

History/Geography/Env Studies 460
American Environmental History
Fall 2025 (4 credits)

Lectures: Tuesday and Thursday, 11:00-12:15 - 1111 Mosse Humanities Building
Sections: Wednesdays, in-person, as indicated in enrollment

Teaching Staff:

Dr. Jim Feldman
jwfeldman@wisc.edu
Office hours: Thursdays 1:30-3:30 (or by appointment)
in 5214 Mosse Humanities Building

TA: Natalie Belew
nbelew@wisc.edu
Office hours: TTH 12:15-1:15, or via [Zoom](#)
4271 Mosse Humanities Building

What is Environmental History? Environmental history is the study of the interactions between human societies and the natural world over time. In this course, we will study American environmental history from European arrival in North America to the present. We will explore the ways that different groups of Americans adapted to and changed the landscape and also examine their ideas about nature.

The course has several explicit themes: Putting nature into history; identifying agency in environmental history; ways of knowing and acting in nature; the role of region; and the relationship between history and sustainability. A central premise throughout will be that much of the familiar terrain of American history looks very different when seen in its environmental context, and that one learns a great deal about both history and the environment by studying them together. The separate regions of the United States have different environments; the characteristics of these landscapes have shaped patterns of human life. We will look at the everyday lives of everyday people, asking how their labor, their religion, and their cultures influenced their interactions with the natural world—and how these different groups of people exerted historical agency in their interactions with the world around them. In our focus on region, we will pay particular attention to our own home—the North American Great Lakes. Although we typically think of sustainability as a forward-thinking concept, in this course we use it as a lens of inquiry to help us understand human/environmental interactions in the past. As a lens of inquiry, sustainability requires us to investigate the intersections of environmental change, economic activity, and social organization, and how these intersections have changed over time.

An additional goal of this class is to further your liberal arts education. What does this mean? The liberal arts education focuses on general learning, intellectual ability, and critical thinking rather than technical or professional skills. The goal of this class, then, is not just to convey specific information about environmental history (although you will learn much about this) but to teach you how to engage directly and critically with this material, and how to interpret it to better understand environmental change in its social, historical, and political contexts, and how to draw lessons from this history. A liberal arts education provides the tools we need to be active citizens of our communities. As we will learn this semester, active engagement plays a key role in resolving the complex environmental dilemmas that have faced our society for centuries.

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

- 1.) Have a basic understanding of the field of American environmental history, its goals and methods.
- 2.) Recognize and understand how factors such as class, race, region, and gender have shaped the way that people have understood and interacted with the world around them.
- 3.) Critically analyze the intersections among environmental change, economic activity, and social structures over time.
- 4.) Effectively communicate complicated ideas about environmental history through classroom discussion and in written format.
- 5.) Participate in engaged critical thinking in a classroom environment.

Bulletin 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

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

Instructional Modality, Workload & Credit Hours: 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.

Attendance, discussion, and participation: Your engaged participation in discussions and other class activities—in both lecture and discussion section—is the essential key to the success of this course. “Lectures” will be interactive and will demand your active participation. Come to class each day prepared to discuss reading assignments as indicated in the syllabus and in the weekly Canvas modules.

Make arrangements early in the semester to share lecture notes with a classmate; that way, if you do have to miss a lecture, you will know where to turn. Do not ask the professor or teaching assistant to give you a recap of what you missed.

We understand that life happens, and circumstances might force you miss occasional classes. Please communicate in writing (email) with the teaching team, 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.

Discussion sections are where you'll dig deeper into the readings and workshop your writing assignments. **Attendance in section is required**, and more than one unexcused absence will affect your section grade. You must come to section well prepared, having digested the assigned readings. Note that some weeks, there is dedicated reading assigned to section. You must have that week's reading assignment with you in a form you can access without a live internet connection (i.e., either printed or downloaded to a laptop or tablet).

Attendance Self-Grading: Keep track of your attendance, contributions to class discussions, and your engagement with the course. Set a goal for yourself of contributing at least once per class section. At the end of the semester, you will be asked to give yourself a self-assessment and grade for your attendance and participation (15% of your total grade); a rubric will be provided. As long as this grade tracks with the teaching team's general assessment of your participation, this will be your grade for this component of the course. We know that different people participate and engage in different ways, and this system is one way of accounting for that.

Top Hat, in-class writing assignments, and quizzes: Fifteen percent of your grade in this class will be earned by completing in-class writing assignments, Top Hat exercises, and other short assignments. These will be graded on a pass/fail basis (full credit, half credit, or no credit). There will be 15-20 of these assignments over the course of the semester. These assignments are intended to **maximize your engagement in the course** and will dramatically increase your grade if you complete them all. You may skip two of these in-class assignments with no penalty (or simply drop your lowest two grades). In-class writing/Top Hat assignments will occur regularly but will be unannounced. There will be no opportunity to make up these short assignments. You might want to have a laptop to complete in-class writing assignments. If you don't want to bring a laptop, make sure that you have looseleaf paper or index cards that you can use to turn in these assignments.

