

## History 500: History of American Wilderness

Fall 2024

3 credits

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Tuesdays, 3:15-5:15, 5255 Mosse Humanities Building

Prof. Jim Feldman

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Office hours: Thursdays 1:00-3:00 (or by appointment)

in 5214 Mosse Humanities Building

**Course Description:** What is wilderness? What are its uses? How and why have American ideas about wilderness changed over time, and across class and culture? What human activities—if any at all—are appropriate in a wilderness? These are some of the questions that we will seek to answer in this upper-level, reading-intensive course.

American ideas about wilderness have changed markedly over time and vary widely across categories of race, class, and gender. Many EuroAmericans once saw wilderness as a negative, destructive force, and considered it to be the mission of the developing nation to conquer and subdue the wilderness. Wilderness and civilization were seen as polar opposites. American ideas about wilderness were tightly intertwined with perceptions of Indigenous Peoples, and the creation of wilderness and conservation areas often had dramatic implications for indigenous land tenure and culture. Many indigenous groups perceived wild nature through a different lens, one that rejected the dualistic perspective that placed human society outside of nature. Attitudes toward wilderness began to change dramatically in the nineteenth century; many people still conceived of wilderness and civilization in opposition but believed that the problem lay in the civilized world, and that wilderness contained an antidote to a society increasingly focused on financial gain and bent on environmental ruin. As this belief gained popularity, a campaign to protect what remained of the American wilderness took root. When Congress created the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964, many considered it the crowning achievement of the environmental movement. But in recent years, scholars and activists have questioned the utility of wilderness as a conservation strategy, worrying that focusing on the distant wilderness tempts us to ignore environmental problems close to home. Others continue to believe that wilderness preservation remains the single most important goal of environmental protection. Indigenous perspectives on wild nature have often emerged as a counterpoint to EuroAmerican perspectives and have produced a different set of policy concerns. In this course, we will explore both the historical and contemporary implications of these debates about the value and meaning of wilderness. We will explore both historic EuroAmerican and indigenous ideas about wilderness as well as current concerns about its value as an idea and as a conservation strategy.

This class will also contribute to your liberal arts education. A liberal arts education focuses on general learning, intellectual ability, and critical thinking rather than technical or professional skills. The goal of this class is not just to convey information about American encounters with wilderness (although you will learn much about this) but to teach you how to interpret this information critically, and how to understand modern environmental issues in their social, historical, and political contexts.

**Learning Outcomes:** Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

- 1.) Have a basic understanding of the subject matter—the complicated ways that Americans have encountered and thought about “wilderness,” from colonial times to the present.
- 2.) Understand how Indigenous perspectives on wild nature diverge and converge from EuroAmerican perspectives in historical and modern contexts.
- 3.) Explain how wilderness ideas and applications have differential impacts across lines of class and race, with particular attention to the impact of wilderness ideas on indigenous peoples.
- 4.) Place modern debates about wilderness and nature protection in their historical context.
- 5.) Effectively communicate complicated ideas in a classroom setting, primarily through class discussion.
- 6.) Critically analyze primary source documents and use those documents to create original arguments that

explain American encounters with wilderness from diverse perspectives.

7.) Effectively communicate complicated ideas about environmental history in written format.

**Bulletin Description of History 500:** Advanced exploration of selected topics, featuring small group discussion and intensive engagement with historical materials. Topics vary.

**Requisites:** History 201 or junior standing

**Credit Hours and Workload:** The credit standard for this 3-credit course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit or 9 hours per week), which include regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, individual consultations with the instructor, and other student work as described in the syllabus. The expectation is that you will work at least 2 hours outside of the class for every hour in the classroom.

**Attendance, Discussion and Participation:** Your participation in discussions and other class activities is essential. This class will be run in seminar format, meaning there will be very little lecture. We have a small group—everyone's active participation and engagement will be necessary for the course to be a success. Come to class each day prepared to discuss the assigned reading. There will be a variety of short assignments, usually due before the start of class, throughout the semester. These will count, along with your attendance and participation in class discussions, toward 40% of your grade. Attendance will be taken every class meeting; your grade will begin to drop with each absence after the first one. I understand that life happens and circumstances might force you miss additional classes. Please communicate in writing with me, preferably 48 hours in advance, to see what accommodations can be made. Exceptions are made for absences documented by a health care professional, athletics, or the Dean of Students, and for religious observance.

