

History 500: American Environmentalisms

Spring 2026

University of Wisconsin Madison

3 credits

Wednesdays, 1:20-3:15, Education L177

Prof. Jim Feldman

jwfeldman@wisc.edu

Office hours: Wednesdays 10:00-12:00 (or by appointment)

5214 Mosse Humanities Building

Course Description:

This course examines the history of American environmentalism from the early twentieth century to the present, tracing how concerns about pollution, conservation, public health, labor, and justice have shaped environmental thought, activism, and policy. We will explore key events such as the emergence of modern environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s, the growth of grassroots and environmental justice movements, the conservative backlash against regulation, and the turn toward climate justice and sustainability. Through the close reading of both primary and secondary sources, students will analyze how environmentalism has evolved in response to economic change, racial inequality, and global climate challenges, and how competing visions of nature and progress continue to shape American ideas about nature and efforts to create a just and healthy society.

The course will be run as a reading seminar. There will be very little lecture. Class time will be spent discussing and analyzing the readings. A majority of the readings will be primary sources—that is, the documents written or created as Americans built the environmental movement (or reacted against it). A central goal of the course is to learn how to critically analyze these documents, and then to use them in creating your own original arguments about American environmentalism and its many strands.

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 specific information about American encounters with nuclear energy (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 complex ways that Americans advocated for environmental responsibility from the early twentieth century to the present.
- 2.) Effectively communicate complicated ideas in a classroom setting, primarily through class discussion.
- 3.) Effectively communicate complicated ideas in written format.
- 4.) Critically analyze primary source documents and use those documents to create original arguments that explain the many varieties of American environmentalism.
- 5.) Participate in engaged critical thinking in a classroom environment.

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.

At least once during the semester, you are expected to meet with me in office hours (or at some other time of mutual convenience)—this can be to discuss a paper or reading, or just to chat. More information will be provided about this.

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 35% 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.

Attendance Self-Grading: Keep track of your attendance, contributions to class discussions, and your engagement with the course. 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 my general assessment of your participation, this will be your grade for this component of the course. I know that different people participate and engage in different ways, and this system is one way of accounting for that.

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. All readings will be available electronically on Canvas. The readings listed in the syllabus are required. 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 me. Sometimes, I will send Canvas 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). I

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, 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/ChatGPT/Copilot: 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. And they often repeat racialized and gendered biases that are widespread online. 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 – provide a citation that lists the tool you used, the query/prompt that you used, and the date. Submitting written work that comes from generative AI without this citation will be regarded 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.

Although it is not prohibited, **I urge you not to use generative AI on writing responses.** These responses are pass/fail and generously graded. Their purpose is to help you process the material and to be ready to engage 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.

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: Students will be evaluated on the following components, each of which will be discussed in more detail during class:

Attendance, Participation & Engagement Self-Assessment: 15%	Inner Tracking Assignment: 5%
Reading Responses & Short Assignments: 20%	Final Paper: 25%
Two midsemester essays: 17.5% each	

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, but clear notification will be provided if changes are made)

Wk 1: Wednesday, January 21 – Introduction & Course Themes: What is an Environmentalist?

Wk 2: Wednesday, January 28 – Debating Conservation, Preservation, and the Roots of Environmentalism

Reading: Johnson, “Conservation, Subsistence, & Class”

Pinchot, “The Fight for Conservation”

Roosevelt, “Special Message from the President”

Knapp, “The Other Side of Conservation”

Mattes, “Another National Blunder”

Muir, “The Revolt Against Utilitarianism”

Reading Response (2 pgs.) -- Everyone must complete: What was the relationship between conservation and economic development? Why/how was this relationship contested? Be sure to refer to Johnson and at least three primary sources (but be sure to read all of them!) and underline your thesis.

Wk 3: Wednesday, February 4 – Pathways to Environmentalism: Affluence, Ecology and Wilderness

Readings: Harvey, “Loving the Wild in Postwar America”

Del Mar, *Environmentalism*

Brower, “The Place No One Knew”

Stegner, Wilderness Letter

Carson, *Silent Spring*

Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, “Foreword”

Shephard, “The Place of Nature in Man’s World”

Reading Response (1-2 pgs.): Pulling from at least four readings (and at least 1 secondary source), build an argument that explains what elements of postwar American society primed the country for the emergence of mainstream environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Underline your thesis statement.

Wk 4: Wednesday, February 11 – Spaceship Earth and American Environmentalism

Reading: Robertson, “This is the American Earth”

Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment*, “Introduction”

Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons”

Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*

Vogt, *Road to Survival*

Meadows, *Limits to Growth*

Paley Commission, “Resources for Freedom”

Reading Response: Place at least 3 substantive comments in the discussion board, either responding to the questions that are there or to the comments of a classmate. Be sure to engage directly with the readings in your responses by using quotes, facts, and specific references.

