

History and Environmental Studies 326 - American Environmental History

Professor: Todd Dresser

2212 Sage Hall

Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:30am-1pm

Office: 3449 Sage Hall

Email: dressert@uwosh.edu

Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 1-3pm

Chat office hours: Monday 3pm-5pm (I will be available to chat on the course page in D2L)

What is Environmental History and how will we study it?

Environmental history analyzes the interactions between human societies and the natural world through time. In this course, we will take American environmental history from the arrival of Europeans to the present as our focus. We will study the ways different groups of Americans adapted to the landscape and also how those groups adapted the landscape to suit their needs, perceived or actual. In doing this, we will study the material, or physical relations between humans and the natural world. We will also study human cultural relations, or the worlds of ideas and meanings that humans have constructed about the natural world. Our central premise throughout will be that much of the familiar terrain of American history looks very different when seen in its environmental context, and one can learn a great deal about both history and the environment by studying them together.

We will take a liberal-arts approach to the subject matter of this course. The material here will not be a pile of information to memorize and internalize, as one might do in a professionally oriented class. Rather, we will approach the subject matter as historians; we will analyze primary and secondary sources with the goal of answering a complex puzzle, or question, about the past. Historians pose a series of questions about their world: why is this the way it is? Has it always been this way? What was it like before and why did it change? Here, History will be a set of questions to wrestle with rather than a set of answers to accumulate and hold on to until the end of the term.

The semester is broken down into seven units, each of which focuses on a question. Students will use the primary and secondary readings, as well as class discussion, to answer four of the seven questions. More information on how to do this is below, but the idea behind this approach is to give students practice at reading, discussing, thinking, and writing about genuine historical problems. Our ultimate goal is to try to get into the minds of people in the past and understand their world on their terms to the best of our abilities. Paradoxically, we do this so that we may better understand our own world and how it got to be the way it is.

Essays

Students will write four essays this semester that will be three to four pages each. Each essay will answer the unit question that is found in the weekly reading schedule. There are seven units and **all students will write on the first and last unit. Of the remaining five, students will choose the two** that they wish to write on or that best fit into their schedules.

The essays will be assessed based on the richness with which they answer the question. Unlike a crossword puzzle or a math problem, there is not a right or magic answer hidden away in the documents that you are supposed to uncover. There are, however, answers to the questions that are more textured, nuanced, detailed, thoughtful, and eloquently presented than others. Carefully considered and persuasively argued answers that display a deep reading of the course material will earn higher grades than those that are hastily written and fail to show that the author read the course readings.

Think of these essays as take-home exam questions. Rather than having a midterm or a final, you will perform the tasks of analyzing and synthesizing course material throughout the semester. This format should prevent students from having to cram information all at once and allow some time to thoughtfully consider the course material.

These essays are meant to be challenging, but they are also meant to be fun. At its best, academia is about asking the best question one can come up with and answering it in the richest possible way. These essays attempt to do just that.

Nuts and bolts: Each essay should be three to four pages, double-spaced, in a twelve-point readable font, with page numbers at the bottom, and written to the best of your ability. The due dates for the papers are in the weekly schedule of readings and are also in the chart below.

Paper	Due date
First Paper	Sept. 27 - everyone must do
Second Paper	Oct. 11
Third Paper	Oct. 25
Fourth Paper	Nov. 8
Fifth Paper	Nov. 22
Sixth Paper	Dec. 6th
Seventh Paper	Dec. 15th - everyone must do

Discussion and Participation

Your participation in discussion is extremely important. Discussion in history is equivalent to a lab in a science course. It is where we test out ideas and weigh their validity. In addition, class discussion is where you can try out your ideas before you commit them to paper in your essays. Therefore, discussion and participation will count significantly toward your grade. Conversely, since participation is so important, absence from class will be detrimental and your grade will drop significantly after two unexcused absences.

Starting with the second unit on Sept. 22nd, students will help lead discussion. Working in groups, they will summarize the readings for the day and place them in context. Students will also pose questions about the readings for the class to consider. These short presentations will be assessed on a plus, check, minus basis. A plus is an outstanding job; a check refers to adequate work, and a minus to less-than-adequate work. Each student will do this twice and this will be part, but not all, of your discussion grade. A guide for summarizing the readings is below.

