

THIS SYLLABUS IS A DRAFT AND IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE BEFORE SUMMER 2021

[Matthew P. Johnson](#)

HIST 298
US Environmental History
Summer 2021
Mondays through Thursdays, 1:00-3:00 pm, EST
Location: Online, synchronous
(Zoom link coming in June)

Office hours
Monday-Thursday, 3:00-4:00pm and by appointment
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Course Description

In this course, we will explore the history of the United States with the premise that the nonhuman world is essential to understanding the human past. From mosquitoes to oil fields, the nonhuman environment will feature as a protagonist alongside the human actors that traditionally dominate the discipline of history. Three themes will guide our learning: how the natural environment affected human affairs, how humans have, in turn, impacted the environment, and how people have thought about the nonhuman world. Over the past two centuries, people in the United States altered the natural environment in profound ways that both raised standards of living and unleashed a host of damaging ecological consequences. Learning the history of these dramatic environmental changes is a necessary starting point for understanding climate change and other contemporary environmental problems.

Course Goals

This course will provide students with a basic understanding of US environmental history and teach them to think critically about environmental concerns. Students will gain a firmer understanding of the forces that encouraged and shaped past environmental change, as well as the consequences of such changes, and will be able to think through how such knowledge might be applied to the present, a time of tremendous environmental upheaval. Students will also gain critical reading and writing skills and learn how to engage in informed discussion and debate.

Books and Readings

All course readings will be posted to Canvas.

Housekeeping

Pandemic Adjustments

Due to the global pandemic, this course will be held online. I will plan to hold lectures and discussions synchronously, meaning that they will happen live during class time, but I can record lectures and post them on Canvas upon request for those who cannot attend a lecture. I ask (but do not require) that students turn on their cameras and that they ensure their Zoom background is a neutral space.

I know the online format and additional stresses of pandemic life make it an especially difficult time to be a college student. I will do my absolute best to be understanding and flexible as challenges arise. If you anticipate having any specific difficulties, please send me an email, and we can work something out.

Academic Honesty

There is a zero tolerance policy for plagiarism in this class and claiming ignorance is not an acceptable excuse. Plagiarism is not just copying someone else's writing. Any time you present ideas without correctly citing them, you are committing plagiarism. This is the most serious intellectual offense you can commit in academia, and I take it very seriously.

It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the [Georgetown University Undergraduate Honor System](#). It is your professor's duty to refer academic misconduct - including plagiarism - to the Georgetown Honor Council. If the Council decides that you have plagiarized, you will fail this class and suffer additional penalties.

Sexual Harassment and Misconduct

There is a zero tolerance policy for sexual harassment and misconduct in this classroom.

Beyond the classroom, I am committed to supporting survivors of sexual misconduct, which includes relationship violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault. You should know that university policy requires me to report any disclosures about sexual misconduct to the Georgetown Title IX Coordinator, who directs the University's response to sexual misconduct.

Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professionals who provide support and assistance to survivors of sexual assault and other forms of sexual misconduct. You can find them by clicking [here](#). You can learn more about whom to call - and who will help - by searching [here](#). And for all campus resources and reporting on sexual misconduct, visit: <http://sexualassault.georgetown.edu>.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities on record with the university and who require accommodations should contact the professor by the end of the second week.

Assignments and grading

25% Final exam

25% Participation
25% Weekly quizzes
25% Weekly writing reflections

Final exam – the final will be a cumulative test on everything that we’ve covered in class. There will be no surprises and it will cover material familiar to students who attend class regularly and do the readings.

Participation – participation will be assessed on attendance and contributions to discussions. Please do the readings thoroughly and come to class prepared.

Weekly quizzes – weekly quizzes are short quizzes designed to test you on the readings. You will have about ten minutes or so to answer 3-5 short questions with a sentence or two each. These quizzes will happen weekly and I will not announce the specific date in advance.

Weekly writing reflections – at the end of every week you will turn in a two-page writing reflection that answers one of the questions I pass out at the beginning of the week. These reflections are due every Friday at midnight.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (June 7-11)

Monday, June 7 (Lecture)

Lecture: Background

Optional readings

- J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, Introduction and Conclusion

Tuesday, June 8 (Discussion)

Discussion: American Revolution, 1770s

Required readings

- J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, pages 1-11, 52-57
- J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, Chapter 6
- Olmsted, “Rice Districts” (primary source).
(Total reading: 66 pages).

Wednesday, June 9 (Lecture)

Lecture: Cotton South, Industrialization, and Civil War, 1780s-1860s

Optional readings

- Erin Mauldin, *Unredeemed Land*, Chapters 1 and 2

Thursday, June 10 (Discussion and Map Quiz)

--In class map quiz, Thursday, June 10—

Discussion: Gold Rush and Westward Expansion, 1850s-1880s

Required readings

- Andrew Isenberg, *Mining California*, Chapter 1 and epilogue (total reading: 43 pages).

Optional readings

- [Matthew P. Johnson, "Fieldtrip to North Bloomfield"](#)

--Due Friday, June 11, reading reflection 1—

Week 2 (June 14-18)

Monday, June 14 (Lecture)

Lecture: Urbanization, 1860s-1910s

Optional readings

- Catherine McNeur, "Swinish Multitude"
- [Catherine McNeur, "Protecting their Pigs"](#)
- McShane and Tarr, "Horse in Nineteenth-Century"

Tuesday, June 15 (Discussion)

Discussion: Coal mining, 1880s-1910s

Required readings

- Charles Barnard, "From Hod to Mine in Seven Lifts," 1874, *American Homes*
- Thomas Andrews, "Chapter 4: Dying with Their Boots On" in *Killing for Coal* (Total reading: 60 pages)

Wednesday, June 16 (Lecture)

Lecture: World War I through World War II, 1914-1945

Optional Readings

- [Matthew P. Johnson, "Fieldtrip to Midway-Sunset"](#)
- Nancy Quam-Wickham, "Cities Sacrificed on Altar of Oil"
- Margaret Humphrey's, *Malaria*, 94-112, 140-154

Thursday, June 17 (Discussion)

Discussion: Race and US imperialism, 1898-1945

Required Readings

- Colin Fischer, "1919 Chicago Race Riot"
- Matthew P. Johnson, "Swampy Sugar Lands"
- Matthew P. Johnson, "'Thirsty Sugar Lands,'" pages 4-8, 14-18

(Total reading: 54 pages).