Reading Responses: Periodically over the course of the semester, you will be asked to write short (1-2 page) reading responses that ask you to draw on multiple readings. These will be graded on a pass/fail basis (full credit, half credit, or no credit). The goal of these assignments is to help you synthesize readings and course materials and to practice key skills of the historians' craft such as thesis writing, argumentation, and textual analysis. You may skip one of these assignments with no penalty (or simply drop your lowest grade). The prompts for these assignments are listed on the syllabus and posted in the Canvas modules.

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. In fact, it will be helpful to have a laptop or similar device to complete in-class writing assignments, and we realize that many students read their assignments on a laptop or tablet. Please put away earbuds/earphones during class.

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 ringers and notifications during class.** The TA will sit toward the back of the lecture hall and monitor electronics use. If you begin using your laptop for non-class purposes, the TA will take note, ask you to shut it down, and inform me. Persistent violation of this policy will have consequences for your course participation grade.

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. 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/Copilot/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 – maybe a place to start, but you, as the author, are responsible for ensuring that the information and outputs are appropriate and original. 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. We want to know what YOU think, not read a word salad created by AI. 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 must 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 us if you have any questions about this.

Although it is not prohibited, **we urge you not to use Generative AI on the writing responses.** These responses are pass/fail and generously graded. Their purpose is to help you process the material, practice argumentative writing, and to be ready to engage with the material in class. The only person who loses out when you use generative AI for these assignments is you.

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.

Course Readings: The amount of reading fluctuates from week to week. Sometimes you are asked to read over 100 pages of a single secondary source; other times you are asked to give a close reading to only 15 pages of primary sources. Try to keep your eye on the syllabus so that you can tell when the heavier reading loads are coming, and plan ahead. The following book is available at the University Book Store, as well as through many other vendors. It is also on reserve at Helen C. White. You can purchase either the first or second edition.

- Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, 2nd Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014)

The rest of the course readings are available electronically through Canvas. These are REQUIRED readings; you are strongly urged bring them with you to both lecture & section (in print or on a laptop, iPad, or e-reader) so that you make use them to aid in class discussion. **We strongly discourage you from using your phone to access readings in class**—it is harder to stay on task with your phone in your hand, you can’t take notes on your phone, and it is distracting to others.

Exams: There will be two exams and a final; further details on these exams will be announced later in the semester.

Grading Breakdown and Course Requirements (submitted via Canvas Dropbox unless otherwise noted)

In-class/Top Hat assignments & quizzes	15%
Reading Responses	10%
Midterm 1	17.5%
Midterm 2	17.5%
Final Exam	20%
Section/lecture attendance & participation (self-assessment)	15%
Inner Tracking Final Reflection	5%

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 Calendar (Subject to change; check the weekly Canvas modules for the most accurate calendar)

Wk 1: Thursday, September 4 – Introduction & Course Themes

Wk 2: Tuesday, September 9 – The Columbian Exchange

Reading: Steinberg, “A Truly New World,” *Down to Earth*, Canvas

Crosby, “Virgin Soil Epidemics,” Canvas

Wednesday, September 10 (for section): Indigenous History Docs, Canvas (see reading questions on Canvas)

Thursday, September 11 – Indigenous Economies

Reading: Mann, “1491,” Canvas

Wk 3: Tuesday, September 16 – Understanding the Fur Trade

Reading: Murphy, *A Gathering of Rivers*, Canvas

Reading response due before class in the Canvas Dropbox (1-2 pgs.): Referring to at least three readings, craft an argument that explores/explains environmental aspects of contact between Europeans and indigenous people in North America. What were the environmental, economic, and/or cultural implications of these encounters? Underline your thesis statement.

Wednesday, September 17 (for section): no additional reading; be prepared to discuss reading responses

Thursday, September 18 – The Puritans Face the Wilderness

Reading: Dennis, “Cultures of Nature,” Canvas

Wk 4: Tuesday, September 23 – New England Economies: Household and Market

Reading: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, “A World of Fields and Fences,” Canvas

Skim Foster, et. al, “The Importance of Land-Use Legacies,” Canvas

Wednesday, September 24 (for section): Puritan primary sources, Canvas

Thursday, September 25 – Jamestown and the Search for Gold

Reading: Merchant, “The Tobacco and Cotton South,” Canvas

Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, “Topography,” Canvas

Wk 5: Tuesday, September 30 – Rice, Tobacco, Slaves, and Soil

Reading: Stewart, “Rice, Water, and Power,” Canvas

Reading response due in Canvas Dropbox by start of class (1-2 pp.): Pulling from at least three different sources construct an argument about the relationship between slavery and nature. Underline your thesis.

