

HIST 460

# American Environmental History

Professor Matt Villeneuve  
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Oct 22<sup>nd</sup> 1866  
"What are you doing now?" he asked  
"Do you keep a journal?"  
"No I make my first entry to-day"

*Solitude*

To be alone I find it necessary to be  
the present - I avoid myself. Now



*Indian Summer*, Jasper Francis Cropsey, 1866

*This course provides students with a survey of interactions among people and more than human environments from before European colonization to the present while paying close attention to problems of **ecological change, human ideas, and uses of nature** that are critical components of the field of U.S. environmental history.*



## **HIST 460: American Environmental History (4 Credits) 2023-2024**

*Humanities, Social Science; Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S; cross-listed as ENVIR ST 460, GEOG 460, HISTORY 460*

**Course Description:** *A survey of interactions among people and natural environments from before European colonization to present. Equal attention to problems of ecological change, human ideas, and uses of nature and history of conservation and environmental public policy.*

**Requisites:** *None*

**Meeting Time and Location:** Tuesday/Thursday 4:00-5:15pm George Mosse Humanities Building Humanities 1111

**Instructional Modality:** *In-person. This 4-credit class meets each week for a total of 4 class period hours over the fall semester: two 75-minute lectures plus one 50-minute discussion section, which together count as four contact hours according to UW-Madison's credit hour policy. The course expects that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, discussing, etc.) for about 2 hours out of classroom for every class period, for an average of at least 8 hours of work outside of class per week. This syllabus includes detailed information about meeting times and expectations for student work.*

*This course offers substantive interaction which engages student learning and assessment through direct instruction, written feedback on student work, and facilitating discussion of course content. The instruction is outlined by the course schedule.*

**Instructor:** Professor Matt Villeneuve [mwilleneuve@wisc.edu](mailto:mwilleneuve@wisc.edu)

**Office Hours:** Wednesday 10:00am-12:00pm George Mosse Humanities Building 5117

**Graduate Student Teaching Assistant:** Samm Newton [snewton4@wisc.edu](mailto:snewton4@wisc.edu)

**Office Hours:** Thursday 1:30-3:30 Humanities 4271

DIS 301 George Mosse Humanities Building 2125 Friday 8:50am-9:40am

DIS 302 George Mosse Humanities Building 2631 Friday 9:55am-10:45am

DIS 303 George Mosse Humanities Building 2125 Friday 12:05pm-12:55pm

DIS 304 George Mosse Humanities Building 2131 Friday 1:20pm-2:10pm

**Course Learning Outcomes:** *In this course, students will:*

- *Understand the basic questions posed by environmental history as a field and method for doing historical scholarship*
- *Evaluate the continuities and shifts between environmental politics, in relation to social and economic and racial formations and material conditions in U.S. history*
- *Demonstrate proficiency with using primary and secondary sources to complete an original research paper related to the history of a chosen landscape*

**Graduate Credit Learning Outcomes:**

- *Assess a foundational work in the historiography on environmental history in concert with extended original research*





*“The special task of environmental history is to assert that stories about the past are better, all other things being equal, if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it. This is different from saying that our histories should turn their readers into environmentalists or convince everyone of a particular political point of view. Good histories rarely do this. But if environmental history is successful in its project, the story of how different peoples have lived in and used the natural world will become one of the most basic and fundamental narratives in all of history, without which no understanding of the past could be complete.”*

-William Cronon, 1992

Today, it seems as if the United States (and the globe) is experiencing a range of unprecedented environmental crises. Climate change, species extinctions, invasive flora and fauna, energy sustainability, droughts and famines, depleted resources and increased pollution, etc. seems to evidence a troubled present and perilous future for both human and non-human life alike. Yet every crisis has a history. Understanding that past can inform how we might approach the present.

This course will treat the American past as seen through the lens of the natural world. While it is numbered at the 400 level, this course is intended as an introduction to historical research in the field of environmental history. In this class, we will center relations between human beings and non-human world as a critical part of our analysis, in order to explore how Americans have understood such relationships – and how these relationships have, in turn, materially shaped human events. We will not only study environmental topics, but practice the methodology of environmental historians, who aim to tell stories about "nature" as both a biological system and as a cultural concept.

Alongside these considerations, students will practice various skills central to the method of this field, such as reading the landscape; study the historiographical issues which define U.S. environmental history; and conduct an original research paper investigating the history of a landscape of their choice. By the end of the term, we will have traversed the varied terrain of the diverse people who call the land which is now the United States home to understand how people's perceptions, imaginings, and interactions with the non-human world, and the ways in which these different "natures" have acted as both agents and objects of historical change over time.