Summarizing Primary Sources:

When you summarize a primary source, first consider who the writer or writers was/were. Then relate who the audience for the piece was. Next discuss what the writer/writers wanted the audience to know. Finally, and most importantly, relate why these authors wanted their audience to know what they wanted them to know at this particular time. For example, who did John Muir think his readers were for *My First Summer in the Sierra*; what did he want them to value about wilderness and why did he write these things at the turn of the twentieth century?

Summarizing Secondary Sources:

When you summarize a secondary source, first relate what the thesis or argument of the passage is. Then tell us what evidence the author uses to support her/his argument. Next outline what the writer wants us to know about the past. Finally, compare and contrast your author to other historians from the unit (if applicable). For example, what is Walter Johnson's thesis about the slave market in the South? What evidence does he use? How does his argument compare to the one made by Mart Stewart? Do they use the same evidence? Do they have similar theses? How are they different?

Plagiarism

There are many areas of life, outside of education, where it is acceptable to use the ideas or words of another person as if they were one's own. Politicians, for example, almost always use the words of speechwriters. Higher education, however, absolutely relies on the notion that the words and ideas that one presents as their own are, in fact, their own. To do otherwise is plagiarism and it cuts against core academic values. Misrepresenting someone else's work as one's own denies a person the chance to learn how to think, write, and argue in an informed and

thoughtful way. First offenses of plagiarism will earn the student a grade of zero on the assignment where it occurs. Any offense after that will be remanded to the academic dean and the student risks failing the course altogether.

Many instances of plagiarism are unintentional and result from a lack of knowledge about how to cite sources. If you are unsure about what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, please talk to me or visit the Polk Library's citation page <<http://www.uwosh.edu/library/citing.html>>. There is also a helpful tutorial on Cornell University's website <<http://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/tutorial/index.cfm>>.

Statement on Laptops

Since many of the readings of the course are available in electronic form, students may use laptops in class in order to reference the course material and take notes. Students are not allowed to use their computers to create a distraction, however, and will be asked to turn off their computers if they are engaged in non-course related activities.

Course Readings

The amount of reading fluctuates from week to week. Sometimes you are assigned to read over 100 pages of a single secondary source; other times you are asked to give a close reading to 30 pages worth of primary sources. Try to keep your eye on the syllabus so that you can tell when the heavier reading loads are and plan ahead. The following items are available at the University Book Store:

Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Conservation in the Progressive Era: Classic Texts, edited by David Stradling (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

Electronic Readings: The majority of electronic readings will be available on e-reserve from the Polk Library. These readings are marked with a **(P)** in the weekly reading assignments below. Other readings will be on the course page on D2L. These are marked with a **(D2L)** in the reading schedule. In rare instances, I will send readings out as email attachments. I will let you know of these instances as they arise.

Grade Breakdown and Grading Scale

Requirement	Percentage of Grade
Attendance and Participation	25%
First Paper	15%
Second Paper	17.5%
Third Paper	20%
Fourth Paper	22.5%

We will follow the standard UW-Oshkosh grading scale

Grade	Percentage	Grade	Percentage
A	93-100	C	73-77
A-	90-92	C-	70-72
B+	88-89	D+	68-69
B	83-87	D	63-67
B-	80-82	D-	60-62
C+	78-79	F	59 and below

Weekly Schedule of Readings

Unit One: Natives and Newcomers: Question: To what extent did Natives and Newcomers have sustainable relationships with the North American environment and with each other?

Sept. 8: Introduction: Natives and Newcomers

Sept. 13: Steinberg, Chapters 1 and 2; Charles Mann “1491” from the *Atlantic Monthly* **(D2L)**

Sept. 15: Cronon, “A World of Fields and Fences” from *Changes in the Land* **(P)***** ***Students will sign up for reading summaries today******

Sept. 20: Virginia DeJohn Anderson, selections from *Creatures of Empire* **(P)**; Brian Donohue, selections from *The Great Meadow* **(P)**

Unit Two: Slave Environments: Question: Mart Stewart coined the term “landscape of domination.” How did these landscapes work and interact with each other on the scale of: the plantation, the South, The United States, and the Globe?

