

HI 589

Nature's Past: Histories of Environment and Society

Fall 2014, HIS 304, Fridays 12-3

Professor Sarah Phillips

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This course explores approaches in environmental history and asks how non-human actors, together with human agents, determined historical outcomes and shaped ecological, technological, demographic, political, and cultural change. While the course is heavily tilted toward United States history, given the instructor's field of expertise, we will also examine cases from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

This course is reading intensive, with an entire book (or the equivalent) assigned each week, and sometimes the addition of one or two additional items. You must come prepared to discuss the reading and to engage in a lively discussion. For each class meeting, prepare two written lists: first, a list of things you understood and want to talk more about (items that caught your interest; events you found important; themes you can restate; big and small arguments you found persuasive); and second, a list of questions you have or confusions you're feeling (things you didn't understand and want help with; things you want to complain about). Make sure your lists include items from every section of the book, not just the beginning or end. Many students also like to browse the internet to see what things look like now and how topics are covered in cyberspace; please feel encouraged to share those items with the class as well. These lists and notes do not need to be handed in; they are for your reference only. But I will count on your careful preparation in order to keep the discussion moving and I will start collecting your notes if the class discussion isn't going well.

Please bring the assigned materials to class – in any format, electronic or physical – because we cannot do close readings or group exercises unless everyone has copies of the materials.

Course grades will be calculated as follows: 40% class participation; 30% reaction papers (10% three times); and 30% final research project. For each of the three reaction papers, you will choose one week's entire set of readings and write 3 double-spaced pages on a single theme. Specific instructions on format will be provided in class. The reaction papers are due on the day of the class meeting the readings are discussed. Late papers will be penalized. For the research paper of 15-20 pages, you will pose a specific question in environmental history and answer it, using a combination of primary and secondary sources. You may choose a topic outside the English-speaking world only if you can read primary and secondary sources in the necessary language. You will present your research-in-progress to the class halfway through the semester and again at the end. Any excused absence from class must be approved by the instructor IN ADVANCE of the class meeting and make-up work will be required. More than two absences (excused or unexcused) will result in a significantly reduced final grade.

Required Books:

- Paul Kelton, *Epidemics and Enslavement: Biological Catastrophe in the Native Southeast* (Nebraska, 9780803227910)
- Robert Marks, *China: Its Environment and History* (Rowman & Littlefield, 9781442212756)
- Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford, 9780199758722)
- James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale, 9780300078152)
- John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in the Honduras and the United States* (Texas, 9780292712560)
- Sarah Vogel, *Is It Safe?: BPA and the Struggle to Define the Safety of Chemicals* (California, 9780520273580)
- Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (Nation Books, 9781568587295)

Schedule

Readings marked with a [*] are available on Blackboard Learn. Some of these are very lengthy, so plan accordingly! To class bring either printouts of these readings or a computer/device with the pdfs uploaded and ready to view.

Sept 5

No class. Start the reading for Sept 12!

Sept 12: What is Environmental History?

- * William Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History"
- * J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, 1-62, 304-14
- * Virginia D. Anderson, "King Philip's Herds"
- * Michael Rawson, "Enclosing the Common" from *Eden on the Charles*
- * Edmund Russell, "Evolutionary History: Prospectus for a New Field"

Sept 19: Collapse and its Critics

- * Jared Diamond, *Collapse*, 1-23, 79-177, 311-28
- * McAnany and Yoffee, eds., *Questioning Collapse*, 1-44, 113-75, 239-68

Sept 26: New World Encounters

- * Alfred Crosby, "Virgin Soil Epidemics"
- Paul Kelton, *Epidemics and Enslavement*

Oct 3: China: The Big Picture

Robert Marks, *China: Its Environment and History*

Oct 10: Environmental Histories of American Slavery

* Mark Fiege, "King Cotton," from *The Republic of Nature*
 Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom*

Oct 17: Modernity, Power, and Politics

James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*

* Sarah Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, Intro and Ch. 3

Oct 24: African Environments

* Adams and McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa*, xi-58

* James McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land*, 1-5, 141-73

* Fairhead and Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape*, 1-5, 15-95, 176-278

Oct 31:

Present research topic and question to class; distribute copies of an image and a written primary source to everyone to analyze and discuss

Nov 7: Commodities and Empire

John Soluri, *Banana Cultures*

* Gregg Mitman and Paul Erickson, "Latex and Blood"

Nov 14: We're All a Little Bit Plastic

Sarah Vogel, *Is It Safe?*

Nov 21: Climate Change

Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos*

CLIMATE CHANGE EXERCISE DUE (will count toward participation grade)

Dec 5:

Presentation of Research Projects