

**GEO 754**  
**Seminar in Environmental History**  
Fall 2020

Bob Wilson  
Department of Geography

Tuesday, 2:00-4:45pm  
Eggers: 155

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**Office Hours:**

Email me to schedule an appointment online.

“Environmental history is, among other things, a lengthy account of human beings imagining themselves into a serious pickle.”

-- Elliott West, *The Contested Plains*

**Overview**

Elliot West provides one definition of environmental history. Here is another: environmental history is the study of the relationship between society and the rest of nature over time. This course will introduce you to some of the key works and themes in the field as well as expose you to some promising new work in this area of historical scholarship. Environmental history is an interdisciplinary endeavor. Because of this, we will read works by authors trained as geographers, historians, and ecologists.

After discussing the history of the sub-field and its distinctive approach to society-environment relations, we will read a number of classic and new works on the subject. Along the way, we will examine the methods, questions, and writing styles of practitioners in the field. More than most scholars, environmental historians have sought to reach academic *and* public audiences simultaneously with their work. We will weigh the opportunities and pitfalls of such an approach as we discuss each text.

This course is not a history of environmentalism. *Environmentalism* is a social movement originating in the 1960s that has varied greatly from country to country. *Environmental history* is the study of the historical relationship between people and the environment. Attention to political movements such as environmentalism is but one facet of this field. However, since I imagine many of you are interested in the movement, we will devote time in the middle of the course to the growth of environmentalism (and anti-environmentalism) in the United States and the legacy of the ‘environmental era’ in this nation and other industrial/post-industrial democracies.

In most of geography, the academic ‘product’ is an article or chapter in an edited volume. In much of historical geography, and in the interdisciplinary sub-field of environmental history, the ‘product’ is a book. Moreover, most of these books are narratives: *stories* about the relationship

between people and the environment. For those of you new to environmental history, this might seem unusual. In this course will also discuss the authors' narrative strategies and the strengths and weaknesses of this form of environmental writing.

### Evaluation

- 30% Class participation (includes attendance, participation, and facilitating/leading one discussion)
- 30% Two short essays
- Book review (15%)
  - What lessons can we learn from the environmental history of diseases and epidemics? (15%)
- 40% Final seminar paper

### Course Texts

The following texts are available as free ebooks through the SU Library. I have provided links to the books on Blackboard. If you want hardcover or paperback versions, you will need to order them on your own:

- Fiege, Mark. *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012. (SU Library – ebook)
- Langston, Nancy. *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. (SU Library – ebook)
- McNeill, J. R. *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. (SU Library – ebook)
- McNeill, J. R., and Peter Engelke. *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. (SU Library – ebook)
- Russell, Edmund. *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. (SU Library – ebook)
- Turner, James Morton, and Andrew C. Isenberg. *The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. (SU Library – ebook)

The following books are not available for free via the library. You must purchase them at the SU Bookstore or order a hard copy or digital copy online:

- Brown, Kate. *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future*. New York: Norton, 2019.
- Demuth, Bathsheba. *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019

### Schedule, Topics, and Readings

(BB) – Available under “Readings” on course Blackboard page.

#### **August 25<sup>th</sup> – Introduction: What is Environmental History?**

Andrews, Thomas and Flannery Burke. “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives* January (2007): 10–13. (BB)

Steinberg, Ted. “Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History.” *American Historical Review* (2002): 798–820. (BB)

Fiege, Mark. *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012 (BB)

- “Foreword: Environmental History Comes of Age” and “Land of Lincoln”

Sutter, Paul S. “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History.” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 2013). (BB)

- Just read p. 94-99.

### **September 1<sup>st</sup> – Global Environmental History | Environmental History of the Modern World**

McNeill, John. “The First Hundred Thousand Years.” In *The Turning Points of Environmental History*, edited by Frank Uekötter, 13–28. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. (BB)

- Focus especially on the first 4-5 “turning points.”