Wk 5: Wednesday, February 18 – Earth Day Environmentalism

Reading: Rome, “Give Earth A Chance”

Rhee, *Natural Attachments*

Nelson, “Earth Day Speech”

Hayes, “Earth Day”

Commoner, “Harvard University Lecture”

Phinney, “Letter to the Oregon Environmental Council”

GASP, Public Service Announcements

Reading Response (2 pages): What similarities and/or differences do you see in how Rome and Rhee define environmentalism? How do the primary sources (and/or those from the last few weeks) fit into their arguments?

Sunday, February 21: First Paper Due by 5:00 pm in the Canvas Dropbox

Wk 6: Wednesday, February 25 – The Rise of Anti-Environmentalism

Reading: Turner & Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*

Turner, “The Specter of Environmentalism”

Conservative Response Documents

Reading Response: Place at least 3 substantive comments in the discussion board, either responding to the questions that are there or to the comments of a classmate. Be sure to engage directly with the readings in your responses by using quotes, facts, and specific references.

Wk 7: Wednesday, March 4: – Love Canal and the Origins of Environmental Justice

Reading: Thomson, “Toxic Residents”

Montrie, “To Stir up Dissent and Create Turmoil”

Gibbs, “Knocking Doors at Love Canal”

“A Mother’s Reflections on the Love Canal Disaster”

Council of the Southern Mountains, “We Will Stop the Bulldozers”

El Malcriado, “Growers Spurn Negotiations on Poisons”

Reading Response (1-2 pages): Build an argument that explores how the environmentalism described by Gibbs and Montrie is different than (or similar to) “mainstream environmentalism.” Be sure to work primary sources into your argument. Underline your thesis statement.

Wk 8: Wednesday, March 11 – The Radical and the Deep

Reading: Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*

Foreman and Abbey, “Monkeywrenching”

Sessions and Devall, “Deep Ecology”

Huber, “EarthFirst! Action in Oregon”

Miss Ann Thropy, “Population and AIDS”

Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

Reading Response: TBA

Wk 9: Wednesday, March 18 – Black Ecology & The Roots of Environmental Justice

Reading: Gioielli, “Urban Environmental Justice”

Hare, “Black Ecology”

Newfield, “Lead Poisoning”

Thomas Jr., “Black Survival in Our Polluted Cities”

Muskie, “Speech at the Philadelphia Earth Week Rally”

Coombs, “The Sierra Club Looks at Itself”

Reading Response: Place at least 3 substantive comments in the discussion board, either responding to the questions that are there or to the comments of a classmate. Be sure to engage directly with the readings in your responses by using quotes, facts, and specific references.

Wk 10: Wednesday, March 25 – The Challenge of Environmental Justice

Reading: Wells, *Environmental Justice in North America*

McGurty, “From NIMBY to Civil Rights”

Environmental Justice Documents

Reading Response: Identify at least two themes that you see running through the readings and identify at least 2 quotes from each reading that align with these themes. Write a brief paragraph that explains each theme (just 3-4 sentences is fine).

March 30-April 1 Spring Break

Wk 11: Wednesday, April 8 – Redwood Summer

Reading: Speece, *Defending Giants*, “Radicalization” (skim 124-42)

Woodhouse, “Radical Environmentalism and Ecoterrorism in the United States”

Gabriel, “If A Tree Falls in the Forest, They Hear It”

Bari, “Revolutionary Ecology”

Additional reading TBA

Reading Response: TBA

Sunday, April 12: Paper 2 due

Wk 12: Wednesday, April 15 – The Rise of Sustainability

Reading: Shellenberger and Nordhaus, “The Death of Environmentalism”

Price, “Remaking American Environmentalism”

Agyeman, “Toward a Just Sustainability”

Sustainability Documents

Reading Response: Place at least 3 substantive comments in the discussion board, either responding to the questions that are there or to the comments of a classmate. Be sure to engage directly with the readings in your responses by using quotes, facts, and specific references.

Wk 13: Wednesday, April 22 – Climate Justice

Reading: Benson, *Surroundings*

Whyte, “Too Late for Indigenous Climate Justice”

Climate Justice Documents

Reading Response (1-2 pgs.): In what ways is the climate justice movement different (or similar to) previous environmental movements? Underline your thesis statement.

Wk 14: Wednesday, April 29 – The Future of Environmentalism

Reading: Asafu-Adaje et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*

Foreman, “The Anthropocene and Ozymandias”

Marris, “Humility in the Anthropocene”

Kingsnorth, “The Rise of the Neo-Greens”

Sheehan, "Dangerous Hope and Cautious Optimism"

Reading Response (2 pgs.) Everyone must complete: Where should environmentalism go from here? What do you see as the future of environmentalism? What points do the authors make that inform your perspectives?

Wk 15: Wednesday, May 6, 11:59 PM – Final Paper, Engagement Self-Assessment, and Inner Tracking Assignment Due