GEO 754
Seminar in Environmental History
Fall 2013

Bob Wilson
Department of Geography
Tuesday, 6:45-9:30

Office: Eggers 533
Office #: 443.9433
Office Hours: Friday, 1:00-2:45
or by appointment.

Email: rmwilson@maxwell.syr.edu

“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 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 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 will seem very unusual. In this course will also discuss the authors’ narrative strategies and the strengths and weaknesses of this form of environmental writing.
Evaluation
20% Class participation (includes attendance and short presentations)
30% Two book reviews (15% each)
40% Final seminar paper
10% In-class presentation based on final seminar paper

Book Reviews:
You will also write two five- to six-page book reviews on texts from the course. If you like, you may also choose another work of environmental history that I did not assign, but you must clear it with me first. However, if you choose this option you are still expected to do all the required course readings.

A book review is not a summary. Certainly, you will want to discuss the book’s structure and the key points in the text. But in a review you must also carefully evaluate the weaknesses and strengths of the author’s argument and the utility of the text. It might help to develop a passing familiarity with some of the other related works on the topic so you can better situate the book within the relevant literature.

Although the two book reviews are of the same length, I want you to write them in different styles. For the first one, you will write it in the style of longer review essays found in the Journal of Historical Geography, Reviews in American History, or H-HistGeog. For the second one, I expect you to use the reviews found in popular intellectual journals such as The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, The Nation, or The American Scholar as your guide. In class, we will discuss the characteristics of reviews in each of these publications.

Class Participation:
Students are expected to attend all classes and come ready to participate in class discussions. As many of you know from TAing undergraduate discussion sections, grading participation is a difficult matter. I expect students to read the course texts critically, to develop questions and comments based on those readings, and to be willing to listen to and wrestle with other students’ views.

Each of you will also be expected to give a brief (ten minutes max) introduction to the week’s readings at some point in the course in which you note the key points in the texts and offer some questions and comments to help initiate the discussion.

Seminar Papers
The major requirement for the course is a 15-20 page seminar paper on a topic of your choosing. You might select a particular facet of environmental history to examine in more detail (such as urban environmental history or landscape and disease) or produce a short research paper using primary sources. If you choose the first option, you must develop an argument and critically evaluate the sources you use. I do not want a cursory literature review.

You will also give a 15-minute presentation to the class based on this topic. Since the presentations are scheduled before the final paper is due, this will be an opportunity to ‘test run’ your ideas and solicit feedback from myself and the rest of the class.
Books to Purchase/Check-Out from Library

And one of the following…

Schedule, Topics, and Readings
August 27th
Introduction: What is Environmental History?


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

• Just read p. 94-99.

Themes in Environmental History (Part I)
September 3rd
Ecological Imperialism and the Nature of Conquest


**September 10th**

**Bodies, Disease, and Landscapes**


**September 17th**

**Oceanic Environmental History**


**Histories of Environmental Reform and Management (three weeks)**

**September 24th**

**Conservation and Conflict**


**October 1st**

**Managing Nature (or, conservation in action)**


Or


** October 8th**

**Environmentalism**


** Friday, October 4th–1st Book Review Due. Email it to me.**

**Themes in Environmental History (Part II)**

**October 15**

**Environmental History and American History**


Read these chapters:
- King Cotton
- Nature’s Noblemen
- The Road to *Brown v. Board*
- Paths that Beckon
- *Also, I will assign each of you one additional chapter to read.*

**October 22**

**Mining and EnviroTech**


**October 29**

**Urban Environmental History**


**November 5**

**Socialist Natures**


**November 12th**

**Toxic Troubles**


** ** ** Friday, November 15th – 2nd Book Review Due. Email it to me. **

**November 19th**

**Climate Change**


Sabin, Paul. “‘The Ultimate Environmental Dilemma’: Making a Place for Historians in the Climate Change and Energy Debates.” *Environmental History* 15, no. 1 (2010): 76–93. (BB)


**December 3rd**

**Final Paper Presentations**

** ** ** Final Papers Due **
Friday, December 12th, 5:00pm
(email them to me)