Richards, John. 2003. *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (BB)

- Introduction
- 1 – The Early Modern World (p. 17-24, 55-57)

McNeill, J. R., and Peter Engelke. *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. (BB)

### **September 8<sup>th</sup> – Epidemics and History I: Disease as Agent of Empires and The Geopolitics of Disease**

Crosby, Alfred W. 1986. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (BB)

- Prologue
- Ills

McNeill, J. R. 2010. *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (BB)

### **September 15<sup>th</sup> – Environmental History as National History**

Fiege, Mark. *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012. (BB)

Read these chapters:

- “Foreword: Environmental History Comes of Age” and “Land of Lincoln”
  - Skim or review your notes. You’ve read these chapters already but reread them to refresh your memory about Fiege’s purpose and approach in this book.
- “King Cotton”
- “The Nature of Gettysburg”

- “The Road to *Brown v. Board*”
- “Paths that Beckon”
  - In addition to reading this chapter, consider what other “paths” might beckon. What other aspects of American history, or other nations’ histories for that matter, should geographers and historians examine through an environmental history lens? Be prepared to discuss at least *one* of these “paths” in seminar.
- \*Also, I will assign each of you – or pairs of you – *one* additional chapter to read.

### **September 22<sup>nd</sup> – Evolutionary History**

Russell, Edmund. 2011. *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (BB)

### **\*\* First Short Essay Due\*\* Friday, September 26<sup>th</sup> Book Analysis**

### **September 29<sup>th</sup> – Postwar Environmentalism**

Zelko, Frank. 2006. “Challenging Modernity: The Origins of Postwar Environmental Protests in the United States.” In *Shades of Green: Environmental Activism from Around the Globe*, edited by Christof Mauch, Nathan Stoltzfus, and Douglas R Weiner, 13–40. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (BB)

Rome, Adam. *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013. (BB)

- Preface
- Prologue: “Give Earth a Chance”
- The Prehistory of Earth Day

Maher, Neil. 2017. *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (BB)

- Introduction: Launching the Sixties
- 3 – Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Cape Canaveral and Whole Earth Environmentalism

I will assign you one of the following chapters to read about environmentalism in a European country:

- Uekötter, Frank. 2014. “German Environmentalism, 1945-1980.” *The Greenest Nation?: A New History of German Environmentalism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. (BB)
- Bess, Michael. 2003. “The Unexpected Trajectory of Environmentalist Success.” *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (BB)

### **October 6<sup>th</sup> – African American Environmentalism | Environmental Justice**

Stewart, Mart. 2006. “Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism.” In *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, edited by Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. (BB)

Egan, Michael. 2002. “Subaltern Environmentalism in the United States: A Historiographic Review.” *Environment and History* 8 (1): 21–41. (BB)

Finney, Carolyn. 2014. *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. (BB)

- Introduction
- 3 - Forty Acres and a Mule
- 4 - Black Faces

Melosi, Martin. “Environmental Justice, Ecoracism, and Environmental History.”

### **October 13<sup>th</sup> – Conservatives and Anti-Environmentalism**

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

### **October 20<sup>th</sup> – Epidemics and Environmental History II: The 1918 Spanish Flu and Emerging-Remerging Diseases**

Crosby, Alfred. 2003. *America’s Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press. (BB)

- Preface to New Edition
- 1 – The Great Shadow
- 5 – The Spanish Flu Sweeps the Country
- 6 – Flu in Philadelphia
- 15 – An Inquiry into the Peculiarities of Human Memory

Snowden, Frank. 2019. *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (BB)

- 21 – Emerging and Remerging Diseases
- 22 – Dress Rehearsals for the Twenty-First Century: SARS and Ebola

Worster, Donald. “Another Silent Spring.” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2020, no. 1 (22 April 2020). Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. [doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9028](https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9028). (BB)

Mitman, Gregg. *In the Shadow of Ebola*, 2014. (BB - documentary)

- Please also read the interview with Mitman—there’s a link to the PDF beneath the link to the movie.

