon as possible.

Classroom Conduct:

I expect you to conduct yourself in a professional manner at all times. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior is grounds for dismissal from the class. Computers will be allowed in class as long as they don't become a distraction to you or students around you. Cell phone use will not be tolerated during class. Please make sure you have silenced and put away your phone before class begins. No video or audio recording of lectures is allowed without my permission.

COURSE SCHEDULE*

*The course syllabus provides a general plan for the course; deviations may be necessary.

Week 1:

Textbook: Down to Earth, Prologue and Chapters 1-2.

June 7: **What is nature, and why does it matter?**
 Pre-Columbian America/The Native American Landscape

June 9: **The Columbian Exchange**
 A World of Fields and Fences
DISCUSS: Excerpt from William Bartram, Travels (1791)

Week 2:

Textbook: Down to Earth, Chapters 3-4.

June 14: **Is There Nature in the City?**
 Finding the Wild Side of Atlanta: A Walking Tour of Downtown*
DISCUSS: William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" (1996)

****Summer weather in Atlanta can be hot and humid! Wear comfortable clothing and bring water for our walking tour.***

June 16: **Fur Traders and the Capitalist Revolution
Energy from Nature (Water, Oil, and Whales)**
DISCUSS: Gary Kulik, “Dams, Fish, and Farmers” (1985)
Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist, or Do You Work for a Living?”
(1996)

Week 3:

Textbook: Down to Earth, Chapters 5-8, 10.

June 21: **Plantation Agriculture in the Antebellum South
Barbed Wire and the Transformation of the American West
Foodways and Environment**
DISCUSS: John Soluri, “Accounting for Taste” (2002)

Drew Swanson, “Wormsloe’s Belly” (2009)
D. W. Griffith, A Corner in Wheat (watch film in class)

June 23: **READING RESPONSE #1 DUE
The Romantic Idea of Nature**
DISCUSS: John Muir, A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf (ALL)

Week 4:

Textbook: Down to Earth, Chapters 9, 11-12.

June 28: **Conserving the Nation’s Resources
The Social Legacies of Conservation**
DISCUSS: Jenny Price, “When Women Were Women, Men Were Men, and Birds Were
Hats” (1999)
Excerpt from William Hornaday, Our Vanishing Wildlife (1913)

June 30: **The Dust Bowl
Nature and the New Deal**
DISCUSS: David Lilienthal, “The Tennessee Valley Authority” (1944)
The River (watch film in class)

Week 5:

Textbook: Down to Earth, Chapters 13-14.

July 5: **The Atomic Bomb and the Population Bomb
Suburban Sprawls Remakes American Cities**
DISCUSS: Rachel Carson, Excerpt from Silent Spring (1962)
Ted Steinberg, “Lawn-O-Rama” (2007)

July 7: **PLACE PAPER DUE
Ecology and the Land Ethic
From Woodcraft to REI: Outdoor Recreation and Wilderness Preservation**

DISCUSS: Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic" (1949)
Edward Abbey, "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks" (1968)
Monumental: David Brower's Fight for a Wild America (watch film in class)

Week 6:

Textbook: Down to Earth, Chapter 15.

July 12: **READING RESPONSE #2 DUE**
Earth Day and the Environmental Decade
Environmental Regulations

DISCUSS: John McPhee, Encounters with the Archdruid (ALL)

July 14: **The Environmental Backlash**
Environmental Racism/Injustices

DISCUSS: Robert Bullard, "Environmental Racism Revisited" (1990)
"Neighbors *of the Fence*," The Bitter Southerner (2016)

Week 7:

Textbook: Down to Earth, Chapter 16.

July 19: **"Coca-Cola Capitalism" in Atlanta**
Global Environmental Challenges and Sustainability

DISCUSS: Bartow Elmore, "Citizen Coke" (2013)
Bill McKibben, Selections from The End of Nature (1989)

July 21: **PROCTOR CREEK PROJECTS DUE**
Lessons from American Environmental History
Presentation of Final Proctor Creek Projects

TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE: July 26

Your constructive assessment of this course plays an indispensable role in shaping education at Georgia State. Upon completing the course, please take the time to fill out the online course evaluation.