**NB: This syllabus is provisional. Always check the course Blackboard site for up-to-date information.**

**Hist 252: American Environmental History**

*M, W, F. 10-10:50AM
King 323*

*Prof. White
Office Hours: M, Th. 2-4PM
(440) 832-0268
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**Course Goals:**
This course explores the environmental history of the continental United States from 1491 to the present. We will examine how humans have altered the American environment and how environmental factors have shaped the course of American history. The first half of the class will cover each region up until the early 20th century, and the second half will address the last hundred years thematically. By the end of the course students should appreciate how an environmental perspective can shape our understanding of American history, and how a historical perspective can enhance our understanding of contemporary environmental issues.

*For students in environmental science:* Think of this class as a way to apply information and perspectives from the natural sciences to the study of history and to develop writing and critical thinking skills used in the humanities and social sciences.

*For students in the humanities and social sciences:* Think of this class as a way to acquire historical perspective on contemporary environmental issues, and to think environmentally about economic and social issues. Be prepared to learn (yes, that means memorize!) some basic facts and perspectives about environmental processes. However, don't worry—this is not a science class and does not assume any prior knowledge of environmental sciences.

**Format:**
The course will be in a lecture-discussion format. Depending upon the topic, some weeks will involve more discussion and participation than others.

**Course Policies:**
*Attendance:* Attendance will be taken each class. Students are expected to participate in class and complete the assigned readings each week. Much of the material in the lectures may not be covered in the readings but will be on the exams, and so students should obtain notes for any missed classes.

*Honor Code:* All course work is governed by Oberlin's Honor Code. If you have a question about how the Honor Code applies to a particular assignment, you should ask me in advance of the due
date. Further information about the honor code will be posted along with instructions for particular assignments.

**E-mail:** I will answer short e-mails Mon-Fri 9-5. If you have any questions that require a long answer, please come by my office during office hours instead. I will give feedback on any draft or outline of your class work provided you send it in at least 48 hours before the deadline—the longer I have, the better the feedback.

**Grading:** A (90-100), B (80-89), C (70-79), D (60-69), F (below 60). Plus and minus grades for scores within two points of the next letter grade.

**Submitting Work:** All written work must be submitted by e-mail. I will mark off 7 points every 24 hours late, weekends included, no exceptions unless you bring in a note from your class dean explaining that you could not submit the assignment. If you know in advance that you will not be available to submit work on a given day, please contact me well ahead of the deadline.

**Assignments and Grades:**
**Participation:** Participation will be 20% of the final grade, based on students’ attendance and class discussion. Students may also earn their participation grade by posting written discussions and current news and journal articles relevant to the class on the course Blackboard site.

**Quizzes:** There will be three in-class quizzes worth 10% of your grade each (30% total). At each quiz, you may bring in up to two pages (single-sided) of notes, but everything in this outline must be entirely of your own creation: Any reproductions from any handouts, web sites, books, or classmates will be a violation of the honor code. The outline may be hand-written or typed (minimum 10-pt font). Bear in mind that writing an outline is one of the best ways of reviewing material. However, it is probably not in your best interest to try to fit as much as possible onto the page, because you may not have the time to find it all during the quiz.

**Primary Source Essay:** An important part of this class will be learning how to use primary sources to write history. For your first essay, please select a relevant primary source document or documents from your source book (Merchant) and explain how that document can be interpreted and what it can tell us about environmental history. Please see course Blackboard site for a detailed writing guide and a sample ‘A’ paper from another course. The essay should be ~1500 words and will be due before class on Wednesday, March 10.

**Local History Project:** For your final project, you will write an original piece of research on local environmental history, either individually or in groups. In week five, we will have a class on local history, and I will discuss possible projects and start to organize groups on different topics. Students will then meet with the college archivists and reference librarians to explore sources for research. A preliminary prospectus will be due before spring break, a revised and expanded prospectus will be due in week 10, and a rough draft due in week 14.
Final Grade:
20% participation
30% quizzes
10% primary source essay
40% local history project (including submission of prospectuses and drafts)

Reading:
This course has two required textbooks, both available at the college bookstore:
Ted Steinberg, Down to Earth: Nature’s Role in American History, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2009)
Caroline Merchant, Major Problems in American Environmental History, 2nd ed. (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 2005)
(NB: Please use the above format for citations and bibliographies.)
Remember that you must buy the second edition of each. All other readings will be posted to the course Blackboard site. Students are expected to complete the reading for each class and to be prepared to discuss the material. I recommend that you try to bring the Merchant reader with you to class when we are discussing primary documents.

