



***"Genesee Scenery," 1847, Thomas Cole, founder, Hudson Valley School***

**American Environmental History**  
**History 440-601**  
Summer 2009  
North Carolina State University

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**Description**

This course is a history of the relationship between human beings and nature in the United States. We will explore the varied and changing relationship between Americans and the landscapes they inhabited. Focusing on the past two centuries, we will investigate how humans have used, viewed, and remade this land. Two central questions guide the class: What is environmental history? And, how does environmental history matter in American history? Students will be introduced to themes in American Environmental History, including: Native Americans and the environment; ecological changes following contact with European, African and Asian peoples, animals, and microbes; the impact of settlement, industrialization and urbanization; how new technologies permitted greater environmental modification; the rise of conservation and environmentalist movements in the twentieth century; environmental inequality; and the historical roots of today's environmental problems.

**Objectives:**

This course fulfills requirements for 400-level History courses at NC State. Students will:

- understand and engage in the human experience through the interpretation of evidence from the past in its context; and
- become aware of the act of historical interpretation itself, through which historians use varieties of evidence to offer perspectives on the meaning of the past; and
- make academic arguments about history using reasons and evidence.

**Goals:**

This course has two basic themes. I argue that environmental history consists of both *Material* and *Cognitive* elements. "Material" refers to actual physical changes in the land, including changes caused by human activities. "Cognitive" refers to how individuals and societies saw themselves and nature and how those ideas led to environmental change. Cognitive and material components interact and influence each other. Having taken this class, students will be informed about their own pasts and better equipped for what one environmental historian calls "the peculiarly human task of living in nature while thinking ourselves outside it."

**Expectations:**

Education is a shared endeavor. I expect you to help create and maintain a respectful learning environment, even if that environment is virtual. A respectful learning environment includes the following:

- Respect each other. Every student should feel free to contribute her or his own opinion. There is a fine line between free speech and hate speech. The former is absolutely necessary to learning; the latter stifles it. If in doubt about the distinction, please consult with the instructor.
- You must read and digest the assigned material *before the day assigned*.
- Maintain an open mind. Readings, lectures, and other student's comments may challenge your previous beliefs. Give them your full consideration.

Note! You are expected to complete assignments within the time period allotted. Except for prior arrangement with the instructor or serious, proven emergency, late assignments will not be accepted.

Note! This is a five-week course. It requires sustained, dedicated effort to watch two dozen lectures, read four books, and complete all course assignments. Help yourself by doing whatever work you can in advance of due dates.

**Cheating:**

Academic dishonesty is totally unacceptable. Cheating perverts historical inquiry. Cheating will not be tolerated in this class. If I detect cheating, I will lower the grade of offenders and will turn over all cases to the University Office of Student Conduct, which has led in the past to expulsion. For definition of academic dishonesty see:

[http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/student\\_services/student\\_discipline/POL11.35.1.php](http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/student_services/student_discipline/POL11.35.1.php)

**Disabilities:**

Students with personal, medical or physical barriers to success should contact the instructor as soon as possible. Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with verifiable disabilities. By law, no accommodations can be made unless students first register with Disability Services for Students at 1900 Student Health Center, Campus Box 7509, 515-7653. [http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/offices/affirm\\_action/dss/](http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/offices/affirm_action/dss/)

**Coping resources:**

This class will require a great deal of your energy and your time. You may find the writing assignments and reading load difficult. You will find this improves with practice. Many persons and written resources are available to help you succeed. One such resource is the writing tutorial center [http://www.ncsu.edu/tutorial\\_center/](http://www.ncsu.edu/tutorial_center/) The center provides free writing and public speaking assistance to students.

**Distance education:**

Teaching and learning at a distance poses special challenges. Each student is responsible for assuring reliable access to a computer with Internet access that is also equipped with word processing software. You must be able to navigate the course website and use all of its features. You are expected to post questions and respond to

the questions of others on the course discussion list. Though you cannot see them, many other students share the class, and they enhance your learning experience.

### **Grading:**

History is a disciplined way of understanding our world as well as the record of the past. The goal is for you to learn to think historically by reading and writing historically. The assignments in this course are designed to assess your performance and will determine your final grade. But they are also intended and designed to enhance your learning experience. There is no busy work in this course.

NOTE: Because of compatibility issues, all assignments must be submitted in MS Word 97 (.doc) or Rich Text Format (.rtf) format. Newer versions of MS Word use the .docx format: This is **not** acceptable – so please be sure to save as .doc or .rtf

Grades will be calculated as follows:

- 15% Discussions
- 25% Short papers
- 15% Quizzes
- 20% Book review
- 25% Final examination

#### 1. Weekly discussions

Participation is required in weekly online discussions conducted through the course website. You are expected to post questions and to respond to other students' comments in a thoughtful, informed manner that engages with the readings and lectures. Participation in discussions is worth fifteen percent of the course grade. Discussions will be held through the course website on Thursdays and Fridays of each week.

#### 2. Short papers

Questions about the assigned readings will be posted on the course website. Cumulatively, two short papers will be worth twenty-five percent of the course grade. Short papers will be due **Friday, May 22** and **Friday, June 5**.

#### 3. Short examinations

Two short exams (quizzes) will test knowledge of facts and historical interpretations from the lecture and readings. Together, the quizzes will be worth fifteen percent of the course grade. Quizzes will be conducted online through the course website on **Friday, May 29** and **Friday, June 19**.

