

AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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*

In this course, we will 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, 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 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 perceiving nature as something to be feared to something that should be preserved, and this course will range from the whaling grounds of the North Atlantic to the lawns of suburban homes throughout the United States, and beyond. As we trace how the nation’s attitudes toward nature have changed, 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 the nation’s environment has shaped the social, political, and economic development of the United States.

Required Materials:

Besides shorter materials, which will be provided on ANGEL, there are six books required for this class:

-Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature’s Role in American History* (ISBN: 978-0195331820)

-William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (ISBN: 978-0809016341)

-John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (ISBN: 978-0871565914)

-Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (ISBN: 978-0195174885)

-Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (ISBN: 978-0618249060)

-John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (ISBN: 978-0374514310)

Grading Policy:

The class grade will be formulated from a mid-term exam, a final exam, class participation, and a series of short document analyses related to the weekly readings. The grade breakdown and due dates are listed below:

Mid-term Exam (20%): October 7

Final Exam (20%): TBA
Class Participation (10%)
Document Analysis (50%): 5 responses total

The majority of the grade will be made up of five document analyses, due at the beginning of each corresponding discussion class. We will talk about this more thoroughly in class, but you will be expected to find one primary source document relevant to the weekly topic, and to write a two page response analyzing your document, how it fits into the main theme of the week, how it relates to other readings for the week, and what interesting questions it raises.

Grades will be calculated using PSU's grading scale: A (100-95), A- (94.9-90), B+ (89.9-87.9), B (87.8-83.3), B- (83.32-80), C+ (79.9-75), C (74.9-70), D (69.9-60), F (59.9 and below). Students who fail to take exams during the assigned exam period will receive a zero for the assignment, unless clearing their absence with me at least one day prior. Fifteen points will be deducted each day an assignment is late, and those more than four days late will not be accepted.

Course Schedule and Assignments: (*subject to change)

Week 1: The Native American Landscape

Textbook: Steinberg, Prologue and Chapter 1

August 26: Introduction, what is environmental history?

August 28: Native Americans and the myth of the "ecological Indian"

August 30: DISCUSSION, What is nature and why does it matter?

Assignment: Donald Worster, "Paths Across the Levee"; William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness"*

*Reading assignments provided on ANGEL.

Week 2: Transatlantic Exchanges

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 2

September 2: HOLIDAY, Labor Day

September 4: The Columbian Exchange, *Discuss Weekly Reading Assignments*

Assignment: The Charter of the Pennsylvania Colony (1681)

September 6: The Fur Trade

Week 3: Changes in the Land

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 3

September 9: The Capitalist Revolution

September 11: DISCUSSION

Assignment: Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (ALL)

September 13: The Pioneers

Week 4: Making Energy from Nature

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 4

September 16: Redefining Reasonable Use: New England's Rivers and Industrialization

September 18: Whaling

September 20: "Petrolia"

Week 5: The Old South

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 5

September 23: Plantation Agriculture in the Old South, Southern Foodways

September 25: Agricultural Reforms, South and North

September 27: DISCUSSION

Assignment: John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*

Week 6: Romantic Ideas About Nature

September 30: The Romantic Idea of Nature

October 2: DISCUSSION, Tourism and the "Natural Sublime"

Assignment: John F. Sears, "'Doing' Niagara Falls in the Nineteenth Century" and "Tourism and the Industrial Age"

October 4: Review for Mid-Term Exam

Week 7: Nature and the Civil War

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 6

October 7: **MID-TERM EXAM**

October 9: "Ruin Nation": Nature and the Civil War

October 11: Nature and the New South

Week 8: Nature and the New Nation

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapters 7-8, 10

October 14: Nature and the New West

October 16: DISCUSSION: Chicago

Assignment: Selections from William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*; Film: *A Corner in Wheat* (1909)

October 18: Urban Growth and Pollution

Week 9: Conservation and Progressivism

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 9

October 21: The Precursors to Conservation

October 23: Progressive Era Conservation

October 25: DISCUSSION: Assessing the Social Legacies of Conservation

Assignment: Adam Rome, “Nature Wars, Culture Wars: Immigration and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era”; Selections from William Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wildlife*; Editorials For/Against Southern Stock and Game Laws

Week 10: The New Deal

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 11-12

October 28: Nature and the New Deal

October 30: The TVA (Film: *The River*)

November 1: DISCUSSION

Assignment: Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl*

Week 11: World War II and the Cold War

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 13-14

November 4: World War II and the Atomic Age

November 6: Post-War Affluence, Consumerism, and Suburbanization

November 8: DISCUSSION: Tourism and Outdoor Recreation

Assignment: The Conservation Foundation, “Loving Wilderness to Death”; Edward Abbey, “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks” from *Desert Solitaire*; Roderick Nash “The Irony of Victory” from *Wilderness and the American Mind*

Week 12: Environmentalism

Textbook: Steinberg, Chapter 15

November 11: Antecedents to the Environmental Movement

November 13: DISCUSSION

Assignment: Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

November 15: Earth Day and the Environmental Decade

Week 13: The Politics of Environmentalism

November 18: Energy, Film: *Lovins on the Soft Path* (1982)

November 20: DISCUSSION: The Emergence of Sustainable Development

Assignment: Gifford Pinchot, Selections from *The Fight for Conservation* (1910); Donald Worster, “The Shaky Ground of Sustainable Development”; Selections from the U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*

November 22: Environmental Backlash

Week 14: HOLIDAY (November 25-29)

Week 15: The Costs of Development

December 2: DISCUSSION

Assignment: John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*

December 4: Environmental Inequalities and Environmental Justice
December 6: Natural Disasters

Week 16: The Global Environment

Reading: Steinberg, Chapter 16

December 9: The Global Environment

December 11: DISCUSSION: The Fate of Nature in the Twenty-First Century

Assignment: Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, Chapter 2: “The End of Nature”;
Jennifer Price, “Looking for Nature at the Mall”

December 13: Review for Final Exam