### **October 27<sup>th</sup> – Authoritarian Environmental Governance: Soviet Union and Maoist China**

[Soviet Union](#)

Snyder, Timothy. 2010. Introduction: Hitler and Stalin” and “The Soviet Famines.” *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books. (BB)

Wemheuer, Felix. 2014. “Collectivization and Famine.” In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, edited by Stephen A Smith, 407–23. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (BB)

Brain, Stephen. 2010. “Stalin’s Environmentalism.” *The Russian Review* 69 (1): 93–118. (BB)

Bonhomme, Brian. 2013. “Writing the Environmental History of the World’s Largest State: Four Decades of Scholarship on Russia and the USSR.” *Global Environment* 6 (12): 12–37. (BB)

## OR

### Maoist China

Tyner, James A. 2012. *Genocide and the Geographical Imagination: Germany, China, Cambodia*. Laham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers. (BB)

- 3 – Starving for the State: China

Wemheuer, Felix. “Collectivization and Famine.” In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, edited by Stephen A Smith, 407–23. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. (BB)

Shapiro, Judith. 2016. “Environmental Degradation in China under Mao and Today: A Comparative Reflection.” *Global Environment* 9 (2): 440–57. (BB)

### **\*\* Second Essay Due \*\***

**Friday, October 30<sup>th</sup>**

### **What lessons can we learn from the environmental history of diseases and epidemics?**

#### **November 3<sup>rd</sup> – Animal History | Comparative Environmental History**

Demuth, Bathsheba. 2019. *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

- Note: This book is not available on Blackboard. You must by a copy from the library or from somewhere else (Barnes and Noble, online retailer, etc.)

#### **November 10<sup>th</sup> – Toxic Trouble | Gender and Environmental History**

Langston, Nancy. 2010. *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (BB)

#### **November 17<sup>th</sup>– Unnatural Disasters | Science, Technology, and Society**

Brown, Kate. 2019. *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future*. New York: Norton.

- Note: This book is not available on Blackboard. You must by a copy from the library or from somewhere else (Barnes and Noble, online retailer, etc.)

#### **November 24<sup>th</sup> – Discuss research and writing strategies for final paper.**

**December – No classes after Thanksgiving Break. Work on final papers.**

**\*\* Final Paper Due \*\*  
Monday, December 15<sup>TH</sup>, 11:00pm  
(email them to me)**

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Stay Safe Pledge

<https://provost.syr.edu/the-stay-safe-pledge-guidance-for-faculty-tas-and-instructional-staff/>

Syracuse University's Stay Safe Pledge reflects the high value that we, as a university community, place on the well-being of our community members. This pledge defines norms for behavior that will promote community health and wellbeing. Classroom expectations include the following: wearing a mask that covers the nose and mouth at all times, maintaining a distance of six feet from others, and staying away from class if you feel unwell. Students who do not follow these norms will not be allowed to continue in face-to-face classes; repeated violations will be treated as violations of the Code of Student Conduct and may result in disciplinary action.

Faith Tradition Services

Syracuse University does not set aside days for any religious holiday. Students must notify instructors by the end of the second week of classes for regular session classes and by the submission deadline for flexibly formatted classes when they will be observing their religious holiday(s). Please remind students in class of their obligations to do so. Students will have access to an online notification form through MySlice for two weeks beginning on the first day of class.

Disability Syllabus Statement

Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. I invite any student to contact me to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be essential to your success and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process.

If you would like to discuss disability-accommodations or register with CDR, please visit Center for Disability Resources. Please call (315) 443-4498 or email [disabilityresources@syr.edu](mailto:disabilityresources@syr.edu) for more detailed information.

The CDR is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic accommodations and will work with the student to develop an access plan. Since academic accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact CDR as soon as possible to begin this process.