

History 280: United States Environmental History

Course Meetings:
1-1:50pm CCC 321 MWF

UWSP – History Department
473 CCC
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Office Hours:
1-2pm Mondays and Wednesdays
and by appointment

What can the past teach us about sustainability?

That question is at the root of all we'll do this semester. As an historian, I think there is no better a challenge than to teach how the past matters today. As an *environmental* historian, I further believe that the lessons of the past are—and should be—environmental lessons.

In this class, we look for lessons to guide sustainability in four places: parks, cities, farms, and forests. Each forms a unit in the class. There are certainly other ways to survey American environmental history, but this particular arrangement works very well. It encourages us to see the intellectual and cultural traditions that undergird how Americans today think about parks and cities, farms and forests.

In each unit, we will keep in mind the components of sustainability: justice, economics, and ecology. As it turns out, Americans have long thought about these themes, well before the notion of sustainability came on the scene. That's good for us, because it means we can learn from people who have already thought about the things we care about. The past is full of people who can help us decide how to build cities, farm soil, design parks, and manage forests.

About those lessons: How do we decide upon what counts as a lesson? That's the hard part. It will be part of our conversation every day. It's also the fun part. And before we get into it, let me make this promise: If you can learn how to draw a lesson from the past, then you've taught yourself how to think historically.

Enduring Understandings:

Sustainability requires understanding the lessons of the past.

Learning Outcomes: After taking this course, students will be able to:

- Describe and explain major changes in the history of the United States environment
- Evaluate competing claims about the nation's environmental past
- Question the landscape around them with thought and care

Course Structure: The big promise I make to you is that environmental history is especially relevant because it offers lessons for how we ought to think about sustainability today. I designed the course structure to help you decide upon which lessons history actually teaches.

I have described below the structure and rhythm of our work, helping you see how everything fits together. More information on specific items can be found elsewhere on the syllabus, in upcoming handouts, or in class as the time comes.

We begin each unit with a week of lecture. My aim is to give you an overview of the unit theme's history, whether forest history, park history, agricultural history, or urban history. I want you to have a basic sense of chronology for how important ideas and major events unfolded. To reinforce the lectures, you will read short chapters from our textbook, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*. You will see that there are particularly American ways of thinking about cities and farms, and parks and forests.

During lectures, we will pause to discuss the lessons these overviews offer.

After the week of lecture, we will spend one day watching a short film and discussing it. I like to insert the film here because it's a good visual break. Films also bring other perspectives into our inquiry—and that's the real reason I include them.

During film days, our task will always be to identify what lesson the film might contain.

Next, we arrive at the heart of the unit: the book. I have chosen four smart and accessible books for this class and each will let us dig deeper into the history of cities, forests, farms, or parks. (A note to those concerned about heavy reading loads: I have only assigned about 150 pages of each book.) To further the ease of reading, I also provide reading guides that will help you focus on the author's message without getting bogged down in details. In fact, these reading guides are required work. On every book discussion day, a handful of students (decided upon ahead of time) will have to teach me the day's reading using their completed reading guide.

During book discussion days, our conversation will end with the lessons we can draw from the book.

The last day before the unit exam, I have scheduled a "competing viewpoints discussion." These will be entirely in-class exercises. I'll present the class with a scenario, in which there will be competing viewpoints about environmental history. Using the lessons identified throughout the unit, the class will judge the relative merits of the viewpoints. It's fun, although more importantly, it's great review for the exam since it demands that you clarify the unit's lessons.

On exams, you will describe and explain one lesson from the unit—in about 250 words. Note that the lesson is not given to you; instead, deciding upon the lesson is your primary intellectual work in this class. *I therefore highly recommend participating in class conversations about what the past can teach us. Likewise, I just as highly recommend that your own studying be focused on building up a case for the lessons you identify.*

Also on exams, you will have a series of true-false, multiple choice, or similar format questions—all based on a key term studyguide handed out at the beginning of the unit. *I highly recommend defining and describing those terms as the unit develops.* There will not be a word bank on the exam.

Graded Assignments: There are **four exams** (one at the end of each unit), a **final paper** called the “place paper,” and a **participation** grade.

Exams have two sections. In the first, you will be asked to explain one lesson from the past in a long paragraph. In the second, you will be asked to do some mix of multiple choice, true-or-false, fill-in-the-blank, or matching. These questions will be based upon a list of key terms that I will distribute at the beginning of each unit.

Participation is based on the daily preparation, with special emphasis on the unit books. More info to come.

