

Joanna L. Dyl
Sample syllabus

U.S. Environmental History

Course Overview

Environmental history is the study of the relationship between human societies and nature and how that relationship has changed over time. That relationship is complex and reciprocal: the environment both reflects the influences of human activity and affects human history. This course explores the role of nature in American history from the time of settlement to the late twentieth century. Topics covered include: the role of diseases and animals in history; the impact of the environment on familiar subjects such as slavery and industrialization; the growth of cities and suburbs; pollution, consumption, and energy use and policy; and changing ideas about the environment, including the rise of the conservation and environmental movements.

After taking this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify major figures, events, and developments in American environmental history;
2. Summarize the forces that have shaped major trends in American environmental history;
3. Analyze textual and visual primary sources as historical evidence;
4. Evaluate arguments that historians have offered to explain the trajectories of American environmental history;
5. Write papers using historical evidence to develop and support an argument.

Books Assigned

The following books are required for the course:

Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*, third edition (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Louis S. Warren, ed., *American Environmental History* (Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Other assigned readings will be available on Canvas or, in the case of journal articles, through the library website.

Course Format

This course will combine lectures and discussions of the readings. Most classes will consist of a 40-minute lecture followed by 40 minutes of discussion of the readings assigned for that date. Discussions are a very important part of the course (and of the learning process), and class participation therefore represents 20 percent of your grade in this class.

My expectation is not only that you will come to class but that you will come prepared to raise questions and participate in discussion about the readings and the course as a whole. The process of developing your own interpretations of the material – thinking critically about the readings and even the lectures – is a central part of studying history. What did you find most interesting in the readings? What did you find confusing or surprising? How do you see this material relating to lecture and to readings from previous weeks? Please bring the day's readings (both textbooks and articles) to each class session so that we can make specific references during our discussions.

Participation encompasses not just the quantity but also the quality of your comments, and it incorporates listening as well as talking. Your grade will be based less on the frequency of your comments than on how well they advance the class discussion – by raising relevant questions, advancing or challenging the group's line of thought on a particular issue, providing original insights into the material, etc. Your comments should demonstrate that you are listening to and engaging with your classmates' comments.

Obviously, a prerequisite to good discussions is a basic respect for others and their opinions. Disagreement is fine (even good), but please remember to be courteous and respectful toward your classmates at all times. Respect for the instructor and your classmates also demands that you: 1) be on time to class; 2) remain silent when others (including the professor) are speaking; 3) refrain from eating during class; 4) minimize disruptions by turning off your cell phone and using your laptop only to take notes or refer to articles. As college students, I expect you to behave like courteous adults and will treat you like adults in turn.

For any of you who are uncomfortable with participating in class because of shyness or other concerns, please come and speak to me. Because class participation is a major part of the course – and because the ability to articulate your ideas verbally is an important skill to develop in college – you will need to work to overcome your discomfort. However, I am happy to make accommodations to help you feel more comfortable with speaking up in class or to make arrangements for you to demonstrate that you are participating as a listener even if you are quiet in class.

Students with disabilities (visible or invisible) are encouraged to consult with me as soon as possible. If accommodations are needed, you should obtain a letter from the Disability Services Coordinator in the Office of the Dean of the College.

I encourage all students to take advantage of my office hours. If you are not available during office hours, I am happy to schedule another time to meet with you. Please do not hesitate to ask if you have questions about course material, assignments, your progress, or other topics related to the course, your studies, or environmental studies in general.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. Excused absences (those cleared with me in advance AND resulting from illness, religious observances, or travel for courses, athletics, or other campus activities) can be made up. Arrangements for make-up work should be made with me individually and will usually involve an additional short writing assignment. Unexcused absences and absences that are not made up will have a significant impact on your grade.

Assignments

1. Three short in-class quizzes (30 percent of grade total, 10 percent each);
2. Midterm essay exam (4-5 pages, 20 percent of grade);
3. Final essay exam (4-6 pages, 30 percent of grade);
4. In-class participation (20 percent of grade).