Course Schedule:

PART I: REGIONS

Week 1: Beginnings
2/8: Intro
2/10: Native American ecologies
Reading: Steinberg (prologue and chapter 1)
2/12: The Columbian Exchange
Reading: A. Crosby, “The British Empire as a Product of Continental Drift” (posted to Blackboard)

Week 2: The North
2/15: European settlers in the “wilderness”
Reading: Steinberg (22-33); Merchant (66-70, 75, 88-93, 131-33)
2/17: The Native American experience of colonization
Reading: Steinberg (33-39); Merchant (36-37, 50-58)
2/19: Ecology and the “market revolution”
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 3); Merchant (147-54, 181-84)

Week 3: The Midwest
2/22: The early frontier
Reading: A. Taylor, “Wasty Ways” (Blackboard); Merchant (171-73, 281-83)
2/24: Industrialization and commodification
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 4)
2/26: Deforesting America
Reading: W. Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis* (selections) (Blackboard)

**Week 4: The South**
3/1: Plantation ecology
*Reading:* Steinberg (chapter 5); Merchant (106-110)
3/3: The Civil War: An environmental perspective
*Reading:* Steinberg (chapter 6)
3/5: The closing of the commons
*Reading:* Steinberg (chapter 7); Merchant (220-23)

**Week 5: Local Environmental History**
3/8: The Western Reserve and Lorain County as case study
*Reading:* T. Sherman, *A Place on the Glacial Till* (selection); “The Swamp that Different” (Blackboard)
3/10: *Meeting with archivist and reference librarians to discuss local history project*
**First essay due before class**
3/12: Quiz

**Week 6: The West (1)**
3/15: Mining and ranching
*Reading:* Steinberg (chapter 8)
3/17: Conservation and national parks
*Reading:* Steinberg (chapter 9)
3/19: Film and discussion: The damming of Hetch-Hetchy and American wilderness
*Reading:* Merchant (356-60, 365-72, 379-88)

**Week 7: The West (2)**
3/22: Water and power in the West
*Reading:* Merchant (316-19, 336-42); D. Worster, “Hydraulic Society” (Blackboard)
3/24: Boom, bust, and dust in the Great Plains
*Reading:* Merchant (295-310)
3/26: Film and discussion: “The Plow that Broke the Plains”
*No new reading*

**Preliminary local history project prospectus due before spring break**

**Week 8**
**Spring Break**

**PART II: THEMES**

**Week 9: Urbanization**
4/5: Agrarian ideals and urban realities
Reading: Merchant (134, 141-43, 154-60); C. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (selection) (Blackboard)
4/7: From the "organic city" to the "sanitary city"
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 10)
4/9: Quiz

**Week 10: Pollution and Inequality**
4/12: Industrial disasters in the 20th century
Reading: Merchant (407-15, 494-500)
4/14: Pollution, race, and poverty
Reading: A. Hurley, "Social Biases of Environmental Change in Gary" (Blackboard)
4/16: (Un)natural disasters and unequal impacts
Reading: T. Steinberg, "Do-It-Yourself Deathscape" (Blackboard)

**Revised prospectus due Friday by 8PM**

**Week 11: Cars and Suburbs**
4/19: The automobile addiction
Reading: Steinberg (203-15); Merchant (421-24)
4/21: Suburbanization
Reading: Steinberg (216-24); Merchant (415-20)
4/23: Film and discussion: Robert Moses and New York City
Reading: K. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (selections) (Blackboard)

**Week 12: Food**
4/26: The industrialization of American agriculture
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 11)
4/28: The industrialization of American animals
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 12)
4/30: Film and discussion: Food, Inc.
Reading: M. Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma* (selections) (Blackboard)

**Week 13: America and the Global Environment**
5/3: The impact of American consumption
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 14)
5/5: America and global environmental issues
Reading: R. Guha, "How Much Should a Person Consume?" (Blackboard)
5/7: Quiz

**Week 14: American Environmental History in Comparative Perspective**
5/10: Canada and South Africa
5/12: Australia and New Zealand
5/14: Conclusion
**Local history project draft due Tuesday 8PM**

**No new reading this week.**

**Week 15: Exam Period**

**Final project due at scheduled exam time**