--Due Friday, June 18, reading reflection 2--

Week 3 (June 21-25)

Monday, June 21 (Lecture)

Lecture: Postwar affluence and its consequences, 1950s-1970s

Optional readings

- No readings

Tuesday, June 22 (Discussion)

Discussion: Industrial agriculture

Required readings

- Michael Pollan, “Industrial Corn”
(Total reading: 105 pages).
- Note: Michael Pollan’s book is an account of the history of the corn industry through 2006 and much of his narrative concerns the period between 1972-2006, which we will not get to until next week. Nevertheless, the basic structure of the industrial corn industry was put into place in the 1950s-1970s and policies since then accelerated corn production without altering its basic structure.

Wednesday, June 23 (Lecture)

Lecture: Postwar affluence and its consequences, 1950s-1970s

Optional readings

- Matthew Johnson, “Black Gold of Paradise”

Thursday, June 24 (Discussion)

Discussion: Silent Spring

Required readings

- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, selected readings.
(Total reading: 122 pages)

--Due Friday, June 25, reading reflection 3--

Week 4 (June 28-July 2)

Monday, June 28 (Lecture)

Lecture: Environmental Movement, 1960s-1970s

Optional readings

- No readings

Tuesday, June 29 (Discussion)

Discussion: Environmental movement, 1960s-1970s

Required readings

- James Turner and Andrew Isenberg, *Republican Reversal*, Chapter 1 (Total reading: 54 pages).

Wednesday, June 30 (Lecture)

Lecture: Environmental Justice, 1980s-present

Optional readings

- Barbara Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy*, Chapters 1 and 5
- Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*, Chapter 8

Thursday, July 1 (Discussion)

Discussion: Environmental justice, 1980s-present

Required readings

- Listen to the song “New World Water” by Mos Def twice. The second time, have the lyrics in front of you and read along as you listen. This should take about 6 minutes.
- Listen to the album “Black on Both Sides” by Mos Def with the lyrics in front of you, reading along as you listen. Identify any common themes that tie the songs together and take notes on anything that stands out to you as significant. This should take about an hour and 10 minutes. Come to class prepared to discuss the following question: what is the overarching theme of this album and what is a song about the water crisis doing on it?
- Note: This album is available on most music streaming services and on YouTube and I will post the lyrics on our Canvas page.
- Dianne D. Glave, “Black Environmental Liberation Theology”
- Dina Gilio-Whitaker, “(Not So) Strange Bedfellows” (Total reading: 30 pages).

Optional readings

Mark Stoll, “Religion and African American Environmental Activism”

--Due Friday, July 2, reading reflection 4--

Week 5 (July 5-8)

Monday, July 5 (Lecture)

Lecture: Green Drift, 1970s-present

Optional readings

- Turner and Isenberg, *Republican Reversal*, Introduction and conclusion

- Turner and Isenberg, *Republican Reversal*, Chapter 3
- Turner and Isenberg, *Republican Reversal*, Chapter 4

Tuesday, July 6 (Discussion)

Discussion: The future of environmentalism

Required readings

- William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”
- Dorceta Taylor, “American Environmentalism”
(Total reading: 70 pages)

Wednesday, July 7

Review for final

Thursday, July 8

Final exam

Bibliography

- Barbara Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor Disputes* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).
- Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
- William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in William Cronon (ed) *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995).
- Colin Fisher, "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot," in Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (eds) *"To Love the Wind and Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).
- Dina Gilio-Whitaker, "(Not so) Strange Bedfellows," Chapter 5 in *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).
- Dianne D. Glave, "Black Environmental Liberation Theology," in Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (eds) *"To Love the Wind and Rain": African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).
- Margaret Humphreys, *Malaria: Poverty, Race, and Public Health in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)
- Andrew Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).
- Matthew P. Johnson, "Swampy Sugar Lands: Irrigation Dams and the Rise and Fall of Malaria in Puerto Rico, 1898-1962" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 51, 2 (May 2019): 243-271.
- Timothy LeCain, *Mass Destruction: The Men and Giant Mines that Wired America and Scarred the Planet* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009).
- Erin Mauldin, *Unredeemed Land: An Environmental History of Civil War and Emancipation in the Cotton South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 2000).
- J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Catherine McNeur, "The 'Swinish Multitude': Controversies over Hogs in Antebellum New York City," *Journal of Urban History* 37, 5 (September 2011): 639-660.

Clay McShane and Joel Tarr, "The Horse in the Nineteenth-Century American City," in Dorothee Brantz (ed) *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study of History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 227-245.

Michael Pollan, "Industrial Corn": this is the first section of Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

Nancy Quam-Wickham, "'Cities Sacrificed on the Altar of Oil': Popular Opposition to Oil Development in 1920s Los Angeles," *Environmental History* 3, 2 (April 1998), 189-209.

Dorceta Taylor, "American Environmentalism: The Role of Race, Class, and Gender in Shaping Activism 1820-1995," *Race, Gender, and Class* 5, 1 (1997): 16-62.

James Turner and Andrew Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).