

**HISTORY/GEOGRAPHY 932**  
**TOPICS IN AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY**

**INSTRUCTOR:** Bill Cronon, 443 Science Hall.

**Phone:** 265-6023; this has an answering machine, and I'll try to reply to messages as quickly as I can.

**No calls to my home phone number, please.** Your best bet for a quick reply is almost always to email me rather than phone, at [wcronon@wisc.edu](mailto:wcronon@wisc.edu).

**Office Hours:** 10:00am-12:00pm, Wednesday mornings, first come, first served, at 443 Science Hall, or at other times by appointment. I would prefer to see you during regular office hours, but will schedule other times if necessary. Please don't just stop by my office if you need to see me at times other than my office hours, however; email me first to make an appointment.

**DESCRIPTION:**

The seminar is a one-semester introduction to some of the most interesting recent literature of American environmental history, read principally for the theories and methodologies it can offer scholars and scientists as well as its implications for contemporary environmental politics and management. The seminar assumes no previous coursework in the field, and students with a wide variety of backgrounds and disciplines are encouraged to participate. We will read a number of the most important works that have been produced in the field during the past twenty years, with an eye to exploring the different themes and methods that have shaped this body of scholarship. We will concentrate mainly on what might be called the "second generation" of writing in environmental history, trying to assess how the field has evolved and where it might be headed in the future, but will also review some classic texts to see how the field has changed over time. Our goal will be to evaluate these texts with a critical but sympathetic eye, trying to discover ways in which their approaches might be helpful to our own work. At the same time, we'll use this literature to think about the more general process of conceiving, conducting, and writing research about the past (whether within the disciplines of history, geography, ecology, environmental studies, natural resource management, or what have you) trying to gain as much practical wisdom as we can about how to do theses and dissertations. We will also talk about strategies for teaching this material in the undergraduate classroom.

As is typical of the field itself, we will be approaching environmental history from at least three different angles. First, we will ask how various human activities have historically depended on and interacted with the natural world: how have natural resources shaped the patterns of human life in different regions of the continent? Second, we will try to trace the shifting attitudes toward nature held by Americans during different periods of their nation's history: how have the human inhabitants of this continent perceived and attached meanings to the world around them, and how have those attitudes shaped their cultural and political lives? Finally, we will ask how human attitudes and activities have worked together to reshape the American landscape: how have people altered the world around them, and what have been the consequences of those alterations for natural and human communities alike?

We will approach these broad questions not through a chronological survey of all American history, but rather through an eclectic series of case studies focusing on different approaches and questions that have guided environmental historians in their work. (If you're interested in a more chronological survey of the field, you're encouraged to take or audit History/Geography/Environmental Studies 460, my environmental history lecture course.) Among other topics, we will discuss the concept "nature" as it relates to this field; the risks and opportunities of using scientific research to make claims about past environmental change, and, conversely, the risks and opportunities of bringing historical perspectives to scientific scholarship; different narrative and metanarrative strategies that have organized environmental storytelling; the political history of conservation and environmentalism; the relation of

environmental history to social and cultural history; and possible contributions that environmental history might make to contemporary environmental controversies and policy-making. For all students, one of our foremost concerns will be to explore the problems and opportunities this field offers for research and teaching so that seminar participants can work in it themselves if they so choose. Finally, because environmental history has been unusually successful among academic fields in reaching large public audiences for its work, we will spend a fair amount of time discussing the practice of science and scholarship in the public realm, thinking about ways to communicate effectively with audiences beyond the academy.