**Reading Responses:** Prior to each class meeting, I will ask you to respond to the week's readings in writing. This might take the form of short paper, posts to the Canvas Discussion board, or some other assignment. These short assignments are graded on a full credit/half-credit/zero credit basis, and they will make up 20% of your grade. These assignments are not meant to take much time—you should not feel the need to take these to the History Lab or the Writing Center. These short assignments are meant to help you think through the material before class and to provide a platform for practicing key historical skills such as thesis-writing, document analysis, and the use of evidence. You may skip two reading responses over the course of the semester (except the ones specified on the syllabus that everyone must complete). These responses are typically due to the Canvas Dropbox before the start of class. There will be no opportunity to make up short assignments.

**Readings:** The amount of reading fluctuates from week to week. Sometimes you are asked to read close to 200 pages of a single source. Keep your eye on the syllabus so that you can tell when the heavier reading loads are coming. The following book is available at the University Book Store in Reeve and on reserve at the library:

- Michael J. Lewis: *American Wilderness: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

The majority of the course readings will be available electronically on Canvas. These are REQUIRED readings; you are strongly urged bring them with you to class (in print or on a laptop, iPad, or e-reader) so that you make use them to aid in class discussion.

**Canvas & Communication:** The course Canvas page is the best way to find readings, discussion questions, assignments, and to keep up with any changes to the course calendar. Email is the best way to get in touch with the teaching team. Sometimes, we will send Canvas/email announcements regarding the coming week's class. Please check Canvas sometime on Monday afternoon for updates and last-minute information about the upcoming class meetings.

**Devices/Technology in Class:** We all use devices. But critical and analytical thinking take a hit once screens are out. You are welcome to use a laptop or tablet in this class as long as it contributes to your learning. However, even when devices like laptops are used for typed notetaking, studies show they invite rote transcribing versus mental processing or thinking (Mueller and Oppenheimer, 2014). This leads to poorer academic performance. Other research demonstrates that when

students engage in off-task behavior on their devices, it hurts the learning of the peers sitting near them. In one study, students who were not using a device in a class lecture but were seated within view of a peer with a device, performed 17 percent worse on an exam based on that lecture material than students who were not within view of someone else's device (Lang, 2020). **We encourage you to turn off your internet connection—and absolutely turn off your ringers and notifications—during class.** Please put away earbuds/earphones at the start of class.

So: Consider hand-writing your notes on readings and in class for potentially more efficient, deeper, real-time learning. At the very least, recognize that devices will detract from your own ability to participate in this discussion-driven class, and also might distract your peers.

**Course Policies and Conduct:** All of us must do our best to be intellectually honest and tolerant of personal differences. Environmental topics are often controversial, and we all have our own beliefs. I hope that everyone will feel safe to express an idea, even if that idea is not a popular one. Diversity drives innovation, creativity, and progress. At UW Madison, the culture, identities, life experiences, unique abilities, and talents of every individual contribute to the foundation of our success. Creating and maintaining an inclusive and equitable environment is of paramount importance to us. This pursuit prepares all of us to be global citizens who will contribute to the betterment of the world. We are committed to a university culture that provides everyone with the opportunity to thrive. Knowing and applying the names and pronouns that students wish to use is a crucial part of developing a productive learning environment that fosters inclusion and personal dignity. Please let us know your preferred name and pronoun any time before or throughout the semester.

**Academic Misconduct:** There are some university guidelines for behavior that I expect all of us to follow. One of these has to do with plagiarism, or taking credit for the work of others. This is a serious offense and will be treated according to university guidelines; failure of the course is a potential outcome of academic dishonesty. This doesn't mean you shouldn't talk with other students about what you are thinking or writing; but when you write something on a paper or exam, it must be in your own words, not copied from someone else. If you repeat someone else's words, you must use quotation marks and must cite the relevant author, work, and page numbers. If you closely paraphrase other writers or rely on their ideas, you must similarly acknowledge your debt with an appropriate citation. Appropriation of another author's work without citation—whether or not you use direct quotations—always constitutes plagiarism. Some clear guidelines are available at [http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA\\_plagiarism.html](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html). You are responsible for knowing what constitutes plagiarism; claiming ignorance will not help you after the fact. If you have any questions about academic honesty, and what might or might not be considered plagiarism, please ask, rather than taking a risk with grave consequences.

