

HSSC-565: Environmental History

Spring 2018, Wednesday 2-5pm, [Fisher-Bennett Hall](#) 201

Instructor: [Etienne Benson](#) (ebenson@upenn.edu)

History and Sociology of Science, University of Pennsylvania

Course overview

This reading- and discussion-based graduate seminar is an advanced introduction to the field of environmental history.

Assignments and grading

Active participation (10%): You are expected to attend every class session and to join the conversation in a way that shows that you have carefully read the assigned readings and taken account of the ongoing discussion amongst your classmates and the instructor. **Every week.**

Discussion introduction (10%) and book review (20%): Once during the semester, at a date to be determined before the third week of the course, you will be responsible for introducing week's readings and providing a set of questions and topics for discussion. You will also write a 700-word review of the book you are introducing, which should be submitted electronically (in Word doc format) before the beginning of that class session. Imagine that you are writing the review for publication in the journal *Environmental History* — that is, for an audience of environmental historians who are familiar with the field but not necessarily with the specific period, place, or subject of the book. **Variable due date.**

Op-ed (20%) and peer edits (10%): Using one of the books or articles we have read during the semester as a starting point, write a 700-word op-ed style piece connecting a historical theme to a subject of current interest. Write as if your piece will appear in a general-interest newspaper such as the *New York Times* — that is, for a well-educated but non-specialist audience that may be interested in environmental themes but has probably never heard of environmental history as such. Your piece should be opinionated but grounded in the scholarship. You will also peer-edit the pieces written by two of your classmates; these edits are due a week later. Op-ed due **March 30**, peer edits due **April 6**.

Historiographic essay (30%): A 3,000-word essay on a historiographic theme of your choice, drawing on at least three of the books we have read over the course of the semester. This essay should focus both on the arguments/theses presented in the literature and on the methods used to support those arguments (concepts, sources, organization, etc.). More than simply a summary of the literature you have selected, your essay should itself also have a clear theme and argument. Due **May 7**.

A note on academic integrity and respectful discussion

We are here to learn with and from each other, and each of us is responsible for doing our part to create a respectful and productive classroom environment. Plagiarism and other violations of academic integrity undermine the learning process for the individual as well as for the broader academic community and will result in a failing grade and possible disciplinary action. No form of harassment or discrimination on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc., will be tolerated. If you believe this policy is being violated or insufficiently enforced, please inform the instructor, the HSS department chair and/or HSS graduate chair (see contact info [here](#)), or appropriate University of Pennsylvania offices (some of which are listed [here](#)).

Special accommodations

All appropriate efforts will be made to accommodate disability status, childcare and other family responsibilities, religious obligations, and other special needs. If you anticipate needing special accommodations or having conflicts with the course requirements, please inform the instructor as soon as possible and ideally within the first two weeks of the semester.

Course readings

You are responsible for obtaining copies of all assigned books and bringing them to class for reference with your notes. Articles and book excerpts will be made available as PDFs on the course Canvas site, but the books we are reading in their entirety must be purchased or obtained through the library. Books available as ebooks via Penn Libraries are noted as such in the schedule below, but if you plan to rely on the ebook version, you should make sure that you have a tablet computer or e-reader that you can use to refer to the text in class (see note on electronic devices below). In case you are unable to acquire a copy of the book in time for class, all assigned books have also been placed on reserve at Van Pelt Library — but again, you are expected to have a copy with you for reference in class.

Recommendations for laptops and other electronic devices

Laptop computers can be a very efficient means of taking notes and searching through text, but they also have a way of creating social distance and distracting their users from the collective conversation. Moreover, practically speaking, for the individual user it can be awkward and disruptive to have to switch between multiple texts and notes on a single electronic device in the midst of a rapidly moving discussion. You are strongly encouraged to bring to class either physical books or tablet computers or e-readers that can be laid flat on the table, as well as to bring your notes in physical form, whether printed or handwritten.