Sept. 22: Steinberg, Chapter 5

Sept. 27: ******First Paper due****** Mart Stewart, “Rice, Water, Power: Landscapes of Domination and Resistance in the Lowcountry, 1790-1888” (D2L)

Sept. 29: Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul* “Persons with a Price” and “Making a World out of Slaves.” (P)

Oct. 4: Sven Beckert, “From Tuskegee to Togo: The Problem of Freedom in the Empire of Cotton,” and “Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War.” (D2L)

Unit Three: Westward the Course of Empire: Question: Why did the bison almost go extinct in the last half of the nineteenth century and why did their near extinction matter?

Oct. 6: Steinberg Chapters 5 and 8

Oct. 11: ******Second Paper Due****** Isenberg, Introduction, and chapters 1 and 2

Oct. 13: Isenberg, chapters 3 and 4; Black Elk Speaks, “The Bison Hunt”

Oct. 18: Isenberg, chapters 5, 6 and conclusion

Unit Four: Romanticism: Question: To what extent is John Muir’s *My First Summer in the Sierra* an expression of Romanticism and to what extent is it something new?

Oct. 20: Steinberg, Chapter 3 and John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (D2L)

Oct. 25: ******Third Paper Due****** Donald Worster, “John Muir and the Modern Passion for Nature” (D2L), and Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

Oct. 27: Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature;” (P) Henry David Thoreau, “Ktaadn” (P); and Novak, *Nature and Culture*, “Sound and Silence: Changing Concepts of the Sublime” (P)

Nov. 1: Anna Botsford Comstock, selections from *Handbook of Nature Study* (P); Kevin Armitage, *The Nature Study Movement*, “Nature, Science, and Sympathy in the Progressive Era” and “A Living Sympathy with All That Is: Nature Study and Roots of Progressive Education.” (P)

Unit Five: Progressive Conservation: Question: To what extent did Progressive conservation try to reform capitalism and to what extent did it preserve nineteenth-century capitalism?

Nov. 3: Steinberg, Chapter 9

Nov. 8: ******Fourth Paper Due****** David Stradling, *Conservation in the Progressive Era*, pgs. 3-56; Thorstein Veblen, “On the Nature and Uses of Sabotage,” from *Engineers and the Price System* (P); Liberty Hyde Bailey, “The Habit of Destruction” from *The Holy Earth* (P)

Nov. 10: Steinberg Chapter 10; Jennifer Price, “When Women were Women, Men were Men, and Birds were Hats,” from *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (P)

Nov. 15: David Stradling, *Conservation in the Progressive Era*, pgs. 57-101

Unit Six: New Deal Certainty and Postwar Uncertainty: Question: Why and how does the technocratic certainty of the New Deal turn into the postwar uncertainty expressed by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*?

Nov. 17: Steinberg chapters 13 and 14

Nov. 22: ******Fifth Paper Due****** Sarah Phillips, “Poor Land, Poor People” from *This Land, This Nation* (P); Lewis Mumford, selections from *The Culture of Cities* (P); Screening of *The River*

Nov. 29: Paul Boyer, “The Whole World Gaspd,” from *By the Bomb’s Early Light* (P) and selections from Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (P)

Dec. 1: Adam Rome, “Septic Tank Suburbia” from *Bulldozer in the Countryside* (P) and Rachel Carson, “A Fable for Tomorrow”, “The Obligation to Endure”, “Elixirs of Death”, and “The Other Road” from *Silent Spring* (P)

Unit Seven: Searching for Just Environments: To what extent was Katrina a natural disaster and to what extent was it a human-made disaster?

Dec. 6: ******Sixth Paper Due****** Steinberg chapter 15 and John McPhee, “Atchafalaya” from *The Control of Nature* (P)

Dec. 8: selections from *Journal of American History*, Special Issue on Hurricane Katrina, December 2007 (D2L)

Dec. 13: Schnellenberger and Nordhaus, “The Death of Environmentalism,” (D2L) Lois Gibbs, Love Canal; United Church of Christ statement on race and the Environment. (P) Newspaper accounts of Katrina. (D2L)

Dec. 15: ******Seventh Paper Due******