

Environmental History of northwestern Europe from 10,000 BP to the present

University of Newcastle upon Tyne
School of Historical Studies

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Introduction

This course is an introduction to the interactions between human culture and the environment of Northwestern Europe from the end of the last Ice Age to modern times. Throughout history, humans have affected the natural environment, sometimes in a sustainable manner, but often in a destructive manner. This module explores the ways in which environmental changes, often the result of human actions, have caused historical trends in human societies. This process has happened in every historical period since the end of the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago.

The twenty lectures chart in a chronological way the history of the peoples of northwestern Europe, and their relationship to their environment. Each lecture focuses on a general period in European history, which has been characterised by large-scale changes in the relationship between human societies and the natural world.

This course is extremely unusual within the university curriculum since it combines traditional historical study with environmental science, ecology, archaeology and other sciences. The implications of the concept of environmental change, natural and human induced, as a historical process, rather than as static backdrop to human affairs, will be discussed throughout the course.

No environmental or scientific knowledge is assumed or required from the students attending this course.

Pre-requisite

This is a free-standing unit and has no pre-requisite.

Teaching

The module will be taught by means of 20 lectures of one hour, usually 2 per week.

Assessment

Students are required to write 2 essays of *circa* 2000 words (each essay counts for 50%).

Course structure

The lecture series will be divided into four sections covering pre-history and antiquity, the Middle Ages, early modern period and the modern era. The first five lectures are concerned with the long period between end of the last Ice Age and the early Middle Ages. The next seven lectures are concerned with the medieval and early modern period. The last seven lectures will be devoted to the two centuries of industrialisation. During these 200 years humans have caused more changes in the environment than in the 9.800 years preceding it. This division is intended to show how exceptional the 20th century was in terms of population growth, the consumption of resources and the resulting human impact on the environment.

Lecture titles:

1. What is Environmental history?

A. Pre-history & antiquity

2. The environment at the end of the last Ice Age, 10,000 BP (=Before Present)
3. The age of the hunter-gatherers, 10,000 - 5,000 BP
4. The introduction and development of agriculture, 5,000 – 2,000 BP
5. The environment of Roman Britain

B. The Middle Ages

6. Environmental crisis and climate optimum, 500 - 1300 AD
7. The fate of the Vikings in the North Atlantic, 1000 - 1500
8. The Black Death: an ecological disaster

C. The early modern period, 1500 – 1750

9. The Little Ice Age
10. The Dutch Republic: an engineered environment
11. Scandinavia and the Baltic region: timber, grain and the environment
12. Landscape change and energy transformation in the British Isles

D. The modern era

13. The Industrial Revolution: energy and natural resources
14. Population growth and the environment
15. Changes in the atmosphere
16. Water use, water pollution and water management
17. Forest history
18. Agriculture
19. The rise of the conservation movement

20. Summary and conclusions