The three in-class quizzes will consist of identifications and analysis of a quotation from a primary source. They are designed to test your understanding of important concepts from the course and your ability to analyze a quotation (a skill that we will practice regularly in class). Quizzes will take place during the first thirty minutes of class, and they are closed book and closed note. Material will be drawn from both lectures and readings.

Both the midterm and final exam are take-home exams. They are open book and open note, and the questions are designed to test your ability to synthesize the material and develop your own interpretation. Your grade will take into account the strength and originality of your argument, the use of sources to support the argument, and the quality of writing.

The assignments for this class emphasize writing because writing assignments represent the best way for you to develop your skills in analysis, critical thinking and written expression. I am less interested in whether you can memorize material than in whether you can analyze and apply that material. Strong writing skills will also serve you well in your other classes and in whatever career you eventually pursue.

Your in-class participation will be evaluated each day based on your participation in class discussion and activities such as the “minute around,” small group exercises, and brief writing assignments based on the week’s readings. (The “minute around” is an exercise in which each student has one minute to orally present her or his reactions to the day’s reading to the class. We will frequently open class discussions with the “minute around.”) The course website on Canvas includes an area for discussion, and posts of questions, comments, or material of interest to the class will be evaluated as contributions to your participation grade.

My intention with graded work is to challenge you and provide you with an honest evaluation of your performance and your progress. Grades in the A-range represent excellent work, those in the B-range reflect good work, and those in the C-range represent acceptable work.

Written work that is submitted late will lose 1/3 of a grade for each day it is late, unless the instructor has granted an extension in advance. Extensions will be granted in exceptional circumstances only.

I take plagiarism and academic dishonesty very seriously. Academic integrity lies at the foundation of the learning process and is central to the mission of critical inquiry within higher education. It is also, of course, a matter of personal ethics. Cases of plagiarism will result in a failing grade on the assignment and will be reported to the Dean of Students. The Writing Center website offers a helpful guide to the correct use and citation of sources: "[Using Outside Sources](#)"

Week 1

1/13 Introduction: What Is Environmental History?

Week 2

1/18 North America before European Arrival

Donald Worster, "Doing Environmental History," in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Donald Worster, pp. 289-307. (Canvas)

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, preface and prologue, "Rocks and History."

1/20 The Ecology of Invasions

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 1.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 1.

"How to Read a Secondary Source." (Canvas - optional)

Week 3

1/25 The Spanish in North America

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 2.

Documents on the Spanish in colonial North America from *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, ed. Carolyn Merchant, pp. 28-34. (Canvas)

"How to Read a Primary Source." (Canvas - optional)

1/27 The Fur Trade

Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, pp. 1-91.

Document: “Wolf Calf (Piegan) Describes the Arrival of Horses, Recorded 1895,” from *Major Problems in the History of the American West*, eds. Clyde A. Milner II et al, second edition, pp. 86-87. (Canvas)

Week 4

2/1 The Southern Colonies: Disease and Challenges for Settlers

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 2.

Carville Earle, “Environment, Disease, and Mortality in Early Virginia,” in *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Thad Tate and David Ammerman, pp. 96-125. (Canvas)

2/3 Land and Commerce in New England

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 3.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 3 and ch. 4, section 1 (pp. 72-124).

Week 5

2/8 Industrialization

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 4.

Documents on “Controlling Water in the Early Industrialization of New England,” from *Environmental Issues in American History*, ed. Chris J. Magoc, pp. 41-51. (Canvas)

First quiz

2/10 Expanding Territory and Markets

Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, pp. 92-163.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, pp. 175-179.

Week 6

2/15 Slavery and Plantation Agriculture

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 5.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 4 section 2, pp. 124-140.

Documents on “The Cotton South Before and After the Civil War,” from *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, ed. Carolyn Merchant, pp. 205-211 (documents 1, 2, and 3). (Canvas)

2/17 Resistance and Civil Wars

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 6.

Scott Giltner, “Slave Hunting and Fishing in the Antebellum South,” in “*To Love the Wind and the Rain*”: *African Americans and Environmental History*, eds. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, pp. 21-36. (Canvas)

Mark Fiege, “Gettysburg and the Organic Nature of the American Civil War,” in *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of War*, eds. Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell, pp. 93-109. (Canvas)

Week 7

2/22 The Cotton South

Writing Workshop

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 7.

