

# History/Geography 932

## Topics in American Environmental History

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 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. 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 these and dissertations. We will also talk about strategies for teaching this material in the undergraduate classroom.

During the fall semester of 2008, the seminar will meet from 9:00am-12:00pm on Wednesdays in 202-204 Bradley Memorial Hall, home of UW-Madison's Center for Culture, History, and Environment.

**IMPORTANT:** *This seminar will in all likelihood next be offered during Fall 2010, since I'll be teaching the new CHE environmental history methods seminar in Spring 2010. I'll post additional information about that course as it becomes available, but it's now looking as if I will be rotating between that seminar and this one on a two-year cycle.*

### Syllabus:

HTML (optimized for viewing on screen, with active links; updated to reflect changing assignments): [HTML ▶](#)

PDF: (optimized for printing): [PDF ▶](#)

Endgame Summary for Remainder of Semester: [HTML ▶](#)

**Application form for Fall 2008 (due 4/1/08):** [PDF ▶](#) or [DOC ▶](#)

### Class Web Pages Under Development

[How to Read a Landscape](#) (second draft, revised, still under construction--not yet broken into subpages)

[Style Sheet for "How to Research Environmental History" Website](#)

[Revised Template for New Web Pages, 11/20/08](#) (Kevin Gibbons)

### Website Pages Ready for Viewing:

How to Frame a Researchable Question: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/questions.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/questions.htm) (12/20/08)

What Are the Documents: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/documents.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/documents.htm) (12/20/08)

Searching: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/searching.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/searching.htm) (12/11/08)

Fall 2008

## 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:** 9:45-11:45am, Tuesday mornings, first come, first served, at 5103 Humanities, or at other times by appointment (meetings by appointment are generally in 443 Science Hall). 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.

**Course Website:** Bill's Website: Bill's website is at [www.williamcronon.net](http://www.williamcronon.net), and the page for this course can be found at <http://www.williamcronon.net/courses/932.htm>. Be sure to bookmark and keep track of this link, since the page will have links and other materials helpful for students in the course. If you happen to lose track of it, a Google search of "William Cronon 932" is likely to yield this page as the top hit.

### *Course 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.

## ***Course Reading Assignments***

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:

Wayne Booth, *The Craft of Research*, Chicago (\$15.00) Q 180.55 M4 B66 2008  
 William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, Norton (\$19.95) F548.4 C85 1991  
 Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*, California (\$24.95) SB486 S65 J34 2001  
 Jake Kosek, *Understories*, Duke (\$23.95) SD566 N6 K67 2006  
 Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian*, Norton (\$15.95) E98 P5 K74 1999  
 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, Ballantine (\$7.50) QH81 L56 1968  
 Thomas Mann, *Oxford Guide to Library Research* (\$18.95) Z710 M23 1998  
 Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty* (\$21.95)  
 David Nye, *Consuming Power*, MIT (\$26.00) HD9502 U52 N94 1998  
 Michael Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Penguin (\$16) GT2850 P65 2007  
 Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, Oxford (\$27.29) GF27 S85 2002

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. 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.

***Note that there is an all-day class field trip scheduled on Saturday, September 20 from 8am-5pm.***

## ***New Focus on Learning to Research Environmental History***

I've chosen a new focus for course activities this year after realizing that the ability of both undergraduate and graduate students to do historical research appears to be in fairly steady decline, probably largely as a result of the rise of the Internet, Google search tools, and the diminishing experience students have with traditional libraries. I'm therefore going to turn our attention this semester to the question of how we can best research environmental change and human relationships to such change in the past.

Because we don't have time to take on major research projects in a single semester, I'm going to try the experiment of thinking about environmental history research methods by asking how we can teach them to other students (probably principally undergraduates). This has the advantage of enabling us to construct and perform small exercises of the kinds we might ask such students to do, while at the same time learning the skills associated with such exercises ourselves.

Several of our assignments will be designed to generate research tools that we can post on the course website and make available to other people interested in learning more about this field. I haven't completely resolved all of these assignments in my own mind, so will be brainstorming with members of the seminar a set of research exercises that would likely be most helpful given their own interests and also helpful in generating tools for others.

In the past, before the days of the Web, I often asked students in this seminar to produce what I called *An Environmental Historian's Whole Earth Catalog*, in which teams fanned out across the campus and came back with reports about treasures

they found in various libraries, tools for navigating those libraries, and possible environmental history research topics that might be done in those collections. I think it might be very useful to revise that exercise so that it's perhaps a little less focused on particular research collections, and more on different categories of documents that can be used to explore past environmental change. My thought is that different teams can work together to explore these different genres of sources and produce guides to their use which we can post on the course website that can then serve a much broader audience as *An Environmental Historian's Whole Earth Catalog*.

