North American Environmental History, 1491-2013

This course surveys the environmental history of North America and the Caribbean from 1491 to the present. Topics include indigenous practice, colonization, agricultural intensification, industrialization, urbanization, war, waste disposal, and climate change. Above all, the course will be concerned with the political conflicts and social inequities that arose as the continent and its surrounding waters underwent centuries of ecological change. The global environmental contexts and consequences of American political and economic activities also will be emphasized.

Graded activities for the semester will consist of the following:

- Attendance, class participation: 25%
- Three of the following six writing assignments, one per period: 45% (15% each)
  - 1a. “Controlling Animals in the Colonial Period” (2-3 pp., due Sept. 15) OR
  - 1b. “The Idea of Improvement in the Colonial Period” (2-3 pp., due Sept. 22)
  - 2a. “Picturing Nature in the 19th Century” (2-3 pp., due Oct. 6) OR
  - 2b. “Violence and Nature in the Late 19th Century” (2-3 pp., due Oct. 27)
  - 3a. “Managing Nature in the Early 20th Century” (2-3 pp., due Nov. 10) OR
  - 3b. “Filming Nature in the Late 20th Century” (2-3 pp., due Nov. 24)
- Final Essay: “The Changing Nature of a City” (6-7 pp., due Dec. 10): 30%

Required Texts (available for purchase at bookstore):

1. Environmental History and the American South: A Reader, ed. Paul S. Sutter (U. Georgia, 2009)
3. Susan Scott Parrish, American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World (UNC, 2006)
5. Chad Montrie, People’s History of Environmentalism in the United States (Continuum, 2011)
7. Megan Kate Nelson, Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War (U. Georgia, 2012)

Other assigned readings will be distributed in PDF form by email. Students are required to have a digital or print copy of each reading on the designated day of class.
1. Before and after 1492

Tues., Sept. 3: Introduction

Thu., Sept. 5: Promoting the Natural Abundance of the New World

2. Animals in Colonial North America

Tue., Sept. 10: Access to Wild Animals: Beavers, Deer, and Migratory Birds
Reading Assignment:

Thu., Sept. 12: Fights over Domestic Animals: Pigs, Cows, Sheep, Horses, and Dogs
Reading Assignment:

---------WRITING ASSIGNMENT 1a: “Controlling Animals in the Colonial Period”---------
due Sun., Sept. 15, 8 pm, by email

3. Changing Landscapes in the 17th Century

Tue., Sept. 17: Planting Maize, Tobacco, Wheat, and Rice
Reading Assignment:

Thu., Sept. 19: Settlers’ Encounters with Swamps and Forests
Reading Assignment:

---------WRITING ASSIGNMENT 1b: “The Idea of Improvement in the Colonial Period”---------
due Sun., Sept. 22, 8 pm, by email

4. Pastoral Colonies, Agrarian Nation?

Tue., Sept. 24: Pastoral Modes in the Colonial Period
Reading Assignment:
Thu., Sept. 26: Georgic Modes in the Early Republic
Reading Assignment:

5. Idealizing Nature in Industrializing America

Tue., Oct. 1: The Natural and Technological Sublime in the Industrial Revolution
Reading Assignment:

Thu., Oct. 3: Escaping to Nature and Protesting Capitalism
Reading Assignment:
- Henry David Thoreau, Walden (1854, 2008), pp. 2-82, 93-185, 198-214 (skip “Reading,” “Brute Neighbors,” and “Conclusion”).

----------WRITING ASSIGNMENT 2a: “Picturing Nature in the 19th century”------------------
due Sun., Oct. 6, 8 pm, by email

6. The Nature of Violence and Death in the Mid-19th Century

Tue., Oct. 8: Garden Cemeteries and the Politics of the Picturesque
Reading Assignment:

Thu., Oct. 10: Gothic Modes during and after the Civil War
Reading Assignment:

7. Confronting Species Extinctions in the Mid-19th Century

Tue., Oct. 15: No Classes (Trinity Days)

Thu., Oct. 17: Ideas about Extinction in the Age of Railroads
Reading Assignment:

8. New Western Economies in the Late 19th Century

Image Assignment:
• Using ARTstor or Library of Congress, find one striking image related to the environmental history of meat production and email it to Professor Wickman by Monday, Oct. 21 at 8 pm

Thu., Oct. 24: Gold and Silver Mining in Colorado, Nevada, and California
Image Assignment:
• Using ARTstor or Library of Congress, find one striking image related to the environmental history of mining in the West and email it to Professor Wickman by Wednesday, Oct. 23 at 8 pm

---------WRITING ASSIGNMENT 2b: “Violence and Nature in the Late 20th c.”------------------
due Sun., Oct. 27, 8 pm, by email

9. Western Conflicts and Catastrophes in the Early 20th Century

Tu., Oct. 29: Conflict over National Parks
Reading Assignment:
• Adam Rome, “Nature Wars, Culture Wars: Immigration and Environmental Reform in Progressive America,” Environmental History 13 (July 2008), 432-453. [PDF]

Thu., Oct. 31: Controlling Water and Capital in the West
Film Assignment:
• Grapes of Wrath (1940, dir. John Ford)


Tu., Nov. 5: Rich and Poor Environments in 20th-century Cities
Reading Assignment:

Th., Nov. 7: Urban Development and Suburban Sprawl
Reading Assignment:
• Ted Steinberg, “Do-It-Yourself Deathscape: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in South Florida,” Environmental History and the American South (2009), pp. 400-431.

---------WRITING ASSIGNMENT 3a: “Managing Nature in the Early 20th c.”------------------
due Sun., Nov. 10, 8 pm, by email

11. Green Initiatives and Mass Movements from the 1950s to the 1970s

Tu., Nov. 12: From “Swamps” to “Wetlands”
Reading Assignment:

Th., Nov. 14: Environmental Legislation before and after Silent Spring
12. Two Protest Movements: Environmental Justice and Monkey Wrenching

Tue., Nov. 19: Toxins and Families
Reading Assignment:

Thu., Nov. 21: “Monkey Wrenching” and “Ecoterrorism”
Film Assignment:
• If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front (2011, dir. Marshall Curry, Sam Cullman)

------------WRITING ASSIGNMENT 3b: “Filming Nature in the Late 20th c.”------------
due Sun., Nov. 24, 8 pm, by email

13. Local Responses to Global Capitalism

Tue., Nov. 26: Biotech and Imperiled Biodiversity?
Film Assignment:
• Food, Inc. (2008, dir. Robert Kenner)

Thu., Nov. 28: No Classes (Thanksgiving)


Tue., Dec. 3: Guest Lecture
Film Assignment:
• Into the Wild (2007, dir. Sean Penn)

Thu., Dec. 5: Climate Justice and Indigenous Rights
Reading Assignment:
• Sheila Watt-Cloutier, “The Inuit Right to Culture Based on Ice and Snow,” in Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril, eds. Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2010), 25-29. [PDF]

------------FINAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT: “The Changing Nature of a City”------------
due Tue., Dec. 10, 8 pm, by email