#### **Required Books:**

- William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003. 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition.
- Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012.

Additional readings will be available on Canvas.

## **Requirements and Grading:**

For a description of each of the following assignments, see the course schedule:

- Landscape History Project:
  - Scouting the Terrain Exercise 3%
  - Landscape Proposal 3%
  - Annotated Bibliography 3%
  - Outline 3%
  - Concepts Writing 3%
  - Class Presentation 5%
  - Final paper (10-12 pages) 30%
- Midterm Exam 15%
- Discussion notes for Cronon, Changes in the Land 5%
- *Death in the West* Response Paper 10%
- Class and section attendance and participation 20%

### *Grading Scale*

A	93-100%
AB	88-92%
B	83-87%
BC	78-82%
C	70-77%
D	60-69%
F	0-59%

## **Policies**

**Class attendance and participation:** This class is designed to function as a “flipped classroom,” a configuration where lectures aim to anchor discussion of readings, practice methodology, and promote participation amongst all members of the course. This is supplemented by discussion sections led by the Graduate Teaching Assistant, who functions as an expert facilitator. In both settings, students are empowered to offer their perspective, ask questions, and respond to their peers in open-ended dialogue. To earn full marks, students are expected to attend class and participate in discussion sections.

**Absences:** Life happens, however; you have one unexcused absence from your discussion section to use as you see fit. Should you need another reasonable accommodation, please communicate with me in writing at least 48 hours in advance.

**Communication:** If you need to reach me to discuss this course, the history department, or scholarship in general, please send me an email or drop by my office hours. Please allow me 48 hours to respond to email. As I do history at odd hours, I have made a point not to respond to email over the weekend. Plan accordingly!

**Late work:** Any assignments that are turned in late will receive a 10% penalty per day late, up to five days, after which it will receive an automatic F. Please do your utmost to avoid turning in late work. Should you need a reasonable extension for any assignment, you must contact me in advance and explain your circumstances in writing. You will need to allow me 48 hours to evaluate your written request.

**Electronics:** The use of laptops are permitted in this course for the sole purpose of note-taking or accessing course materials. Phones are not permitted, and please ensure that they are silent.

**Artificial Intelligence Course Policy:** Because a great deal of the value in the practice of historical writing lies in its capacity to sharpen your own thinking, I encourage you to refrain from the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and applications such as ChaptGPT, DALL-E, StableDiffusion, etc. in crafting the writing which you will submit in this course. However, the use of these tools is permissible in this class when they support the learning objectives of this course – namely, as a tool to refine your original scholarly work. Should you choose to use A.I. programs to supplement your own original work in any way, you must cite your use of these sources according to the Chicago Manual of Style.

For example, if you were to include content generated from ChatGPT in a paper for this course regarding, for instance, the water table in Madison, you would use the following format:

<sup>1</sup> ChatGPT, response to “Explain how a water table functions as part of a moraine landscape like southern Wisconsin,” OpenAI, March 7, 2023.

Please be aware that you are responsible for any and all information you submit based on any A.I. queries. Remember, A.I. programs like ChatGPT use large language models to produce their results. This kind of predictive text will often “hallucinate,” results based on existing texts which have the appearance of verisimilitude but are entirely untrue. (In the context of original historical research, this means that A.I. programs will often invent fake primary sources that were never made, generate people who never lived, and describe events that did not happen.) While this concern about A.I. hallucination is certainly a question of accuracy in history, it is also one of academic honesty at the university. If you include these kinds of results in the work you submit for assessment in this course, you will be subject to the university’s academic misconduct policy, which regards the false representation of evidence as an act of academic misconduct. Use content generated by A.I. resources at your own risk.

As we are practicing the conventions of the historical discipline (which insist on the transparency of the resources we use in our craft), you must also cite A.I. queries which format, revise, or rephrase your work, such as:

<sup>2</sup> ChatGPT, response to “Improve the syntax of this paragraph from my HIST 460 Landscape History Paper on water tables in Wisconsin,” OpenAI, March 7, 2023.

This manner of citation allows the teaching team to fairly evaluate your work and to provide the most constructive feedback to you as a writer. Failure to properly cite your use of A.I. for formatting or stylistic queries is therefore also subject to the university’s academic misconduct policy as a violation of course policies.

In other words, for the purposes of this class, *you must cite any and all A.I. queries that you include in your work, regardless of whether they are used to generate content or refine your original work, in accordance with the conventions of the discipline and in the spirit of academic honesty.* For more information on citation formatting with A.I., see the Chicago Manual of Style Online.