The final paper, aka “place paper,” is a 1200 word exercise in using the lessons of history to read a landscape today. You may choose the place yourself, although I will veto anything too unwieldy. The paper has a prescribed structure and a research component. One important item to keep in mind from the start: the paper has an appendix you must complete. The appendix is a listing and explanation of all twelve historical lessons you created during the semester.



Office Hours: You are welcome to visit me in my office. I set aside office hours so that I have the chance to talk with students one-on-one. During MW 1-2pm (473 CCC), I do not have any other commitments. My only commitment is to speak with my students.

To visit me during office hours you *do not need an appointment*. We can chat about anything going on in the course, from content to class dynamics. They are an especially good time to check in if you missed class. If you have class or work during my office hours, I am happy to make an appointment. Just email me.

Text Rental Readings:

Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*, any edition.

“not dry like normal textbooks!”—actual student

Purchase Books:

Kathryn Newfont, *Blue Ridge Commons* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007).

Richard Manning, *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

Michael Rawson, *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

D2L: There will be a few non-book readings and they'll be available on D2L.

Grading: 20 points for **Participation** + 20 points for **Exam One** + 30 points for **Exam Two** + 40 points for **Exam Three** + 40 points for **Exam Four** + 50 points for the **Final Paper** = 200 semester points.

Letter grades for the semester follow the typical pattern:

A 93-100	B+ 87-89.99	C+ 77-79.99	D+ 67-69.99	F 59.99 and below
A- 90-92.99	B 83-86.99	C 73-76.99	D 60-66.99	
	B- 80-82.99	C- 70-72.99		

Advice from Previous Students: Why listen just to me? Here is what your predecessors want to tell you:

“Read the material and attend class.”

“Attend class, pay attention and from there it’s not hard to do well in the class.”

“Stay caught up on the readings and highlight for the paper at the end.”

“Stay on top of the reading. It’s not too hard and the lectures cover the material, but the text gives a lot of depth and examples.”

“Keep up with the readings.”

“Come ready to participate and add to the discussion.”

“Make sure to do all the assigned reading *before* class.”

“Don’t fall behind on readings and coursework.”

“Be in class every day.”

“Attend class regularly.”

“Come to class with an open mind.”

“Involve yourself in the reading, thinking about how you could apply it to what you care about.”

“Be prepared to read! Pick up on little things.”

“Look beyond just the facts, because it is a very beneficial class.”

“It’s worth your time. Enjoy this class.”

“Come to class and speak up. Participate. I found the class much more interesting when more people took part.”



Who Should Take This Class? Whatever your field, this course has something to offer you.

If you are training to be a teacher, you will find that a great way to connect with students is by telling them the stories hidden in the landscapes around them.

For history majors, layering the environment into your own understanding of the past will enrich your studies, leading to new questions about history.

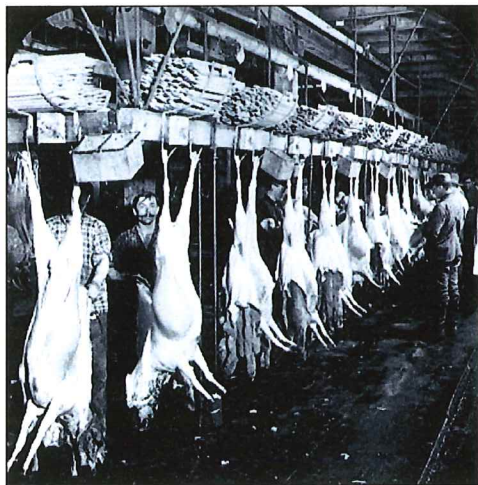
Some students in this class will eventually work in natural resources, for which an understanding of past environments can help inform present policy decisions.

For everyone, environmental history offers the tools *to think critically about the environment as a citizen*.

Course Policies: During the class, cell phones and other electronic devices are prohibited. If you are a parent or are otherwise obligated to be available to your family via cell phone, then please discuss that situation with me, so I know that you have a good reason for keeping your phone turned on.

The prohibition of electronics also extends to laptop computers (unless approved by the Learning Technology Center). While laptops are great aides in studying, the focus in class is on class, not the computer screen. If you do prefer to have your notes in a computer file, you will find that typing them from your handwritten notes will aid you greatly in digesting the material.

For information on plagiarism, consult <http://www.uwsp.edu/centers/rights>. See Chapter 14, *Student Academic Standards and Disciplinary Procedures*, pages 5 -10, for the disciplinary possibilities if you are caught cheating. As an instructor deeply concerned with fairness in the classroom, I pursue each and every case of plagiarism and cheating. Please note that turnitin.com is used for the essay assignments.



