**Environmental Studies/History 326**

**American Environmental History**

**Fall 2022**

TTH, 9:40-11:10, Sage 3215

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**What is Environmental History?**  Environmental history is the study of the interactions between human societies and the natural world over time. In this course, we will study American environmental history from European arrival in North America to the present. We will study the ways that different groups of Americans adapted to and changed the landscape, and also examine their ideas about nature. The course counts for credit in the History major, the Environmental Studies Major, and the Indigenous Studies certificate, and course material engages fully with all three of these fields of study.

The course has five explicit themes: Putting nature into history; ways of knowing nature; reading the landscape; the role of region; and the relationship between history and sustainability. A central premise throughout will be that much of the familiar terrain of American history looks very different when seen in its environmental context, and that one learns a great deal about both history and the environment by studying them together. The separate regions of the United States have different environments; the characteristics of these landscapes have shaped patterns of human life. We will look at the everyday lives of everyday people, asking how their labor, their religion, and their cultures influenced their interactions with the natural world. In our focus on region, we will pay particular attention to our own home—the North American Great Lakes. Although we typically think of sustainability as a forward-thinking concept, in this course we use it as a lens of inquiry to help us understand human/environmental interactions in the past. As a lens of inquiry, sustainability requires us to investigate the intersections of environmental change, economic activity, and social organization, and how these intersections have changed over time.

An additional goal of this class is to further your liberal arts education. What does this mean? The liberal arts education focuses on general learning, intellectual ability, and critical thinking rather than technical or professional skills. The goal of this class, then, is not just to convey specific information about environmental history (although you will learn much about this) but to teach you how to interpret this information critically, how to understand environmental change in its social, historical, and political context, and how to draw lessons from this history. A liberal arts education provides the tools we need to be active citizens of our communities. As we will learn this semester, active citizenship plays a key role in resolving the complex environmental dilemmas that have faced our society for centuries.

**Bulletin Course Description:** A survey of the major topics and issues in North American environmental history from the early native American experience through the twentieth century. Cross-listed: History 326/Environmental Studies 326. Students may receive credit for only one of the two cross-listed courses. Prerequisites: Junior standing or any 200-level History course or consent of instructor.

**Learning Outcomes:** In 2008, UW Oshkosh adopted a set of Essential Learning Outcomes to help define the meaning of a liberal education. This course will help students progress towards three of these outcomes: Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world; critical and creative thinking; and knowledge of sustainability and its applications. Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Have a basic understanding of the field of environmental history, its goals and methods.
2. Recognize and understand how factors such as class, race, region, and gender have shaped the way that people have understood and interacted with the world around them.
3. Understand how environmental relations in Indigenous and EuroAmerican communities compared and differed in historical settings.
4. Critically analyze the intersections among environmental change, economic activity, and social structures over time; in other words, students will understand how the three pillars of sustainability (social justice, ecological responsibility, and economic security) have intersected with each other in American environmental history.
5. Effectively communicate complicated ideas about environmental history in written format.

**Discussion and Participation**: Your participation in discussions and other class activities is essential. Lectures, discussions and other activities will be integrated. Come to class each day prepared to discuss reading assignments. You will be rewarded for perfect attendance; and your grade will drop significantly if you miss more than two classes. There will be no opportunity to make up short assignments or missed classes. If you have more than five unexcused absences, you will fail the course. An “unexcused absence” is any absence for which you cannot provide a note from a doctor, another professor, or some other documented explanation of your absence. If you simply cannot make a class, please contact me before class meets; perhaps an arrangement can be made to ensure that you are not penalized for missing class for legitimate reasons. Your **active** participation is the key to your learning the material and to the success of the course—both for you as an individual and for the class as a whole. Attendance and participation are worth 20% of your total grade.

In addition, there will be a variety of short assignments, many completed during class, throughout the semester. These will range from short writing pieces to unannounced reading quizzes to found object exercises or internet searches. They will be collected and will count toward 10% of your grade.