**A Note about AI/ChatGPT:** Generative AI technologies are becoming widespread and have the potential to enhance learning experiences and promote critical thinking in this course. However, it is important to note that the use of AI should be supplementary and should not replace the development of essential cognitive skills. Generative AI is like Wikipedia - a potential place to start, but you, as the author, are responsible for ensuring that the information and outputs are appropriate and original—that is, YOUR ideas. Often, ChatGPT and similar sites are wrong in their interpretations of a text. Know that work created by AI tools may not be considered original work and instead is considered automated plagiarism. Remember that most of the writing assignments in this course are based on YOUR OWN reflections and interpretations of readings, so there is no right answer. Do not rely on generative AI to do the thinking for you. I want to know what YOU think, not read a word salad created by ChatGPT. If you use an AI tool at any point in the development and/or creation of your work for this course – including discussion board posts, exams, and reading responses, or to improve grammar/syntax – you provide a citation that lists the tool you used, the query/prompt that you used, and the date. If you submit written work that comes from generative AI without this citation, we will regard it as academic misconduct—because it is work produced by someone other than you. Please ask questions if you are not sure about any of this.

**Accommodations:** The University of Wisconsin–Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12) and UW–Madison policy (UW-855) require the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to access and participate in its academic programs and educational services. Faculty and students share responsibility in the accommodation process. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations during the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible after being approved for accommodations. Faculty will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the McBurney Disability Resource Center to provide reasonable instructional and course-related accommodations. Disability

information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

**Papers:** There will be three essays in the course, as indicated in the course calendar below. More information will be provided for each assignment well in advance of the due date.

### Grading Breakdown and Course Requirements

Attendance & Participation	20%
Reading Responses & Short Assignments	20%
First Paper	15%
Second paper	15%
Final Paper	30%

We will follow the standard university grading scale:

A = 92.5+; AB = 87.5-92.4; B = 82.5-87.4; BC = 77.5-82.4; C = 70-77.4; D = 60-69.4

### Course Schedule (Subject to change; check Canvas Modules for most recent updates):

#### **Wk 1:** Tuesday, Sept. 10: Introduction, Course Themes, and First National Cultural Landscape Tour

Meet in 5255 Mosse Humanities Building at 3:15; after initial conversations and introductions, we will walk to Memorial Union for the First National Cultural Landscape Tour. Wear appropriate footwear and clothing for the weather.

#### **Wk 2:** Tuesday, Sept. 17: Debating and Defining Wilderness

Reading: William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," Canvas  
Donald M. Waller, "Getting Back to the Right Nature," Canvas  
Dave Foreman, "Wilderness Areas for Real," Canvas  
Optional: Aplet, Thomson, and Wilbur, "Indicators of Wildness," Canvas

**Response Paper (2-3 pgs.) EVERYONE MUST COMPLETE:** Part 1: Briefly summarize the main argument of Cronon, Waller, and Foreman, identifying a single quote or passage that best summarizes the main point of each. Part 2: How do Cronon, Waller, and Foreman look at wilderness differently? Whose perspective makes the most sense to you, and why?

#### **Wk 3:** Tuesday, Sept. 24: Pristine Wilderness?

Reading: William M. Denevan, "The Pristine Myth," Canvas  
Melanie Perrault, "American Wilderness at First Contact," AW Ch. 2  
Shepherd Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*, Canvas  
Indigenous Primary Sources, Canvas

**Response Paper (1-2 pgs.):** Considering all of the readings from this week, craft an argument about how indigenous land tenure shaped ideas about wild nature. Underline your thesis statement.

#### **Wk 4:** Tuesday, October 1: Howling Wilderness?

Reading: Mark Stoll, "Religion 'Irradiates' the Wilderness," AW Ch. 3  
Puritan primary sources, Canvas  
Genesis, Chapters 2-4, Canvas  
Lynne White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," Canvas  
Wendell Berry, "The Gift of Good Land," Canvas

**Reading Response:** Post at least 3 comments to the Canvas Discussion board, as discussed in class (further instructions in Canvas)

**Wk 5: Tuesday, Oct. 8: Transcendentalists and Intellectuals**

Reading: Bradley Dean, “Natural History, Romanticism, and Thoreau,” AW Ch. 5  
Char Miller, “A Sylvan Prospect,” AW Ch. 8  
Rebecca Solnit, “John Muir in Native America,” Canvas  
Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” and “Huckleberries,” Canvas  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Documents, Canvas  
John Muir, “Our National Parks,” Canvas

**Reading Response:** The readings for this week will be challenging; do your best to understand them—we will unpack and explain them in class. Part 1: Pick a passage from each of Thoreau, Muir, and Emerson that you find provocative or interesting, and explain what you liked/found interesting. Part 2 (1 page): in what ways do you see the words of these 19<sup>th</sup> century writers echoing in today’s understanding of wilderness?