NOTE: You must be up to speed on the readings and the lectures to do well on the quizzes. They will test knowledge of specific facts and arguments from the material.

#### 4. Academic book review

You will write a scholarly review of one book on the course reading list or on the list of approved texts provided on the vista website. NOTE: This is **not** a "book report" in which

you state the basic facts about a book. Nor is it an exercise in simply stating why you like or do not like a certain work, and giving some reasons for your opinion. A book review requires analysis. In your review, you will identify and criticize the author's argument and discuss the reading's contribution to environmental historiography. Specifically, how does this author define and use environmental history, and how does her/his argument change the way we might view American history? Use the style and format of academic book reviews in the journal *Environmental History*. You MUST go to the link on the class Vista site and follow the link to examine sample book reviews. Your review should be 500-700 words in length. The review is worth twenty percent of your course grade and is due **Friday June 12**.

#### 5. Final examination

The final examination will be **Monday June 22**. The examination will be a take-home, open book, fully-cited original essay based on the course readings, lectures, and discussions. The final exam is worth twenty five percent of the course grade.

I hope these assignments will be personally as well as intellectually satisfying, but it is essential you understand this is an advanced course and you will be evaluated on the quality of your original, critical analysis of readings and lectures.

#### **Course readings:**

One copy of each of the books will be placed on reserve at D.H. Hill Library. Articles will be available online as .pdf files <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/reserves/> Books can be purchased at the NC State University Bookstore, off-campus bookstores, and from online booksellers such as [www.powells.com](http://www.powells.com). You should find a significant savings, as much as half or more, if you buy used copies. Any edition of Cronon, White and Price is fine, but be sure you have the *second edition* of Merchant's book. Prices below are estimates for new copies from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

1. Course lectures on DVD from the NCSU Bookstore:  
[http://distance.ncsu.edu/course\\_technologies/Delivery\\_formats/media\\_based.html](http://distance.ncsu.edu/course_technologies/Delivery_formats/media_based.html)
2. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (1983/2003) \$15.00
3. Carolyn Merchant, ed. *Major Problems in American Environmental History* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (2006) \$62.00
4. Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (2000) \$17.00
5. Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1996) \$13.00
6. Articles on electronic reserve at D.H. Hill Library website:  
<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/reserves/>
  - a. Stephen Pyne "Our pappies burned the woods"
  - b. Judith Carney, "Landscapes of technology transfer"
  - c. John McPhee, "Atchafalaya"
  - d. Richard White, "Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?"

**PLEASE NOTE: This schedule is a proposed course of action, not a contract. Due dates, topics, and assignments are subject to change.**

**Schedule**

**Assignment**

Week One

Lecture 1: What is Environmental History?

Carolyn Merchant, *Major Problems*, 1-9, 14-25, 27-36

Lecture 2: Two Worlds Rejoined

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, preface-53

Lecture 3: Disease and Weeds

Merchant 65-93

Lecture 4: Cultivating a New World

Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 54-126

Lecture 5: Commodities and Markets

Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 127-170

**Discussion: Thurs-Fri May 21-22**

**Short Paper due: Friday May 22**

Week Two

Lecture 6: Nature Incorporated

Merchant 129-138, 144-146

Lecture 7: Pastoral and Sublime

Merchant 166-184, 204-211

Lecture 8: Nature and Health

Merchant 226-231; Mart Stewart, "Rice, Water and Power" (e-reserve)

Lecture 9: The Nature of the Civil War

Lecture 10: Poor Men on Poor Land

Stephen Pyne "Our Pappies Burned the Woods" (e-reserve)

**Discussion: Thurs-Fri May 28-29**

**Quiz: Friday May 29**

Week Three

Lecture 11: Five Ways to Look at Bison

Merchant 238-245, 256-260, 274-283

Lecture 12: The Imagined West

Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*, xv-55

Lecture 13: Conservation

Merchant 312-316, 319-325

Lecture 14: National Parks

Merchant 328-336

Lecture 15: Consuming Nature

Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*, 57-109

Lecture 16: Engineering Nature

John McPhee, "Atchafalaya" (e-reserve)

**Discussion: Thurs-Fri June 4-5**

**Short Paper due: Friday June 5**

Week Four

Lecture 17: Dust Bowl

Merchant, 301-310

Lecture 18: A New Deal for Nature

Richard White, *The Organic Machine*, ix-58

Lecture 19: Total War and the Bomb

Merchant 437-440, 459-465

Lecture 20: The Organic Machine & writing workshop

Richard White, *The Organic Machine*, 59-113

**Discussion: Thurs-Fri June 11-12**

**Book Review due Friday June 12**

Week Five

Lecture 21: Suburban Nation

Merchant 404-407; Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*, 167-256

Lecture 22: Wilderness

Merchant 421-424, 356-358, 365-372

Lecture 23: The Regulatory State

Merchant 467-474, 502-512, 524-531

Lecture 24: Environmental Justice

Richard White, "Are You An Environmentalist Or Do You Work For A Living?"(e-reserve)

**Discussion: Thurs-Fri June 18-19**

**Quiz: Friday June 19**

**Final examination: Monday June 22**

**Final grades Posted: Thursday June 25**