Finding sources is not, of course, the sole skill that is essential to becoming an environmental historian. You also have to learn how to ask interesting, important questions that are actually answerable, and to render those questions meaningful by placing them in dialogue with sources. You have to relate your inquiry to a larger body of scholarly and scientific inquiry. You have to build arguments that combine evidence with logical inferences, and you have to write what you learn in a persuasive, compelling, engaging way.

We won't actually be able to *do* all these things this semester, but I hope we can at least talk about all of them, and again, try to come up with exercises that at least give everyone a taste of what goes into these different research-related tasks.

If this works, we should all learn a lot from the process—me included. I'll update this syllabus on the website as the work of the seminar in the weeks ahead take more shape and becomes clearer.

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

(Readings marked with an "R" can be found on our class shelf at the southeast 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 3: Introductory***

Organization and requirements of the course, introductions, discussion of field trip, discussion of new research focus for seminar, brainstorming content of *An Environmental Historian's Whole Earth Catalog*, and, if time, screening and discussion of W. G. Hoskins' *Making of the English Landscape*.

### ***September 10: What Is Environmental History?***

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)

**Assignment:** Bring to class a single primary document that illustrates a particular theme or argument in Steinberg's book. We may want to set up at least a preliminary set of research teams for Whole Earth Catalog assignment so groups can start working on this.

### ***September 17: Reading the Landscape***

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 6-19, 127-9, 137-41, 237-95. (If you're using another edition, read the essays entitled "Good Oak," "Red Legs Kicking," "Thinking Like a Mountain," and Part IV of the Book, "The Upshot."). (R)

Kenneth I. Lange, "A Postglacial Vegetational History of Sauk County and Caledonia Township, Columbia County, South Central Wisconsin, *Department of Natural Resources Technical Bulletin*, No. 168, 1990, 5-36. (read quickly for method) (R)

Jerry Apps, *The Wisconsin Traveler's Companion* (Madison: Wisconsin Trails, 1997); browse.

William Cronon, "Kennebec Journey: The Paths Out of Town," in Cronon, Miles, Gitlin, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, 28-51 (link on course website)

**Assignment:** Come to class with ideas for what might go into a set of online web tools for helping students learn "how to read a landscape." We'll be generating content for these web tools for next week's discussion.

## ***September 20: Special Mandatory All-Day Saturday Field Trip***

### ***September 24: Telling Stories About Nature***

John McPhee, *Control of Nature*, 183-272. (R)

Jennifer Price, "When Women Were Women, Men Were Men, and Birds Were Hats," *Flight Maps*, 57-110. (R)

Jared Diamond, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race, *Discover Magazine*, May 1987, 64-66. (R)

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

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

**Written Assignment:** As a follow-up to last week's discussion and the field trip, teams will prepare on-line tools for helping students learn "how to read a landscape."

### ***October 1: The Craft of Research***

Wayne Booth, *The Craft of Research* (entire, but quickly)

Thomas Mann, *Oxford Guide to Library Research* (entire, but quickly)

**Assignment:** Finalize plans for *An Environmental Historian's Whole Earth Catalog*, with schedule of team reports, and list of "research riddles" for teams to answer.

### ***October 8: Native Controversies***

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

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

Paul L. Koch & Anthony D. Barnosky, "Late Quaternary Extinctions: State of the Debate," *Ann. Rev. Ecol. Evol. Syst.*, 27 (2006), 215-50. (R)

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

**Assignment:** Panel discussion about libraries with Michael Edmonds, Ken Frazier, Sarah McDaniel, and Rick Pifer.

### ***October 15: An Urban-Rural World***

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

William Cronon, Ph.D. prospectus. (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)

**Assignment:** Team source reports: How to Frame Research Questions (Abby, Po-Yi); Maps and GIS (Genya, Brien)

### ***October 22: Energy and Technology***

David Nye, *Consuming Power*, 1-154.

**Assignment:** Team source reports: What are the Documents? (Steel, Jesse); Interviews (Trish, Cathy, Kevin)

### ***October 29: Imposing Conservation***

Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature* (entire).

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

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

**Assignment:** Team source reports: How to search and build bibliography (Michelle, Kevin, Brien); Images (Steve, Po-Yi)

### ***November 5: The Political Life of Forests***

Jake Kosek, *Understories* (entire).

