**Environmental Studies/History 345**

# History of American Wilderness

Fall 2021

3 credits

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TTH, 9:40-11:10, Sage 3232

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**Course Description**: What is wilderness? What are its uses? How should it best be protected? How and why have American ideas about wilderness changed over time? What human activities—if any at all—are appropriate in a wilderness? These are some of the questions that we will seek to answer in this upper-level, reading-intensive course.

American ideas about wilderness have changed markedly over time and vary widely across categories of race, class, and gender. Many Americans once saw wilderness as a negative, destructive force, and considered it to be the mission of the developing nation to conquer and subdue the wilderness. Wilderness and civilization were seen as polar opposites. Attitudes toward wilderness began to change dramatically in the nineteenth century; many people still conceived of wilderness and civilization in opposition, but believed that the problem lay in the civilized world, and that wilderness contained an antidote to a society increasingly focused on financial gain and bent on environmental ruin. As this belief gained popularity, a campaign to protect what remained of the American wilderness took root. When Congress created the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964, many considered it the crowning achievement of the environmental movement. But in recent years, scholars and environmentalists have questioned the utility of wilderness as a conservation strategy, worrying that focusing on the distant wilderness tempts us to ignore environmental problems close to home. Others continue to believe that wilderness preservation remains the single most important goal of environmental protection. In this course, we will explore both the history and current policy implications of these debates about the value and meaning of wilderness. We will explore both historic American ideas about wilderness as well as current concerns about its value as an idea and as a conservation strategy.

This class will also contribute to your liberal arts education. A liberal arts education focuses on general learning, intellectual ability, and critical thinking rather than technical or professional skills. The goal of this class is not just to convey information about American encounters with wilderness (although you will learn much about this) but to teach you how to interpret this information critically, and how to understand modern environmental issues in their social, historical, and political contexts.

**Learning Outcomes:** Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Have a basic understanding of the subject matter—the complicated ways that Americans have encountered and thought about wilderness, from colonial times to the present.
2. Place modern debates about wilderness and nature protection in their historical context.
3. Effectively communicate complicated ideas in a classroom setting, primarily through class discussion.
4. Critically analyze primary source documents, and use those documents to create original arguments that explains American encounters with wilderness from diverse perspectives.
5. Effectively communicate complicated ideas about environmental history in written format.

## Attendance, Discussion and Participation: Your participation in discussions and other class activities is essential. This class will be run in seminar format, meaning there will be very little lecture. Come to class each day prepared to discuss the reading assigned for that day. There will be a variety of short assignments, many completed during class, throughout the semester. These will range from short writing pieces to found object exercises or internet searches. They will be collected and will count, along with your attendance and participation in class discussions, toward 30% of your grade—nearly a third of your final grade. Attendance will be taken every class meeting; your grade will begin to drop with each absence after the second one. 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 get in touch with me before the class meets. There will be no opportunity to make up short assignments. 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.

**Readings:** The amount of reading fluctuates from week to week. Sometimes you are asked to read close to 200 pages of a single source. Keep your eye on the syllabus so that you can tell when the heavier reading loads are coming. The following books are available at the University Book Store in Reeve and on reserve at the library:

* Michael J. Lewis: *American Wilderness: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)
* Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Anchor Books, 1997)

The majority of the course readings will be available electronically on Canvas. 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.

**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.

There are some university guidelines for behavior that I expect all of us to abide by. 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, it must be in your own words, not copied from someone else. We will discuss what plagiarism means more fully during the course of the semester. If you have any questions about academic honesty, and what might or might not be considered plagiarism, please ask, rather than making a mistake with grave consequences.

Please let me know what I can do to accommodate any disabilities that you might have.

**Covid Policies and Conduct Expectations:** All students are required to wear an appropriate face mask that covers their mouth and nose when they are in the classroom.

Students who have a medical condition prohibiting them from wearing a face mask may present written documentation from their health care provider, stating that the individual cannot wear a face mask. Students must present this documentation to the Accessibility Center in the Dean of Students office. In these situations, face shields will be provided to that student through the Risk & Safety Office upon request from the Accessibility Center.