**Graduate Student Designation:** Graduate students who enroll in this course will be expected to complete additional graduate-level work to satisfy the graduate student designation. Graduate students will consult with me to choose a monograph regarding U.S. environmental history

written by a historian. Graduate students will produce a book review of this monograph in lieu of taking the midterm exam (the due date for this review is flexible). Additionally, graduate students will also complete an extended final term paper of 18-20 pages in length.

*Unless otherwise stated, this course follows all other UW-Madison course policies.*



## **Course Schedule**

### **Part One: Getting Started: Definitions, Research, Landscape**

#### **Week 1: A Short Introduction**

Learning Goal: *Familiarize students with the scope of the course, its learning objectives, and the skills we will practice in the study of Environmental history.*

September 7: Conversing with the Earth: Nature, History, Ecology, and Environment

#### **Week 2: Defining the Environmental**

Learning Goal: *Understand the basic questions posed by environmental history—of science, political economy, and cultural meaning – by considering a methodological model.*

September 12: Methods in Environmental History

Reading due: William Cronon, “Kennecott Journey”

September 14: Native American Environments

Reading due: William Denevan, “The Pristine Myth”

For section:

- Susan Hill, *The Clay We Are Made of*, “Karihwa’onwe -The Original Matters”

#### **Week 3: The Nature of Research**

Learning Goal: *Understand, in a systematic way, the bases of historical research and begin applying these to environmental history through experience and practice of the methods of landscape reading.*

September 19: Landscape and Archive: Group A: Research at the Wisconsin State Historical Society and Group B: Landscape Reading at the Lakeshore Preserve

September 21: Landscape and Archive: Group A: Landscape Reading at the Lakeshore Preserve and Group B: Research at the Wisconsin State Historical Society  
Native American Environments

For section:

- Mark Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Introduction, 3-22

- Scouting the Terrain assignment: *Print out a Google Maps screencap of a place that you think illustrates a concept from Cronon's "Kennecott Journey" and a write paragraph explanation of your interpretation.*

### Part Two: The Columbian Encounter

#### **Week 4: Invasions and Transformations**

Learning goal: *Understand the complexities and diversity of American Indian human-environment interactions, their historicity, and the consequences of the (re)connecting of Old and New Worlds.*

September 26: Co-invasion

Reading due: Alfred Crosby, "Virgin Soil Epidemics"

September 28: The Fur Trade

Reading due: Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Chapter 1: Satan in the Land

For section:

- Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 1-107
- Discussion notes: Submit your reading notes on the first half of Cronon, *Changes in the Land*.

#### **Week 5: Changes in the Land**

Learning goal: *Engage a model and foundational work of environmental history, understanding the nature and complexity of its argument, its sources, method, and key questions.*

October 3: Fields and Fences

Reading due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 108-170

October 5: Slavery: Disciplining People and Land

Reading due: Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Chapter 3: King Cotton

For section:

- Landscape Proposal: *Write a two-three paragraph proposal for the landscape you have chosen for your research project.*

### Part Three: City and Country: Power and the Forging Connection

#### **Week 6: Power: Animal, Human, Gravity, Solar**

Learning goal: *To understand relations between energy power and social power as fundamental to the shape of the United States in the early nineteenth century, and the ways such relations continue to shape the continent (and, of course, the entire world).*

October 10: Industrial Revolutions + Cores and Peripheries

Reading due: Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Chapter 5: The Nature of Gettysburg

October 12: The Power of Falling Water

For section:

- Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*
- Annotated bibliography: *Submit an annotated bibliography which includes at least three secondary sources that contextualize and support your final project and at least three primary sources—maps, texts, images, statistics, scientific studies—that provide evidence for your final project.*

### **Week 7: The Logics of Capitalism**

Learning goal: *Be able to understand, utilize, and critique key concepts relating to the rapid development of capitalist industry in the U.S., and its relation to, and effects upon, local and national environments. In the terms of Kennecott Journey, work within the realm of political economy.*

October 17: How the West was Built

Reading due: Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Chapter 6: Iron Horses

October 19: Market Hunting: Extinction and Class Warfare

Reading due: Tara K. Kelly, "Dreaming of Howley," *The Hunter Elite*, 221-237

For section:

- Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*, 1-55.