### **WORK**

Reading assignments are quite extensive, averaging 300 or more pages per week, but are generally not difficult and have been chosen as much as possible for their readability. Required readings are listed in the weekly outline that follows. A number of central texts are available at the University Bookstore:

Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis*, GF504 L8 C65 2005  
 William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, F548.4 C85 1991  
 Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow*, S451 M4 D66 2004  
 Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*, HC108 G3 H87 1995  
 Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*, SB486 S65 J34 2001  
 Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, E98 P5 K74 1999  
 Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares*, SD565 L36 1995  
 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, QH81 L56 1968  
 John McPhee, *The Control of Nature*, TD170 M36 1989  
 Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*, QH81 P857 1999  
 Vaclav Smil, *Energy at the Crossroads*, HD9502 A2 S543 2003  
 Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, GF27 S85 2002  
 Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want*, HD4482 S77 1999

We will read most of these books in their entirety, so you may want to purchase them if you're able, but all are available on reserve either at Helen C. White Library or the Wisconsin Historical Society Library. In addition to the books listed above, we will read a number of documents and articles (marked "R" on the weekly outline below), which will be available on our class shelf at the southeast corner of the Historical Society's reading room. **PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY READINGS UNLESS YOU ARE MAKING A COPY FOR YOURSELF; IF YOU DO SO, BRING THEM BACK IMMEDIATELY.** Please let me know at once (by email is best) if you find a reading missing from the shelf. Many readings are also available on-line.

Because the course is so reading-intensive and because my main goal is for us to think hard together about the theoretical and methodological issues raised by the texts we're examining, I've tried to devise writing assignments that can be done largely on the basis of materials we're already reading for the seminar. You'll be writing a few brief papers (typically 3-4pp) over the course of the semester, each requiring a focused analytical critique of a text we're reading for a given week. Then, at the end of the semester, you'll do a longer final writing assignment that you'll spend at least 1/3 to 1/2 of the semester working on. There are at least three different foci I've been considering framing the final assignment, but I'd like to discuss them with members of the seminar before I make a definite decision about which one we'll do together.

**Note that there is an all-day class field trip scheduled on Saturday, September 9.**

## **SYLLABUS, READINGS, AND HOMEWORK**

(Readings marked with an "R" can be found on our class shelf at the southwest corner of the Historical Society's reading room. Each week's xeroxed readings will be in a separate folder; please keep the folders neat and well organized. Readings are in rank order of importance for the week's discussion, so if you run out of time in a particular week, you're well advised to concentrate your work on materials at the top of that week's list.)

### **September 5: Introductory (Murphy Room, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Historical Society)**

Organization and requirements of the course, introductions, discussion of field trip, discussion of final paper assignment, and, if time, screening and discussion of W. G. Hoskins' Making of the English Landscape.

Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, Part I, the Wisconsin section of part II as well as the essay entitled "Thinking Like a Mountain," and the final section (entitled "The Upshot") if you have time.

### **September 9: Special Mandatory All-Day Saturday Field Trip**

#### **September 12: Nature and Humanity: Agendas (Cutlip Room)**

Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in Problems in Materialism and Culture, 67-85. (R)

Raymond Williams, "Nature," Keywords, 184-89. (R)

Oxford English Dictionary, entry on "Nature." (R)

William Cronon, "Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town," in Cronon, Miles, Gitlin, Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past, 28-51 (R)

"Environmental History: A Round Table," Journal of American History (March 1990), 1087-1147. (R)

Virginia J. Scharff, "Man and Nature! Sex Secrets of Environmental History," Seeing Nature Through Gender, pp 3-19. (R)

Alan Taylor, "Unnatural Inequalities: Social and Environmental Histories," Environmental History, 4:1 (Oct. 1996), 6-19. (R)

Edmund Russell, "Evolutionary History: Prospectus for a New Field," Environmental History 8:2 (2003). (R)

Noel Castree, "Strange Natures," in Nature, 1-44. (R)

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Write a brief paper (2-4pp) describing a key insight you derived from our field trip on Saturday, using 2-3 concrete locations or moments during our wanderings to illustrate your thoughts about it.

### **September 19: Excavating the Colonial Past (Special Guest: Brian Donahue; Murphy Room)**

Brian Donahue, The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord, entire.

Brian Donahue, excerpt from Reclaiming the Commons. (R)

### **September 26: Telling Stories About Nature (Murphy Room)**

John McPhee, Control of Nature, 183-272.