UWO procedure dictates that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, an instructor cannot begin class until all students are wearing a mask properly. If a student is non-compliant with the masking policy and also refuses to leave the classroom promptly when requested, the instructor is required to cancel class. Students responsible for class cancelation for these reasons will be referred to the Dean of Students office, and the student will be unable to attend class until they meet with the Dean of Students. The student may be dropped from the class by the Dean of Students.

Eating and drinking is prohibited in classrooms. There may be students who have a medical condition that requires them to eat at certain times of the day, or when certain symptoms present themselves. If, and only if, a student has documentation from the Accessibility Center in the Dean of Students office that they may eat during class will this be allowed. When possible, the student should be assigned a seat furthest away from other students to reduce risk of exposure of aerosols produced while eating. The student is expected to replace their mask as soon as they have finished eating.

Should a student be required to miss class for medical/quarantine reasons, the student *must* provide documentation supporting this requirement. Accommodations for students missing course time for these reasons will be devised to allow students to meet course learning outcomes.

**Grading Breakdown and Course Requirements**

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| --- | --- |
| Attendance & Participation | 20% |
| Reading Responses & Short Assignments | 10% |
| First Paper | 25% |
| Second paper | 25% |
| Final Paper | 20% |

**Grading Scale**

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

**Course Schedule:**

**Wk 1:** Thursday, Sept. 9: What does wilderness mean to you?

**Wk 2:** Tuesday, Sept. 14: Debating the Value of Wilderness

Reading: William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Canvas

**Response Paper (1-2 pgs.):** What is Cronon’s main argument? Do you agree with this argument? Why/why not?

Thursday, Sept. 16: What is Wilderness, anyway?

Reading: Donald M. Waller, “Getting Back to the Right Nature,” Canvas

Dave Foreman, “Wilderness Areas for Real,” Canvas

Greg Aplet, Janice Thomson, and Mark Wilbur, “Indicators of Wildness, Canvas

**Response Paper (1-2 pgs.)**: How do these authors define wilderness? Do these definitions differ from Cronon’s definition of wilderness? Which definitions make the most sense to you?

**Wk 3:** Tuesday, Sept. 21: Pristine Wilderness?

Reading: William M. Denevan, “The Pristine Myth,” Canvas

Melanie Perrault, “American Wilderness at First Contact,” AW Ch. 2

Chief Luther Standing Bear, “Indian Wisdom,” Canvas

**Post: Discussion question to Canvas discussion board**

Thursday, Sept. 23: No Class

**Wk 4:** Tuesday, Sept. 28: Howling Wilderness

Reading: Puritan primary source excerpts, Canvas

Mark Stoll, “Religion ‘Irradiates’ the Wilderness,” AW Ch. 3

Thursday, Sept. 30: Christianity and Wilderness

Reading: Genesis, Chapters 2-4, Canvas

Lynne White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” Canvas

Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” Canvas

**Response Paper (1-2 pgs.):** Referring to the readings, craft an argument about how religion shaped American ideas about nature in the past, and speculate as well about how religion shapes modern ideas about nature and wilderness.

**Wk 5:** Tuesday, Oct. 5: Transcendentalists and Intellectuals

Reading: Bradley Dean, “Natural History, Romanticism, and Thoreau,” AW Ch. 5

Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” and “Huckleberries,” Canvas

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” Canvas

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Emerson Expounds on Nature and Wealth,” 1844, Canvas

Thursday, Oct. 7: Muir on the Mountain

Reading: John Muir, “Our National Parks,” Canvas

Char Miller, “A Sylvan Prospect,” AW Ch. 8

**Post: Discussion question to Canvas discussion board**

**Wk 6:** Tuesday, Oc. 12: Teddy Roosevelt, Masculinity, and Wilderness

Reading: Gail Bederman, “Theodore Roosevelt: Manhood, Nation, and ‘Civilization,’” ER

Theodore Roosevelt, “Hunting in the Badlands,” Canvas

Thursday, Oct. 14: Women and Wilderness

Reading: Kimberly Jarvis, “Gender and Wilderness Conservation,” AW Ch. 9

Isabella Bird, “A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains,” Canvas

Sallie Bingham, “A Woman’s Land,” Canvas

**Response Paper:** How does gender inform the ways that Roosevelt and Bird looked at nature? What would Bingham say about Roosevelt and Bird? Be sure to refer to the primary source readings, and underline your thesis statement.