Documents on “The Cotton South Before and After the Civil War,” from *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, ed. Carolyn Merchant, pp. 211-223 (documents 4-8). (Canvas)

2/24 The Industrial West

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 8.

Andrew C. Isenberg, “The Industrial Alchemy of Hydraulic Mining: Law, Technology, and Resource Intensive Industrialization,” in *City, Country, Empire: Landscapes in Environmental History*, eds. Jeffrey M. Diefendorf and Kurk Dorsey, pp. 122-138. (Canvas)

Documents: “Property Rights, Technology, and Environmental Protection: *Hydraulic Gold Miners v. Farmers in California*,” from *Environmental Issues in American History*, ed. Chris J. Magoc, pp. 77-87. (Canvas)

Week 8**2/29 The Ecology of Cities**

Midterm essay due

3/2 Urban Resource Use and Industrial Cities

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 10.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 5.

Documents: “Dr. Ezra R. Pulling Reports Unhealthy Conditions Among New York’s Poor, ca. 1860,” “George E. Waring, Jr., Complains That Memphis Is Still Unsanitary, 1882,” and “William Gray Brooks Seeks Boston Disrupted by a Horse Disease, 1872” from *Major Problems in American Urban and Suburban History*, pp. 146-148, 150-153, 262-263. (Canvas)

Week 9**3/7 Natural Disasters**

Ted Steinberg, “Do-It-Yourself Deathscape: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in South Florida,” *Environmental History* 2 (October 1997): pp. 414-438. (Canvas)

Document: Ernest Hemingway, “Who Murdered the Vets? A First-Hand Report on the Florida Hurricane,” *New Masses* (September 17, 1935). (Canvas)

3/9 Conservation and Preservation

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 9.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 7.

Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, pp. 164-198.

No class 3/14 and 3/16 – Spring Break

Week 10**3/21 Debates over Wilderness**

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 8.

Matt Cartmill, “The Bambi Syndrome” in *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History*. (Canvas)

3/23 Fossil Fuels and the Energy Revolution

William C. Barnett, "A Tale of Two Texas Cities: Houston, the Industrial Metropolis, and Galveston, the Island Getaway," *Energy Metropolis: An Environmental History of Houston and the Gulf Coast*, eds. Martin V. Melosi and Joseph A. Pratt, pp. 185-204. (Canvas)

Second quiz

Week 11

3/28 Food, Pesticides, and Consumer Society

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 11-12, 14.

Douglas C. Sackman, "Putting Gender on the Table: Food and the Family Life of Nature," in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. Virginia Scharf (2003): 169-193. (Canvas)

3/30 No class – Prof. Dyl will be away at a conference

Week 12

4/4 From World War I to the 1930s

Nancy K. Bristow, "'It's as Bad as Anything Can Be': Patients, Identity, and the Influenza Pandemic," *Public Health Reports* 125, Supplement 3 (April 2010): 134-144. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41435307>

Andrew Jenks, "Model City USA: The Environmental Costs of Victory in World War II and the Cold War," *Environmental History* 12 (July 2007): 552-577. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25473132>

4/6 Suburbs, Wilderness, and Postwar America

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 13.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 9.

Documents: Levittown Homeowner's Guide and Images, from *America Firsthand*, eds. Robert D. Marcus et al, pp. 237-241. (Canvas)

Week 13

4/11 The Environmental Movement

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 15.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 10.

4/13 Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 11.

Documents: “The Principles of Environmental Justice” (1991). (Canvas)

Week 14

4/18 A Partisan Issue?

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 12.

Donald Snow, “The Pristine Silence of Leaving It All Alone,” in *A Wolf in the Garden: The Land Rights Movement and the New Environmental Debate*, eds. Philip D. Brick and R. McGreggor Cawley, pp. 27-38. (Canvas)

Third quiz

4/20 Energy Policy and Climate Change

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 16.

Warren, *American Environmental History*, ch. 13.

Final essay exam due Wednesday, April 27 at noon