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History 179, American Environmental History

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Dr. Nancy C. Unger, Santa Clara University, Fall 1996

Office: O'Connor #13

Office Hours: Monday Wednesday 10:30–11:30 and by appointment

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Just what **is** "American Environmental History"? Didn't we have **enough** to try to understand in our history without a whole new discipline? This course will introduce students to this exciting and vital new field, beginning with pre-Invasion Indians and concluding with an assessment of the American environment today. Through readings and discussions we will examine a variety of influential issues and themes. Particular emphasis will be paid to politics (both domestic and foreign), gender, race, ethnicity and religion. The assigned readings have been selected to provide a sampling of the variety of current historical approaches to this lively discipline. Students will be able to hone their own historical skills through class discussion of readings, a midterm and a final exam, one brief book review, and a research paper on a topic of their choice.

In the words of environmental historian Robert Weyeneth, "Today it is common for environmentalists to judge the American past harshly. It is easy to measure previous generations against some modern 'ecological' yardstick and find them greedy exploiters of the natural world who lived with no thought for the future. To understand the complexities of the current environmental crisis, however, we need to avoid simple generalizations that shift responsibility from ourselves to the past. This course seeks to understand the historical reasons why American society evolved as it did, heedless of environmental consequences. We will analyze how people shaped the physical environment, and how in turn environment has influenced human values and cultural institutions." In other words, it is far easier to judge our environmental past than it is to truly understand it. Yet it is the understanding of our environmental past that is the key to our future.

REQUIRED readings (available in the student book store):

- Carolyn Merchant, *Major Problems in American Environmental History*.
- William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*.
- Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*.
- Sarah Royce, *A Frontier Lady*. handouts: (I will provide you with a copy of these brief pieces):
- Martin Lewis, "Environmental History Challenges the Myth of a Primordial Eden"
- David Helvarg, "Anti-Enviros are Getting Uglier"

required article available on reserve in the library:

- Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"

OPTIONAL : There are a number of student guides to the study of history that offer suggestions on note taking, paper writing, studying, etc. If you think one might prove helpful to you, I recommend Jules R. Benjamin's *A Student's Guide to History*, 6th edition.

Students are required to read each assignment *carefully* and *completely* BEFORE each date listed here. Participation in class discussion constitutes 10% of your course grade, to be determined by the quality, rather than quantity, of your contributions. The study/discussion questions, which should also be pondered BEFORE each class, are designed to facilitate lively discussions. The other 90% of your course grade will be determined by:

- 10% Brief review of William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (details on separate handout)
- 20% Midterm
- 30% Final
- 30% Research paper (details on separate handout)

Reading Assignments and Important Dates:

September

25 Introduction

27 discussion of requirements for papers
beginning of film: Over America

30 film: Over America

October

2 Frederick Jackson Turner's "Significance of the Frontier in American History" (on reserve in library)

Martin Lewis, "Environmental History Challenges the Myth of a Primordial Eden"

4 Merchant, *Major Problems* Chapter 1

7 Cronon, *Changes in the Land* Preface through Chapter 3

Review of Cronon due at beginning of class--no late papers accepted!!

9 Cronon Chapters 4-8

11 Cronon 4-8 conclusion, plus Merchant Ch. 4 "Soil Exhaustion in Early South"
Research proposal, including tentative thesis and working bibliography, DUE!!

14 "Soil Exhaustion in South" continued

16 continued plus Merchant Ch. 6 "Nature v. Civilization in the 19th Century"

18 "Nature v. Civilization" conclusion

21 Merchant Ch. 7 "Cotton South Before and After Civil War"

23 "Cotton South" conclusion plus background lecture on Gold Rush

25 Sarah Royce, *Frontier Lady* (**all** of *Frontier Lady*)

28 *Frontier Lady* conclusion

30 MIDTERM

November

1 Merchant Ch. 9 "Great Plains Grasslands Exploited" (skip Worster pp. 314–323)

4 Worster, *Rivers of Empire* pp.ix–60

6 Worster, *Rivers of Empire* pp. 61–125

8 Worster continued plus Merchant Ch. 10 "Resource Conservation..."

11 "Resource Conservation..." conclusion, plus Ch. 11 "Wilderness Preservation"

13 "Wilderness Preservation at the Turn of the Century" continued

15 "Wilderness Preservation" concluded plus Worster pp. 127–188
Last day to hand in optional drafts

18 Merchant pp.484–top of 491, plus Worster pp. 189–259

20 Worster pp. 189–259 concluded, plus Merchant pp. 491–522

22 Merchant pp. 491–522 concluded plus Worster pp. 257–335
Research Paper Due at beginning of class--NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED!

25 Merchant Ch. 15

27–29 Thanksgiving Holiday!!

December

2 Merchant, Ch. 15 plus handout "Anti-Enviros Are Getting Uglier"

4 Film: Discussion with Carolyn Merchant

6 To Be Announced

10 FINAL EXAM: 1:30

Both exams will be in essay form. I will be giving you a sample exam before the mid term so you can see exactly what to expect. If you are uneasy about your essay writing ability, here is a suggestion: Prepare one or two answers from the sample exam or the study/discussion questions *before* the exam. I will gladly go over your essay with you individually and show you how to improve. *After* both exams I will make photocopies of the best answers available for reading in my office. Students have found these samples enormously helpful. Let me know of anything else you might think of to help you do your best.

If you have dyslexia or any other learning or testing disability, please let me know at the **beginning** of the semester so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Please do not hesitate to ask questions or make comments during class. If you don't understand something (whether from the book or a lecture) chances are excellent that others are also confused and could benefit from clarification.

Class participation does constitute 10% of your grade.



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