Wednesday, October 1 (for section): no additional reading; be prepared to discuss reading responses

Thursday, October 2 - Visions for the American Republic

Reading: Price, “Missed Connections: The Passenger Pigeon Extinction,” Canvas

Wk 6: Tuesday, October 7 – The Control of Water and the Emergence of Industry

Reading: Montrie, “‘I Think Less of the Factory Than of My Native Dell,’ Labor, Nature and the Lowell ‘Mill Girls,’” Canvas

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, “A World of Commodities,” Canvas

Wednesday, October 8 (for section): Midterm Review

Thursday, October 9 – In class Midterm

No reading

Wk 7: Tuesday, October 14 – Romantics and the American Landscape

Reading: Kusserow & Braddock, *Nature’s Nation*, Canvas

Romantic Nature Documents, Canvas

Reading response due in Canvas Dropbox by the start of class (1-2 pgs.): This is a reflection, not an analysis. How have historic traditions of art and the environment shaped your own ideas about these subjects? Do you see any connections between the issues raised by Kusserow and Braddock and the way that we think about nature (and art) today? Do these primary sources reveal perspectives on nature that seem familiar to you? Or do they seem distant and disconnected from your own ideas about wild nature? Refer to specific passages from the readings.

Wednesday, October 15 (for section): Review Romantic nature readings and match with images posted on Canvas, as discussed in class

Thursday, October 16 – The Organic City

Reading: Steinberg, “The Death of the Organic City,” *Down to Earth*, Canvas
Rosenberg, “The Cholera Years,” Canvas

Wk 8: Tuesday, October 21 – Reshaping the Midwest: Rails, Meat & Wheat

Reading: Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, “Rails and Water,” Canvas

Wednesday, October 22 (for section): 1-paragraph MEAL exercise, as discussed in class

Thursday, October 23 – Northwoods Lumber & Great Plains Settlement

Reading: Cronon, “Telling Stories About Ecology,” Canvas
Begin reading Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*

Wk 9: Tuesday, October 28 – The Frontier in Environmental Thought

Reading: Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*, xv-80

Reading response due in the Canvas Dropbox by the start of class (1-2 pgs.): Considering examples from the Adirondacks and referring specifically to the readings (use at least two quotes), craft an argument about who wins and who loses in the conservation of nature. What motivates the various people involved in debates over whether or not to protect the natural world? Underline your thesis statement.

Wednesday, October 29 (for section): no additional reading; be prepared to discuss reading responses

Thursday, October 30 – Coal, Steel, and the Urban Landscape

Reading: Unger, *Beyond Nature’s Housekeepers*, Canvas
Continue reading Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*

Wk 10: Tuesday, November 4 – The Emergence of Conservation

Reading: Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*, 81-148, 193-209

Wednesday, November 5 (for section): Conservation documents (Canvas)

Thursday, November 6 – Environmental Crisis and the Great Depression

Reading: Kates, *Planning A Wilderness*, Canvas

Wk 11: Tuesday, November 11 – The New Deal—Planning vs. Conservation

Reading: Maher, “New Deal Body Politic,” Canvas

Wednesday, November 12 (for section): workshop midterms

Thursday, November 13 – Atomic America: How WW2 Changed the North American Landscape

No Reading: **Take-home midterm due** to the Canvas Dropbox by the start of class.

Wk 12: Tuesday, November 18 – Cities, Suburbs, and Cars

Reading: Wells, *Car Country*, Canvas

Cities & Suburbs Documents, Canvas

Steinberg, “America in Black & Green,” *Down to Earth*, Canvas

Reading response due in the Canvas Dropbox by the start of class (1 page): Referring to the readings, write a brief reflection on how cars shape the way that you inhabit the places you know well—this might be your life in Madison, or more likely your hometown.

Wednesday, November 19 (for section): no add.l reading; be prepared to discuss reading responses & documents

Thursday, November 20 – National Parks & the Wilderness Movement

Reading: Sutter, *Driven Wild*, Canvas

Wk 13: Tuesday, November 25 – A Brief History of Climate Change: Science, Politics, Inaction

Reading: TBD

Wednesday, November 26: No section meetings

Thursday, November 27 – No Class—Thanksgiving Break

Wk 14: Tuesday, December 2 – The Emergence of Modern Environmentalism

Reading: Stoll, “The Rise of U.S. Environmentalism,” Canvas

Carson, *Silent Spring*, Canvas

Wednesday, December 3 (for section): Environmentalism Documents, Canvas

Thursday, December 4 – Environmental Backlash

Reading: Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*, “Rats, Roaches, and Smoke,” Canvas

Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar America*, “Introduction,” Canvas

Reading response due in class: Broadly considering the readings for the last few weeks and referring specifically to Wells and Hurley, what do you see as the most important differences between environmental justice and what might be termed “mainstream” environmentalism? What do Rachel Carson and the African American steelworkers of Gary, Indiana have in common in the way that they perceive environmental issues? In what ways are they different?

Wk 15: Tuesday, December 9 – Environmental History and Lessons for the Future

Reading: Solnit, “Hope is an Embrace of the Unknown,” Canvas

Wednesday, December 10 (for section): **Found object exercise:** bring with you to section some modern object in which you can see traces of American environmental history. This object could be a car advertisement, a cereal box, a tv show—anything you want, so long as you can build a case for its relevance as a statement about environmental history; Workshopping Final exams

Finals Week: Final take-home exam & Inner-Tracking Reflection due in the Canvas Dropbox by 12:00 pm on Sunday, December 14.