**Wk 6: Tuesday, Oc. 15: Gender, Masculinity, and Wilderness**

Reading: Gail Bederman, “Theodore Roosevelt: Manhood, Nation, and ‘Civilization,’” Canvas  
Kimberly Jarvis, “Gender and Wilderness Conservation,” AW Ch. 9  
Theodore Roosevelt, “Hunting in the Badlands,” Canvas  
Isabella Bird, “A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains,” Canvas  
Susan Fennimore Cooper, *Rural Hours*, Canvas

**Response Paper:** Construct an argument about how gender informed the understanding of wilderness. Make this a broad and sweeping argument, informed by Bederman and Jarvis, but be sure you refer to the primary source readings. Underline your thesis statement.

**Friday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 5:00 -- First Paper Due in Canvas Dropbox**

**Wk 7: Tuesday, Oct. 22: From Ideas to Action—Wilderness as Conservation Practice**

Reading: Paul Sutter, “Putting Wilderness in Context,” AW Ch. 10  
Benjamin Johnson, “Wilderness Parks and their Discontents,” AW Ch. 7  
Mark David Spence, “Crown of the Continent, Backbone of the World,” Canvas

**Reading Response:** Post at least 3 comments to the Canvas Discussion board, as discussed in class (further instructions in Canvas)

**Wk 8: Tuesday, Oct. 29: Wilderness goes Abroad**

Reading: Roderick P. Neumann, “Africa's ‘Last Wilderness,’” Canvas  
Ezra D. Rashkow, “Idealizing Inhabited Wilderness,” Canvas  
Christopher Conte, “Creating Wild Places from Domesticated Landscapes,” AW Ch. 13

**Response Paper:** What problems arise when the American wilderness ideal is applied in other countries? Does the importance, value, or justification for wilderness change in these situations?

**Wk 9: Tuesday, November 5: The Wilderness Idea Refined**

Reading: James Morton Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace,’” Canvas  
James Morton Turner, “The Specter of Environmentalism,” Canvas  
Additional Reading TBA

**Reading Response:** Post at least 3 comments to the Canvas Discussion board, as discussed in class (further instructions in Canvas)

**Wk 10: Tuesday, November 12: Biologists, Biodiversity, and the Wilderness Ideal**

Reading: Michael Lewis, “Wilderness and Conservation Science,” AW Ch. 12  
Justin Paul Smith, “The Wilderness Paradox,” Canvas  
Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies*, excerpts, Canvas  
Michael Pollan, ed., “Only Man’s Presence can Save Nature,” Canvas

**Reading Response (1-2 pages):** Referring to readings, craft an argument that explains the relationship between the idea of wilderness and conservation science. Underline your thesis.

**Wk 11: Tuesday, November 19: Second Paper Due**

Class showing of "Into the Wild," as discussed in class

Optional Readings: Diana Saverin, "The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem," Canvas

Alex Horton, "'Into the Wild' Bus Removed," Canvas

John Krakauer, "How Chris McCandless Died: An Update," Canvas

No additional Reading Response

**Wk 12: Tuesday, November 26: Thursday, November 11: Welcome to the Anthropocene**

Reading: Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier, "Conservation for the People," Canvas

Dave Foreman, "The Anthropocene and Ozymandias," Canvas

Emma Marris, "Humility in the Anthropocene," Canvas

Erle Ellis, "Too Big for Nature," Canvas

Kyle Whyte, "Our ancestors' dystopia now: Indigenous conservation and the Anthropocene," Canvas

**Response Paper (2 pgs.):** Considering the readings this week, in what ways might the concept of wilderness need to change in the Anthropocene? Underline your thesis statement.

**Wk 13: Tuesday, December 3: Managing the Anthropocene**

Reading: John Asafu-Adjaye, *et al*, "An Ecomodernist Manifesto," Canvas

M. Fletcher, *et. al.*, "Indigenous knowledge and the shackles of wilderness," Canvas

Paul Kingsnorth, "The Rise of the Neo-Greens," Canvas

David W. Kidner, "The Conceptual Assassination of Wilderness," Canvas

**Reading Response:** Post at least 3 comments to the Canvas Discussion board, as discussed in class (further instructions in Canvas)

**Wk 14: Tuesday, December 10: Rethinking Wilderness**

Reading: Donald Worster, "Nature, Liberty, and Equality," AW Epilogue

Jack Turner, "In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World," Canvas

Aldo Leopold, "Thinking Like a Mountain," Canvas

**Response Paper (1 pg.) EVERYONE MUST COMPLETE:** Considering these three short readings, as well as other readings from the semester, what, in your mind, is the value of wilderness?

**Final Papers due to the Canvas Dropbox by 5:00 on Tuesday, December 17.**