### **Week 8: Midterm Examination**

Learning goal: *Use the form of the examination as an occasion to consolidate knowledge and practice applying tools and questions of historical inquiry.*

October 24: The Fisherman's Problem + The Tragedy of the Commons

Reading due: Lissa Wadewitz, "Are Fish Wildlife?" + Garret Hardin, "Tragedy of the Commons"

October 26: Midterm examination

Part Four: Nature and Culture: Forgetting Connections and Rude Awakenings

### **Week 9: Imagining, Picturing, and Making Nature**

Learning Goal: *Understand the role of culture—social relations, aesthetics, literature, and more—in driving discussions concerning environmental issues including health and disease, urban and suburban development.*

October 31: Nature Sublime and Picturesque

Reading due: Henry David Thoreau, from "Walden" selections + Barbara Novak, Nature and Culture, 3-17

November 2: Vital Men and Studious Women

Reading due: *Death in the West* Episodes 1 + 2 + 3 (begin listening)



For section:

- Tara K. Kelly, “Diana’s Own,” *The Hunter Elite*, 221-237
- Outline: *Compose a 1-2 page outline of your landscape history paper. Be sure to include a first order question and any number of second order questions.*

## **Week 10: Gilded Age, Wild Nature**

**Learning Goal:** *Explore the historical origins of twentieth-century environmental politics in the new powers of the state, which expanded—often directly in terms of environmental and land management—during the Progressive Era.*

November 7: The War for Ancient Sunlight

Reading due: *Death in the West* Episodes 7 + 10

November 9: Conservation and the Invention of Wilderness

Reading due: William Cronon, “The Problem of Wilderness”

For section:

- *Death in the West* Response paper: *Write a 1-2 page response paper that answers the following three questions: #1 Who – or what – killed Frank Little? Drawing on the concepts we’ve explored, identify your top three suspects. (Think back to the Peshtigo fire activity that began this class.) #2 Train trestle, mine shaft, union hall, cemetery, the city of Butte, the state of Montana, the region known as “the west” – which landscape discussed in the podcast is the most important to understanding Little’s story? #3 Is this story an environmental history? If so, how? If not, why not? What factors of causation might the podcast need to include?*

### Part Five: Seeing Nature Like a State

## **Week 11: Culture and Conservation**

**Learning Goal:** *Evaluate the continuities and shifts between Progressive and New Deal environmental politics, in relation to social and economic (and racial) anxieties and material conditions.*

November 14: The Dust Bowl and the New Deal’s Managed Landscapes

Reading due: Donald Worster, Dust Bowl, selections 1-42, 67-79

November 16: Guest Lecture: Samm Newton, “Vertical Environments”

Reading due: Reid, *The Sea is My Country*, 1-18

For section:

- Reading due: Aldo Leopold, from Sand County Almanac, “Illinois Bus Trip,” “Red Legs Kicking,” “Thinking Like a Mountain,” and “The Land Ethic”
- W.E.B. DuBois, “Of the Black Belt” + J. Drew Lanham, *The Home Place* (selections)

## **Week 12: A Nation of Plenty and Peril**

Learning goal: *Explore the post-war era in the United States as a disquieting divergence between an imagined culture of plenty and the reality of environmental degradation.*

November 21: Post-war Bounties and Burdens: Bombs, Oil, and Atoms

Reading due: Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Chapter 7: Atomic Sublime + Rachel Carson, from Silent Spring, 3-13.

November 23: CLASS CANCELLED (Thanksgiving recess)

For section: SECTIONS CANCELLED (Thanksgiving recess)

### **Week 13: A World Come Apart and Come Together**

Learning goal: *Understand the enduring crises of the postwar world and the rise of environmentalism as a local, regional, national, and global political force and model the contours of the final project presentations.*

November 28: Earth Day and Energy Crises: From Conservation to Environmentalism

Reading due: Rome, "The Environmental Movement and the 1960s"

November 30: Car Country on the Water and the Automation of Patos Island

Reading due: Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Chapter 9: It's a Gas

For section:

- Concepts Writing: *2-3 pages of writing that apply key concepts—energy flow, commons regimes, social power, alienation, public and private property, etc.— that draws on evidence you have been gathering for the final project.*

### Part Six: What is to Be Done?

### **Week 14: "Think Globally, Act Locally, Panic Internally"**

Learning Goal: *Use the historical knowledge developed over the semester to offer insights on the immediate past, the present, and perhaps even the future.*

December 5: Climate Change: Warming Planet, Scorched-Earth Politics

Reading due: Deborah Coen, "Big is a Thing of the Past," 305-321

December 7: American Anthropocene

Reading due: Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen, and McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives"

For section:

- Presentations. *Each section will be divided in three groups. Students will share their research findings and tell the story of their landscape to their respective groups using [PechaKucha](#) style.*

### **Week 15: The Beginning of the Future**

December 12: Tending the Light

Reading due: Kimmerer, "The Sacred and the Superfund"

*Final papers due December 19th (On Canvas by 11:59pm)*