Sometimes, I will send email announcements regarding the coming week’s class. Please check your email account sometime on Monday afternoon for updates and last minute information about the upcoming class meeting. Email is generally the best way to get in contact with me.

**A Note on Community Engagement & Environmental Studies:** Because of its broad interdisciplinarity, the Environmental Studies Program is both one of the most challenging and one of the most rewarding programs at the university. The key to meeting the challenges and gaining the rewards of our program is embracing the idea of community. Just as environmental problems cannot be solved without communities coming together in dialogue and action, our classes in ES require you to come together as a community characterized by open participation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Participation means actively contributing both your voice in class discussions and your work to build knowledge together. Respect means listening and making space for your peers’ voices while also feeling free to disagree (as the best forms of understanding often arise out of what begins as disagreement). And responsibility means holding ourselves accountable for being curious, engaged, and informed members of our shared community.

What we discuss in our classes is often difficult, but if we see each class as a community in which we are actively engaged, we will gain not only the rewards of knowledge and capacity for action, but a sense of feeling supported, both academically and emotionally – of confronting the problems we face together. Further, an environmental education obligates us to address issues we see and to collaborate with others to build relationships and try to make things better. This means embracing your major as your program, helping it be the best version of itself, and getting involved outside of the classroom on campus and beyond.

**Course Policies and Conduct:** All of us must do our best to be intellectually honest and tolerant of personal differences. Environmental topics are often controversial, and we all have our own beliefs. I hope that everyone will feel safe to express an idea, even if that idea is not a popular one.

Diversity drives innovation, creativity, and progress. At UW Oshkosh, the culture, identities, life experiences, unique abilities, and talents of every individual contribute to the foundation of our success. Creating and maintaining an inclusive and equitable environment is of paramount importance to us. This pursuit prepares all of us to be global citizens who will contribute to the betterment of the world. We are committed to a university culture that provides everyone with the opportunity to thrive. Knowing and applying the names and pronouns that students wish to use is a crucial part of developing a productive learning environment that fosters inclusion and personal dignity. Please let me know your preferred name and pronoun any time before or throughout the semester.

**Academic Misconduct:** There are some university guidelines for behavior that I expect all of us to follow. One of these has to do with plagiarism, or taking credit for the work of others. This is a serious offense and will be treated according to university guidelines; failure of the course is a potential outcome of academic dishonesty. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t talk with other students about what you are thinking or writing; but when you write something on a paper or exam, it must be in your own words, not copied from someone else. If you have any questions about academic honesty, and what might or might not be considered plagiarism, please ask, rather than taking a risk with grave consequences. Please let me know what I can do to accommodate any disabilities that you might have.

**Course Readings:** The amount of reading fluctuates from week to week. Sometimes you are asked to read over 100 pages of a single secondary source; other times you are asked to give a close reading to only 30 pages of primary sources. Try to keep your eye on the syllabus so that you can tell when the heavier reading loads are coming, and plan ahead.

The following items are available at the University Book Store:

* Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, 2nd Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014)
* Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature’s Role in American History*, 4th Ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018)

The rest of the course readings will be available electronically through the Polk Library E-Reserve. These are REQUIRED readings; you are strongly urged bring them with you to class (in print or on a laptop, iPad, or e-reader) so that you make use them to aid in class discussion.

**Exams:** There will be an in-class midterm on October 11; and take-home exams due on and November 17 and December 15. Further details on these exams will be announced later in the semester.

**Place Paper:** The pace paper is due in class onThursday, December 1. Choose a place you know well—for example, the town where you grew up—and write a 5-6 page paper exploring that place’s environmental history. Use the ideas and materials that we have discussed in class to develop an interpretation of why your place developed in the way that it did. This is not a research paper (although you are encouraged to conduct background research); your evidence should come from your observations of the landscape and the ideas and processes that we have discussed in class. The assignment will be discussed in greater detail in the weeks before the paper is due.