Strategies for preparing for class discussion

Except in the week in which you are introducing the readings for discussion — for which the expectations will be discussed in detail in class — there is no formal expectation for how you should prepare for the weekly class sessions. However, there are certain things you can do to maximize your own learning and contributions to the conversation. When you read a scholarly text, highlighting key passages and taking notes in the margins can be useful, but synthesis is also essential. One way of determining whether you are prepared for class discussion is to ask yourself if you have at least the beginnings of an answer to each of the following questions: What are the arguments and themes of each section of the work and of the work as a whole? What kinds of primary sources does the work rely on, and what kinds of secondary sources does it cite? What evidentiary gaps, dubious leaps of logic, and confusing passages did you encounter that you would like to probe further in class? What elements of the work were particularly compelling, provocative, and well-supported? How does it compare to other texts you have read? In what ways could it serve as a model or foil for your own work? Book reviews can be a helpful means of gauging the response of various scholarly communities to a book's arguments and methods — and in fact we will discuss them explicitly in relation to the first few books on the schedule — but they are best read *after* you have familiarized yourself with the book and begun to draw your own conclusions.

Schedule of readings

Part I: Historiographic and conceptual foundations

Week 1: January 17: Defining environmental history: “AHR Conversation: Environmental Historians and Environmental Crisis” (2008); Paul Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History” (2013); Andrew Isenberg, “Introduction: A New Environmental History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (2014).

- *Optional:* Richard White, “American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field” (1985); Carolyn Merchant, “The Theoretical Structure of Ecological Revolutions”; Donald Worster, “Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History” (1990); William Cronon, “Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History” (1990)

Week 2: January 24: Keywords: Nature, wilderness, milieu, climate: Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature” (1980); Georges Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu” (1952); William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” (1996); Mike Hulme, “Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism” (2011)

Part II: Nature and nation

Week 3: January 31: Germany: The Conquest of Nature: David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (2006); published reviews (see Canvas)

Week 4: February 7: Chicago: Nature and Capital: William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991); published reviews (see Canvas)

Week 5: February 14: The Mekong: War and State-Building: David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (2011) [available as ebook]; published reviews (see Canvas)

Part III: Conservation and environmentalism

Week 6: February 21: Conserving the range: Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (1959, excerpts: pp. 1-4, 49-65, 261-276); Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (2009) [available as ebook]

Week 7: February 28: Industrial hygiene: Arthur McEvoy, “Working Environments” (1995); Christopher Sellers, *Hazards of the Job* (1999)

— Spring Break —

Week 8: March 14: Ecology and empire: Sharon Kingsland, “The Role of Place in the History of Ecology” (2010); Megan Raby, *American Tropics: The Caribbean Roots of Biodiversity Science* (2017)

Week 9: March 21: Saving the planet: Benjamin Lazier, “Earthrise; or, The Globalization of the World Picture” (2011); Neil Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius* (2017)

Week 10: March 28: Risk and regulation: Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty* (2006) [available as ebook]; Nick Shapiro, “Attuning to the Chemosphere” (2015)

Week 11: April 4: Climate science and politics: Naomi Oreskes et al., “From Chicken Little to Dr. Pangloss” (2008); Joshua Howe, *Behind the Curve: Science and the Politics of Global Warming* (2014)

Part IV: The Anthropocene and after

Week 12: April 11: Into the Anthropocene: Will Steffen et al., “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives” (2011); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate Change: Four Theses” (2009); Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *Shock of the Anthropocene* (excerpts) (2016); Moore, “The Capitalocene” (2017)

Week 13: April 18: Beyond the Anthropocene: Valerie Olson and Lisa Messeri, “Beyond the Anthropocene: Un-Earthing an Epoch” (2015); Bruno Latour, “Telling Friends from Foes in the Time of the Anthropocene” (2015); Donna Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene” (2016); Anna Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World* (excerpts: pp. vii-viii, 1-43, 138-144, 155-163, 285-288)

One-to-one meetings

Week 14: April 25: One-to-one meetings: No class; meetings with instructor to discuss final essays