Michael Pollan, Second Nature, 37-53. (R)

David Foster, "Thoreau's Country: A Historical-Ecological Perspective on Conservation in the New England Landscape," Journal of Biogeography, 19 (1992), 1537-55. (R)

William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," Journal of American History 78:4 (March, 1992), 1347-1376. (R)

Margaret Atwood, "Death by Landscape," Saturday Night (July 1989), 46-53. (R)

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Nothing due in writing, but come prepared to describe your likely final paper.

**October 3: Big Pictures, Murphy Room (Murphy Room)**

Ted Steinberg, Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History. (entire)

Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," Pacific Historical Review, 54 (1985), pp. 297-335 (read for main themes). (R)

Richard White, "Environmental History: Watching a Historical Field Mature," Pacific Historical Review 70:1 (Feb. 2001), 103-11. (R)

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Write an 800-word book review (in the style of the American Historical Review, Annals of the Association of American Geographers, or another major scholarly journal representing an entire discipline) of Ted Steinberg's Down to Earth.

**October 10: Native Controversies (Cutlip Room)**

Shepard Krech III, The Ecological Indian: Myth and History (entire).

Richard Nelson, Make Prayers to the Raven, xiii-xi, 1-32. (R)

Chief Seattle, "Address to Governor Isaac Stevens," 1855. (R)

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Draft two 45-second sound bites about the issues discussed in Krech's Ecological Indian.

**October 17: An Urban-Rural World (Murphy Room)**

William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, read entire if possible, but otherwise concentrate on 1-259, 371-85. (R)

Richard & Maisie Conrat, The American Farm, browse pictures. (R)

Symposia discussions of Nature's Metropolis in Antipode (April 1994, 113-76) and Annals of Iowa (480-525). (R)

**October 24: Imposing Conservation (Murphy Room)**

Karl Jacoby, Crimes Against Nature (entire).

Karl Jacoby, Ph.D. prospectus. (R)

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Draft a 1000-1500 book review of Jacoby's Crimes Against Nature written in the style of the New Yorker, the Atlantic, the New Republic, or the Weekly Standard.

**October 31: The Challenge of Management (Murphy Room)**

Nancy Langston, Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares (entire).

(Nancy Langston will join us for the second half of this session to talk about her book.)

**November 7: Trashy Insights (Murphy Room)**

Susan Strasser, Waste and Want: A Social History of Waste (entire).

Gregg Mitman, "In Search of Health: Landscape and Disease in American Environmental History," Environmental History 10:2 (April 2005), 184-210. (R)

Christopher Sellers, "Thoreau's Body: Towards an Embodied Environmental History," Environmental History, 4 (1999), 486-514. (R)

**November 14: Class, Race, Environment (Murphy Room)**

Andrew Hurley, Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980, 1-182.

Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" Uncommon Ground, 171-85. (R)

Ellen Stroud, "Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon," Radical History 74 (Spring 1999), 65-95. (R)

Gunther Peck, "The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History," Environmental History 11:2 (April 2006), 212-38.

**November 21: Cultural Constructions (Murphy Room)**

Jennifer Price, Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America (entire).

Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in Problems in Materialism and Culture, 67-85. (reread) (R)

Noel Castree, "Strange Natures," in Nature, 1-44. (R)

Michael Cohen, "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique," Environmental History 9:1 (2004).  
(R)

**November 28: Unnatural Metropolis (Murphy Room)**

Craig E. Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature. (entire)

John McPhee, The Control of Nature, 3-92.

Packet of materials and/or web resources about Hurricane Katrina. (R)

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Rough draft of final paper due in seminar today.

**December 5: Seeing It All As Energy (Murphy Room)**

Smil, Energy at the Crossroads (entire).

Packet of materials and/or web resources re energy and global warming.

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Comments on rough drafts of final paper due in seminar today.

**December 12: Whither Environmental History? (Cutlip Room)**

Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, "Death of Environmentalism," October 2004, plus responses (R)

Adam Rome, ed., "What's Next for Environmental History?" Environmental History 10:1 (January 2005), 30-109.

Adam Rome, "What Really Matters in History? Environmental Perspectives on Modern America," Environmental History 7:2 (April 2002), 303-18. (R)

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT:** Final paper due in seminar today.