

American Studies Department, School of Arts and Sciences; and Planning and Public Policy Program, Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, both Rutgers University

American Land, 01:050:300:02 and 10:762:444, Spring 2008, 3 credits

Monday, 12:35-3:35, Ruth Adams Building, Room 018, Douglass Campus

Taught by Frank J. Popper, Civic Square Building, Room 178, College Avenue Campus, 732-932-4009 X689, fpopper@rci.rutgers.edu, fpopper@princeton.edu

Office hours: Thursday, before or after class, or by appointment

Texts: Joan Didion, "Where I Was From" (2003); Erik Reece, "Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness: Radical Strip Mining and the Devastation of Appalachia" (2006); and Ted Steinberg, "Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History" (2002). All three are in paperback at the Rutgers University Bookstore. There may be additional, shorter reading assignments as needed.

Taking an ecological approach, this course explores the diverse connections between America's national development and land environment. The course examines how the United States originated, then expanded to cover a continental land mass, and in what ways the expansion changed the nation. It examines how, why and with what consequences major parts of the U.S. economy--for instance, farming, industry, energy, services and government--have grown or in some cases shrunk. It looks at how and with what results the U.S. has incorporated different ethnic and racial groups. It shows how, why and with what outcomes it has historically globalized and conducted its foreign policy. It offers insights into why its landscapes look and have looked the way they do. The primary goal of this course is to provide an advanced-undergraduate-level understanding of all these matters.

Thirty percent of the student's grade comes from the take-home exam. Another thirty percent comes from an analytic comparison of the Reece and Didion books due on April 21, and thirty percent comes from the term paper. The paper, which is expected to use sources beyond the texts, may be on any topic the instructor approves. There will be no shortage of material from which to choose topics or approaches, and the instructor wants students to use their imaginations to develop adventuresome analytic (not solely descriptive) subjects and treatments. The paper should be in the range of 10-12 pages, not counting notes, references and graphics. All work for the course should be typed double-spaced. Ten percent of the grade comes from class participation and general conscientiousness, including getting work in on time.

The instructor expects all written work for the course to be original products written for this course only. He—and the American Studies Department, the Planning and Public Policy Program, and Rutgers generally—take plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty VERY seriously. For proof, see the pages on the subject in both the Bloustein School and Rutgers University catalogues. The penalties for misconduct range from a failing grade on a paper or exam to expulsion from Rutgers. If a student has questions on such matters, he or she should consult the instructor. But as a rule of thumb, if you think you may be doing something academically dishonest, you probably are. On a related subject, Wikipedia and other encyclopedias, on-line or off-, are good places to begin research and terrible places to end it. Use them as starting points. Don't cite them.

The instructor wants the written work for the course to meet advanced collegiate standards of writing and will lower the grade of any that does not. In addition, the instructor expects students to attend all classes, do all the reading for them carefully and be prepared to discuss it. The class will be relatively small, so the amount of student preparation will quickly become clear and affect the student's grade.

Schedule

- January 28 Introduction
- February 4 No class
- February 11 Early America: Steinberg, Preface, Prologue and Chapters 1-4
- February 18 Expanding Southern and Western America: Steinberg, Chapters 5-8
- February 25 Grasping the enviroprice: Steinberg, Chapters 9-11
- March 3 Consumption, uneasiness and the emergence of modern-day environmentalism: Steinberg, Chapters 12-16 and Conclusion; take-home exams distributed
- March 10 Exams due
- March 17 Spring vacation
- March 24 Appalachia: Reece, pp. XIII-122
- March 31 Appalachia II: Reece, pp. 123-end
- April 7 California: Didion, pp. 3-114
- April 14 California II: Didion, pp. 115-226
- April 21 Five-page comparative analyses of Didion and Reece due
- April 28 Two-page descriptions of term paper due
- May 5 Individual meetings on paper descriptions in instructor's office
- May 9 Term papers due in instructor's office at noon

A note on sources

There is no lack of sources on US environmental and land history. Alternative texts for this course might have been (or actually have been) Richard Kluger's "Seizing Destiny: How America Grew From Sea to Shining Sea" (2007), Anne Mackin's "Americans and Their Land: A House Built on Abundance" (2006), Daniel Mathews and James Jackson's "America from the Air: A Guide to the Landscape Along Your Route" (2007), Chris Magoc's "So Glorious A Landscape: Nature and the Environment in American History and Culture" (2001), John Opie's "Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States" (1998) or Louis Warren's "American Environmental History" (2003). There are interesting envirohistories of Chicago (by William Cronon), Las Vegas (Hal Rothman), Los Angeles (Mike Davis), Pittsburgh (Joel Tarr) and Portland, Oregon (Carl Abbott), among many other cities and authors. Local blogs, on cities or other places and issues, are sometimes vividly invaluable and other times a complete waste of time. If you have questions about them, consult the instructor.