**Grading Breakdown and Course Requirements**

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| Attendance & Participation | 20% |
| Reading Responses, Quizzes, & Short Assignments | 10% |
| Midterm 1 | 15% |
| Midterm 2 | 15% |
| Place Paper | 20% |
| Take Home Final | 20% |

We will follow the standard university grading scale:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| A 93-100 | B- 80-82 | D+ 67-69 |
| A- 90-92 | C+ 77-79 | D 63-66 |
| B+ 87-89 | C 73-76 | D- 60-62 |
| B 83-86 | C- 70-72 | F 59 and below |

Students are advised to see the following URL for disclosures about essential consumer protection items required by the Students Right to Know Act of 1990: https://uwosh.edu/financialaid/resources/consumer-information/

**Course Calendar**

**Wk 1:** Thursday, September 8 – Introduction, Course Themes, & Reading the Campus Landscape

**Wk 2:** Tuesday, September 13 – The Columbian Exchange

Reading: Ted Steinberg *Down to Earth* (DTE), pp. v-viii, 3-39

Alfred Crosby, “Virgin Soil Epidemics,” Canvas

**Reading Response due in class (1 page):** On page 20, Steinberg discusses landscapes as artifacts. What does he mean by this? How does this concept help us understand human interactions with nature? Be sure to refer to both readings in your answer.

Thursday, September 15 – Indigenous Economies

Reading: Charles Mann, “1491,” Canvas

Indigenous History Documents, Canvas

**Wk 3:** Tuesday, September 20– Understanding the Fur Trade

Reading: Calvin Martin, “Micmacs and French in the Northeast,” Canvas

Jim O’Brien, “A Beaver’s Perspective on North American History,” Canvas

**Reading response due in class (1-2 pgs.):** Referring to this week’s readings, craft an argument that explores and explains the environmental aspects of contact between Europeans and Native Americans in North America? What were the environmental, economic, and cultural implications of these encounters? Underline your thesis statement.

Thursday, September 22 – The Puritans Face the Wilderness

Reading: Steinberg, DTE, 40-54

Carolyn Merchant, Puritan primary source readings, Canvas

Robert Cushman, “Reasons and Considerations,” Canvas

**Wk 4:** Tuesday, September 27 – New England Economies: Household and Market

Reading: William Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, “A World of Fields and Fences,” Canvas

David Foster, et. al, “The Importance of Land-Use Legacies to Ecology and Conservation,” Canvas

Thursday, September 29– Jamestown and the Search for Gold

Reading: Steinberg, DTE, 71-88

Carolyn Merchant, Tobacco documents, Canvas

**Wk 5:** Tuesday, October 4– Rice, Tobacco, Slaves, and Soil

Reading: Mart A. Stewart, “Rice, Water, and Power,” Canvas

William Katz, “Black Indians in the South,” Canvas

**Reading response due in class (1-2 pp.):** Pulling from Stewart and Katz, DTE, and at least one primary source, construct an argument about the relationship between slavery and nature. Underline your thesis.

## Thursday, October 6 - Visions for the American Republic

Reading: Jennifer Price, “Missed Connections: The Passenger Pigeon Extinction,” Canvas

Steinberg, DTE, 57-71

**Wk 6:** Tuesday, October 11 – In Class Midterm

No Reading

Thursday, October 13 – The Control of Water and the Emergence of Industry

Reading: Chad Montrie, “’I Think Less of the Factory Than of My Native Dell,’ Labor, Nature and the Lowell ‘Mill Girls,’” Canvas

Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, “The Triumph of Art over Nature,” Canvas

**Wk 7:** Tuesday, October 18 – The Organic City

Reading: Steinberg, DTE, 155-69

Organic City Primary Source Docs, Canvas

Thursday, October 20 – Romantics and the American Landscape

Reading: Kusserow & Braddock, *Nature’s Nation*, Canvas

Documents in the “Romantic Nature Readings” folder, Canvas

**Reading response due in class (1 pg.):** How have historic traditions of art and the environment continued to shape modern ideas about these subjects? In what ways do the primary sources you read for this week support Kusserow and Braddock’s argument, or how might they be used to refute this argument?

