

# U.S. Environmental History

HIS 220 Fall 2014 ARH 120 Mon,  
Wed, & Fri, 11:00-11:50

**Michael Guenther**  
Mears 315; 269-9816  
guenthmb@grinnell.edu

**Fall Office Hours:**  
Tue: 10-11:30 & 2-4;  
W: 2-4; or by appointment

## Course Overview

This course will introduce students to some of the central issues and debates in American environmental history, a relatively new field of scholarship that emerged in the 1970 seeking to explore the oft-neglected role of the natural world in shaping human history. While scholars of ancient or “pre-modern” societies have always been attentive to the impact of climate, geography, disease, and natural resources, these issues seem to virtually disappear from historical accounts of our own “modern” age. Yet, as we shall see over the course of the semester, the historical record reveals that we cannot understand the fabric of our social, economic and political world without understanding how much it has been shaped by our complex and evolving relationship to nature. To write history without any reference to water, plants, animals, climate, soils, energy, or microbes is to leave out some of the most interesting characters, conflicts, and developments that have shaped America. *And so the fundamental purpose of this class is to think critically about how we can reconstruct a more expansive and compelling story of American history, that incorporates nature into our collective understanding of the past.*

Some of the key topics that we will explore over the course of the semester include: the shifting patterns of land use among Native Americans and European settlers; the role of environmental forces in shaping early colonization; the ideological significance of nature, particularly “wilderness”, in nineteenth-century thought; the ecological transformations wrought by the market revolution, industrial capitalism, and modern agriculture; the role of energy and consumer culture in changing the landscape of twentieth-century America; and the corresponding growth of the conservation movement, the environmental movement, and the response of government policy-makers and regulators.

While the majority of our class time will be devoted to discussing the common readings, I will occasionally give short lectures to provide more context or to explore a particular issue in greater depth. There will be times, moreover, when I will bring in maps, historical documents, or focused projects that I will have you work on in small groups because they shed light on important themes connected to the day’s readings. But I want to emphasize

*analysis*, in which you identify the essential components of an argument and explore how they

Class participation accounts for 25% of your overall grade, and I take this evaluation seriously. I record a participation grade for each and every class session, and you will be able to follow your grade online throughout the semester so that you are fully aware of where you stand in this respect. I will also give short in-class writing exercises on occasion that will count towards your participation grade (allowing students who might not get a chance to raise their hand every class to demonstrate their knowledge and engagement with the reading). Feel free to come by my office hours or schedule a e toccasadiour

projects will be accepted after December 19<sup>th</sup> since the college requires that ALL coursework be submitted by the end of exam week (unless you are taking an incomplete in the class).

Religious Holidays

Grinnell College “embraces the religious diversity of its faculty, students and staff,” and therefore the college’s policy on religious observance emphasizes that the “Faculty and students *share the responsibility* to support members of our community who observe religious holidays.” I take this responsibility seriously.

TT( (d)1 (ive)-32.5)3 (t)v1 Ilite (a)-4 ( t)2 ppd byew-ammuni (t)12 (y)-3 ( s)-5 (t)2 (ude)-3 (ne)-3  
 Tc 0T\*1. 0 Tdh(a)-4( (e)1 (s)TJ0 Tc22 Tw 3.59 0 Td04 Tw 0.22b (l)-1 (i)-1 (g)-2n (m)1 (ngtt)12Tc82 Tw 3.59 0 Td04 Tw 0.(f)0 Td8TJ32

**Week 2 North America before 1492****Mon (Sept 1st): Nature & Narrative**

Reading Due: William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (1992), 1347-1376 (P).  
 Jared Diamond, "The Evolution of Guns and Germs," in *Evolution: Society, Science and the Universe*, ed. A. Fabian (Cambridge, 1998), 46-63 (P).

**Wed (Sept 3<sup>rd</sup>): Deep Time & the Pre-historic Past**

Reading Due: Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York & Oxford, 2009), 3-7.  
Group A: Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York, 2002), excerpts (P).  
Group B: Robert S. McElvaine, *Eve's Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History* (New York, 2001), excerpts (P)  
Group C: Michael Pollan, *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (New York, 2013), excerpts (P).

**Fri (Sept 5<sup>th</sup>): Before Columbus**

Reading Due: Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York, 2005), 339-351.  
 Steve Nicholls, *Paradise Found: Nature in America at the Time of Discovery* (Chicago and Lon23 28w 2.Tj-0.06Td Tw 0.2cerpts

**Week 4 The Rhythms of Pre-Industrial Life in Early America****Mon (Sept 15<sup>th</sup>): The Ecology of Capitalism**

Reading Due: Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, ch. 7-8.

**Wed (Sept 17<sup>th</sup>): Sustainable Farming?**

Reading Due: Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow : Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven, 2004), xiii-xi, 23-35, 155-196 (P).

Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania*, excerpts (P).

**Fri (Sept 19<sup>th</sup>): Working with Nature**

Reading Due: Group A: Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York, 1995), ix-29 (P).

Group B: Judith A.1tb6et2Arney,1*Black Rice: The*

**Week 6 Call of the Wild: The Politics of Nature in Antebellum America****Mon (Sept 29<sup>th</sup>): Romanticism & the Embrace of Nature**

Reading Due: Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (P).  
Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" *The Atlantic Monthly* 9 (1862), 1-24 (P).

**Wed (Oct 1<sup>st</sup>): Landscape Paintings and the Hudson River School**

Reading Due: Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *The American Magazine* (January, 1836), 1-12 (P).  
Image Gallery of Nineteenth-Century Paintings (P).  
Michael Heiman, "Production Confronts Consumption: Landscape Perception and Social Conflict in the Hudson Valley," (P).

**Fri (Oct 3<sup>rd</sup>): The Cultural Battles over Nature, Work, and Class**

Reading Due: Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch: The Famous Jumper* (New York, 2003), ix-xiii, 41-77 (P).

**Week 7 Nature & Nationhood****Mon (Oct 6<sup>th</sup>): The Nature of Union**

Reading Due: Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle, 2012), excerpts (P).  
Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 6.

**Wed (Oct 8<sup>th</sup>): Railroad Nation**

Reading Due: Fiege, *The Republic of Nature*, ch. 6 (P).

**Fri (Oct 10<sup>th</sup>): The Frontier & the American West**

Reading Due: Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Report of the American Historical Association* (1894), excerpts (P).  
Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, ch. 8.





Wed (Nov 12<sup>th</sup>):

**Labor & Energy in a Global Age**

Reading Due:

Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, ch. 3.

Edward D. Melillo, "The First Great Coal Strike of 1892," *Coal*, 30, 1 (1997), pp. 1-14.

Edward D. Melillo, "The First Great Coal Strike of 1892," *Coal*, 30, 1 (1997), pp. 1-14.