**Assignment:** Team source reports: Note-taking (Emma, Cathy); Periodicals / Newspapers / Magazines (Michelle, Steel)

### ***November 12: Bodies, Buildings, and Nature***

Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty* (entire).

Linda L. Nash, "The Fruits of Ill-Health: Pesticides and Workers' Bodies in Post-World War II California," *Osiris* 19 (2004).

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

**Assignment:** Team source reports: Outlining, how to build an argument/narrative (Jacquelyn, Steve); Legal records / Government Documents (Liese, Emma)

## ***November 19: The Politics of Food***

Michael Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma* (entire).

**Assignment:** Team source reports: Drafting/revising/editing/communicating your findings (Genya, Trish); Manuscript and artifact collections (Brian, Jesse)

## ***November 26: Energy and Climate***

In-class viewing of excerpts from *An Inconvenient Truth* and other film clips.

Nye, *Consuming Power*, 156-264 (now optional)

**Assignment:** Team source reports: Positioning your argument within a larger scholarly/scientific terrain (Liese, Brian); Scientific and Quantitative data (Abby, Jacquelyn)

## ***December 3: Unnatural Metropolis***

Collection of web resources about Hurricane Katrina.

In-class viewing of film clips about Hurricane Katrina.

**Assignment:** Group discussion of *How to Research Environmental History* website, brainstorm any remaining elements needed for full implementation.

## ***December 10: Environmental History and Politics***

Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, "Death of Environmentalism," October 2004, plus responses by Carl Pope, Phil Clapp, Frances Beinecke, and Dan Carol, plus speech by Adam Werbach on "Is Environmentalism Dead?", all available on the Grist website at

<http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-intro/>. There are many other interesting items on this page, so please feel free to peruse them as you see fit.

Adam Rome, ed., "What's Next for Environmental History?" *Environmental History* 10:1 (January 2005), 30-109. A PDF of this many-authored symposium can be downloaded here: 

## **December 13: Special Saturday Breakfast: The Future of Environmental History**

We will meet from 9:00am-12:00noon at my house at 2027 Chadbourne Avenue, sharing a pancake breakfast (with pancakes, juice, and coffee provided by me, and any other delicacies that seminar members care to bring), followed by a roundtable conversation reflecting on the work we've done together this fall and drawing general conclusions.

Note-Taking: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/notetaking.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/notetaking.htm) (12/12/08)

Arguing: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/arguing.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/arguing.htm) (12/19/08)

Positioning Your Argument: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/positioning.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/positioning.htm) (12/20/08)

Drafting, Revising, Editing: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/writing.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/writing.htm) (12/10/08)

Manuscripts: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/manuscripts.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/manuscripts.htm) (12/9/08)

Periodicals: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/periodicals.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/periodicals.htm) (12/9/08)

Government Documents: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/govtdocs.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/govtdocs.htm) (12/9/08)

Photographic Images: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/images.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/images.htm) (12/11/08)


Maps: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/maps.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/maps.htm) (12/11/08)

Interviews: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/interviews.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/interviews.htm) (12/19/08)

Quantitative Data: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/quantitative.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/quantitative.htm) (12/21/08)

Landscapes: [www.williamcronon.net/researching/landscapes.htm](http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/landscapes.htm) (12/7/08)

## Additional Readings:

Cronon, "Kennecott Journey" - 

## Examples of Online Resources for Helping Students Learn to Do Historical Research:

Bowdoin College Guide to Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/>


Yale University Senior Essay Handbook: [http://www.yale.edu/history/senior\\_essay.html](http://www.yale.edu/history/senior_essay.html)

Zachary Schrag's Guidelines for History Students: <http://www.schrag.info/> (look under Guidelines for History Students)

## Historian's Whole Earth Catalogs for Environmental History (from 1990s)

In the 1990s, students in my graduate environmental history seminars worked together in teams on a class assignment requiring them to visit major research libraries on the UW-Madison campus and produce written guides to those collections. These guides sought to identify key sources of interest to environmental historians while also providing an overview of how each library was organized with tips for how best to navigate it.

Although these reports are now significantly out of date, especially since they largely predate the digital revolution, and although the documents undoubtedly include a few errors, they still contain valuable information and are worth perusing. These PDF files have been scanned from hard-copy originals and OCR'd, so should be searchable, but don't count on the accuracy of the OCR text.

Historian's Whole Earth Catalog for 1993 (1.8MB) 

Historian's Whole Earth Catalog for 1994 (1.65MB) 