**Wk 8:** Tuesday, October 25– Animals and People on the Great Plains

Reading: Steinberg, DTE, 116-135

Andrew Isenberg, “Indians and Bison on the Great Plains,” Canvas

Thursday, October 27– Reshaping the Midwest: Rails, Meat & Wheat

Reading: William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, “Rails and Water,” Canvas

**Wk 9:** Tuesday, November 1 – Reshaping the Midwest: Northwoods Lumber & Great Plains Settlement

Reading: Steinberg, DTE, 89-99

Worster, “Cowboy Ecology,” Canvas

Begin reading Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*

**Place Paper Workshop:** Come to class with a concrete topic idea and at least 3 pieces of evidence that you think you might use.

Thursday, November 3 – The Frontier in Environmental Thought

Reading: Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*, xv-80

**Reading response due in class (1-2 pgs.):** Considering examples from the Adirondacks, craft an argument about who wins and who loses in the conservation of nature. What motivates the various people involved in debates over whether or not to protect the natural world?

**Wk 10:** Tuesday, November 8 – Coal, Steel, and the Urban Landscape

Reading: Nancy C. Unger, *Beyond Nature’s Housekeepers*,” Canvas

Continue reading Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*

Thursday, November 10– The Emergence of Conservation

Reading: Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*, 81-148, 193-209

Gifford Pinchot, “Principles of Conservation,” Canvas

**Wk 11:** Tuesday, November 15 – Environmental Crisis and the Great Depression

Reading: James Kates, *Planning A Wilderness*, Canvas

Steinberg, DTE, 173-86

Thursday, November 17 –  **Take Home Midterm Due;** The New Deal—Planning vs. Conservation

No Reading

**Wk 12:** Tuesday, November 22 – Atomic Era: How WW2 Changed the North American Landscape

Reading: Sarah Fox, *Downwind: A People’s History of the Nuclear West*, Canvas

Leslie Groves, “General Groves Report on Trinity,” Canvas

Thomas Benally, “So a Lot of Navajo Ladies Became Widows,” Canvas

Thursday, November 24 – NO CLASS – Thanksgiving Break

**Wk 13:** Tuesday, November 29– Cities, Suburbs, and Cars

Reading: Steinberg, DTE, 203-239

Wells, *Car Country*, excerpt, Canvas

Thursday, December 1 – National Parks & the Wilderness Movement; **Place Paper due**

No Reading

**Wk 14:** Tuesday, December 6 –The Emergence of Modern Environmentalism

Reading: Steinberg, DTE, 240-68

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, “A Fable for Tomorrow,” and “Elixirs of Death” Canvas

Denis Hayes, “Earth Day,” Canvas

“Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights,” Canvas

“The Alcatraz Proclamation,” Canvas

## Thursday, December 8 – Environmental Backlash

## Reading: Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*, “Rats, Roaches, and Smoke,” Canvas

**Reading response due in class:** What do you see as the most important differences between what Hurley calls African American environmentalism and what might be termed “mainstream” environmentalism? What do Rachel Carson and the African American steelworkers of Gary, Indiana have in common in the way that they perceive environmental issues? In what ways are they different?

**Wk 15:** Tuesday, December 13 – Environmental History and Lessons for the Future

No Reading

**Found object exercise:** bring with you to class some modern object in which you can see traces of American environmental history. This object could be a magazine advertisement, a cereal box, a tv show—anything you want, so long as you can build a case for its relevance as a statement about environmental history.

Thursday, December 15 – No class; **Final Papers in Canvas dropbox by 5:00 pm**