**Wk 7:** Tuesday, Oct. 19: : **First Paper Due in Class**

No Reading

Thursday, Oct 21: Thursday, March 10: The Wilderness Society and the Wilderness Movement

Reading: Paul Sutter, “Putting Wilderness in Context,” AW Ch. 10

Mark Harvey, “Loving the Wild in Postwar America,” AW Ch. 11

Wallace Stegner, “Wilderness Letter,” Canvas

Wilderness Act of 1964 (Skim), Canvas

**Wk 8:** Tuesday, October 26: Consequences of Wilderness

Reading: Benjamin Johnson, “Wilderness Parks and their Discontents,” AW Ch. 7

James Morton Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace,’” Canvas

**Post: Discussion question to Canvas discussion board**

Thursday, October 28: Wilderness Refined

Reading: Michael Lewis, “Wilderness and Conservation Science,” AW Ch. 12

James Morton Turner, “The Politics of Modern Wilderness,” AW Ch. 14

**Wk 9:** Tuesday, November 2: Race and Wilderness

Reading: Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Canvas

Evelyn White, “Black Women and the Wilderness,” Canvas

Thursday, November 4:Third World Critiques of Wilderness

Reading: Ramachandra Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism,” Canvas

Christopher Conte, “Creating Wild Places from Domesticated Landscapes,” AW Ch. 13

**Response Paper:** What problems arise when the American wilderness ideal is applied in other countries? Does the importance, value, or justification for wilderness change in these situations?

**Wk 10:** Tuesday, November 9: Biologists, Biodiversity, and the Wilderness Ideal

Reading: Justin Paul Smith, “The Wilderness Paradox,” Canvas

Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies*, excerpts, Canvas

Michael Pollan, ed., “Only Man’s Presence can Save Nature,” Canvas

Thursday, November 11: More Troubles with Wilderness—Welcome to the Anthropocene

Reading: Andrew Revkin, “Restoring the Nature of America,” Canvas

Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier, “Conservation for the People,” Canvas

Dave Foreman, “The Anthropocene and Ozymandias,” Canvas

**Response Paper (1 p.):** Considering the readings this week, in what ways might the concept of wilderness need to change in the Anthropocene?

**Wk 11:** Tuesday, November 16: Managing the Anthropocene

Reading: Emma Marris, “Humility in the Anthropocene,” Canvas

Erle Ellis, “Too Big for Nature,” Canvas

Thursday, November 18: Wildness and the Anthropocene

Reading: Paul Kingsnorth, “The Rise of the Neo-Greens,” Canvas

Curt Meine, “What’s So New about the ‘New Conservation,” Canvas

David W. Kidner, “The Conceptual Assassination of Wilderness,” Canvas

**Post: Discussion question to Canvas discussion board**

**Wk 12:** Tuesday, November 23: **Paper 2 Due; electronic copy only,** NO CLASS

**Wk 13:** Tuesday, November 30: Chris McCandless and Ideas of Wilderness

Reading: John Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 1-85

**Response Paper (1 p.):** In what ways does Chris McCandless’s story, as told by Krakuer, tap into the history of American Wilderness ideas?

Thursday, December 2: Rethinking Wilderness

Reading: Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 86-156

**Wk 14:** Tuesday, December 7: The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem

Reading: Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 157-203

Diana Saverin, “The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem,” Canvas

Alex Horton, “‘Into the Wild’ Bus Removed,” Canvas

Skim: Alex Heard, “Does ‘The Wild Truth’ Tell the True Story of Chris McC.?,” Canvas

Optional: John Krakauer, “How Chris McCandless Died: An Update,” Canvas

Thursday, December 9: Rethinking Wilderness

Reading: Donald Worster, “Nature, Liberty, and Equality,” AW Epilogue

Jack Turner, “In Wildness is the Preservation of the World,” Canvas

Aldo Leopold, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” Canvas

**Response Paper (1 pg.):** Considering these three short readings, as well as other readings from the semester, what, in your mind, is the value of wilderness?

**Wk 15:** Tuesday, December 14: Final Thoughts

Thursday, December 16: NO CLASS; **Final Papers Due, electronic submission only, by 3:00 pm**