Regional and state envirohistories are sometimes available—for instance, Donald Worster's "Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s" (1979, new edition in 2004) and Carolyn Merchant (ed.), "Green Versus Gold: Sources in California's Environmental History" (1998). There are what amount to envirohistories of the suburb—for instance, Dolores Hayden's "Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000" (2003), Adam Rome's "The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism" (2001),

and Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue (eds.), “The New Suburban History” (2006). Then there are envirocultural histories of the suburbs such as Paul Robbins’ “Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are” (2007) and Witold Rybczynski’s “Last Harvest: How a Cornfield Became New Daleville: Real Estate Development in America from George Washington to the Builders of the Twenty-First Century, and Why We Live in Houses Anyway” (2007).

Specialized encyclopedias are often good places to start research. (One must always go further.) Over the last decade encyclopedias have appeared on, among other places, the Great Plains, the Midwest, the Northeast, the South, the West, New Jersey, New York State, Cleveland, Los Angeles and New York City. Also useful are Carolyn Merchant’s “Columbia Guide to American Environmental History” (2002) and Shepard Krech III, J.R. McNeill and Carolyn Merchant’s “Encyclopedia of World Environmental History” (2003).

All states, most large cities, many regions and some counties and neighborhoods have been the subjects of serious historical investigation, although not always from an environmental perspective. Visit their websites or the Rutgers library for more information. A fascinating site on the American conservation movement from about 1850 to 1920, maintained by the American Memory project of the Library of Congress, is memory.loc.gov/ammem/amrvhtml/conshome. The National Park Service has a fine historical site, cr.nps.gov/history. The Geological Survey has a site on the Land Use History of North America at biology.usgs.gov/luhna. A good environmental history website is eh-resources.org. Do not overlook the publications and websites of state, city, county and neighborhood historical societies.

There are large literatures on specific issues of envirohistory such as ecological restoration, energy practices, ethical/religious perspectives, environmental justice, the environmental sides of science and engineering, the federal public lands, gender experiences, Native, African and Hispanic American concerns and other ethnic ones, natural resource economics, particular animals, plants and industries, population pressure, and urban and suburban development. Environmental figures have been subjects of recent studies: for starters, Rachel Carson, Bernard DeVoto, Lois Gibbs, Alice Hamilton, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, John Wesley Powell, Wallace Stegner, Frederick Jackson Turner, and the instructor and his wife.

There is also a vast literature on the envirohistory of cherished places: the Everglades, Central Park, the Mississippi River, the New Jersey Pinelands, the California coast, numerous small towns, and on and on. Two good sources on the global environmental effects of American domestic and foreign policy are J.R. McNeill, “Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World” (2001) and, more quirkily, Bret Wallach, “Understanding the Cultural Landscape” (2005).

Any number of specialized periodicals can be useful. Look, for instance, at [Environmental History](#), the [American Historical Review](#), [Annals of the Association of American Geographers](#), [Journal of American History](#), [Journal of the American Planning Association](#), [Journal of Urban Affairs](#), [Journal of Urban History](#), [Natural Resources Journal](#), [Planning](#) and [Urban Affairs Review](#), plus regional periodicals (such as [High Country News](#) for the West) or disciplinary ones (such as those on air pollution, forestry, hazardous waste, housing, farming, mining or wilderness). Many of these periodicals are partly or wholly on the Web, as are many newspapers from around the country. Helpful websites are google.earth and scholar.google.

No American Studies course should ignore artistic contributions to environmental history. For example, Robert Frost, Winslow Homer, Sarah Orne Jewett, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edith Wharton and Thornton Wilder are wonderful sources on turn-of-the-twentieth-century northern New England. “Giants in the Earth,” “My Antonia,” “Little House on the Prairie,” “The Last Picture Show” and “Dances With Wolves,” both as novels and as movies, are indispensable for understanding the Great Plains. The photographer Camilo Jose Vergara may be the best interpreter of the contemporary American city. Find your own favorite artists. Use your imagination to find additional sources and otherwise to participate in this course.