Life Happens: I understand you have a life outside this class. I understand that life might make it difficult to complete some assignments, attend class, or simply to do well. I do my best to be flexible because I know those circumstances are out of your control and my control. I'm on your team.

I also know that some real learning has to take place in this class. You will have more opportunity in life if you understand history, read critically, and write well. This class has to be one of your priorities. I do my best to be flexible, but I have to adhere to some standards. If something comes up, let's talk.

Equity of Educational Access: If you have a learning or physical challenge which requires classroom accommodation, please contact the UWSP Disability Services office with your documentation as early as possible in the semester. They will then notify me, in a confidential memo, of the accommodations that will facilitate your success in the course. Disability Services Office, 103 Student Services Center, Voice: (715) 346-3365, TTY: (715) 346-3362, <http://www.uwsp.edu/special/disability/studentinfo.htm>.

Note: The syllabus is a general plan for the course. Deviations announced in class may be necessary.

Schedule

Why the History of the Environment Matters

Week 1		<u>Wednesday</u> Introduction	<u>Friday</u> Lecture “Preface,” “Prologue,” “Wilderness Under Fire,” and “A Truly New World” <i>Down to Earth</i>
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FARM: How did farming transform North American ecology and communities?

Week 2	<u>Monday</u> Lecture “Reflections from Woodlot”	<u>Wednesday</u> Lecture “King Climate in Dixie” “Extracting New South”	<u>Friday</u> Lecture “Moveable Feast”
Week 3	<u>Monday</u> Films <i>Why Bracero?</i> and <i>Harvest of Shame</i>	<u>Wednesday</u> Book Discussion <i>Grassland</i> 62-109	<u>Friday</u> Book Discussion <i>Grassland</i> 110-190
Week 4	<u>Monday</u> Book Discussion <i>Grassland</i> 217-288	<u>Wednesday</u> Competing Viewpoints Discussion	<u>Friday</u> EXAM ONE

FOREST: How are forests not just natural, but also political?

Week 5	<u>Monday</u> Lecture “World of Commodities” (esp. 62-67)	<u>Wednesday</u> Lecture “Conservation Reconsidered” (esp. 138-144)	<u>Friday</u> Lecture
Week 6	<u>Monday</u> In-Class Film <i>Politics of Trees</i>	<u>Wednesday</u> Book Discussion <i>Blue Ridge Commons</i> , 1-48	<u>Friday</u> Book Discussion <i>Blue Ridge Commons</i> , 71-96, 124-145
Week 7	<u>Monday</u> Book Discussion <i>Blue Ridge Commons</i> , 227-278	<u>Wednesday</u> Competing Viewpoints Discussion	<u>Friday</u> EXAM TWO

CITY: How does nature matter to a city?

Week 8	<u>Monday</u> Lecture “City and Nature” (D2L)	<u>Wednesday</u> Lecture “Death of Organic City”	<u>Friday</u> Lecture “America in Black and Green”
Week 9	<u>Monday</u> In-Class Film <i>River Under the City of Angels</i>	<u>Wednesday</u> Book Discussion <i>Eden on Charles</i> , 1-74	<u>Friday</u> Book Discussion <i>Eden on Charles</i> , 75-128
Week 10	<u>Monday</u> Book Discussion <i>Eden on Charles</i> , 129-178, 277-284	<u>Wednesday</u> Competing Viewpoints Discussion “Green Manhattan”	<u>Friday</u> EXAM THREE

PARK: Why do we have parks?

Week 11	<u>Monday</u> Lecture “Waterfalls and Cemeteries” (D2L)	<u>Wednesday</u> Lecture “American Park Movement” (D2L)	<u>Friday</u> Lecture “Dispossessing the Wilderness” (D2L)
Week 12	<u>Monday</u> Film and Discussion <i>Beach Bill</i>	<u>Wednesday</u> Book Discussion <i>Contested Waters</i> , 8-77	<u>Friday</u> NO CLASS
Week 13	<u>Monday</u> Book Discussion <i>Contested Waters</i> , 121-180	<u>Wednesday</u> Book Discussion <i>Contested Waters</i> , 181-214	<u>Friday</u> THANKSGIVING

Place Paper

Week 14	<u>Monday</u> Competing Viewpoints	<u>Wednesday</u> EXAM FOUR	<u>Friday</u> Paper Workshop
Week 15	<u>Monday</u> Presentations	<u>Wednesday</u> Presentations	<u>Friday</u> Presentations
Week 16	Writing Help		
Final	Paper Due in D2L 2:30pm Thursday, December 17th		