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

**Hist 252: American Environmental History**

*Mon, Wed, Fri. 2:30-3:20PM  
King 341*

*Prof. White  
303 Rice Hall  
Office Hours: Mon. and Wed. 3:30-5PM  
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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. We will conclude in the last two weeks by placing American environmental history in global and comparative perspective. By the end of the course students should appreciate how an environmental approach can enhance our sense of American history, and how a historical approach can inform our understanding of contemporary environmental issues.

*For students in environmental science:* Think of this class as a way to apply information and ideas 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 class will not be covered in the readings but may be on the quizzes, 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 8 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:
Participation: Participation will be 15% of the final grade, based on students’ attendance and class discussion. Students may also earn part of their participation grade by posting written discussions and current news and journal articles relevant to the class on the course Blackboard site.

Reading Questions: For at least a dozen different classes, students should e-mail me at least 3 interesting questions or points for discussion on the class reading by the night before that class meets. Submissions should demonstrate that you have closely read and understood the reading. Students who consistently send in useful questions and discussion ideas will receive a 100 for this assignment, which makes up 10% of your final grade.

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 single-sided pages of notes. 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). 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 will not have the time to find it all during the quiz.

Essays: For this class you will write three essays of ~1300 words apiece, each worth 15% of your grade (45% total). Detailed instructions, writing guides, and sample ‘A’ papers will be posted on the course Blackboard site.

Essay 1 - Primary Sources: You will select one or more from a list of primary source documents in your Merchant reader and explain how historians can understand them and what they reveal about
American environmental history. Where relevant, use passages from the accompanying essays in the Merchant reader for guidance and for examples of how to interpret these primary sources.

**Essay 2 - Historiography:** You will select from several pairs of essays by different authors on the same historical topics and will discuss how and why these authors have arrived at their divergent interpretations and conclusions based on their different evidence, ideas, and viewpoints.

**Essay 3 - Contemporary/Local Issues:** Throughout the semester you will gather current newspaper and journal articles about a recent or ongoing environmental issue, preferably around Oberlin or your own home town, and write an essay that analyzes this issue and places it in the wider context of American environmental history. Project prospectuses must be approved in advance (instructions will be posted on Blackboard). You may collaborate in a group project of ~2200-2500 words, provided your group prospectus clearly explains how you will divide their work among group participants. Students who do not submit a prospectus on time will have 10% deducted from their essay grade.

**Final Grade:**
15% Participation
10% Reading questions
30% Quizzes
15% Primary source essay
15% Historiography essay
15% Current/local issues essay

**Reading:**
This course has two required textbooks, both available at the college bookstore:


Remember that you **must buy the second edition of each**. All other readings will be posted as PDFs on 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 bring the Merchant reader with you to class, especially when we are discussing primary documents. You may also find it helpful to read the short explanations of the documents and articles in each chapter of the Merchant reader.

**Course Schedule:**

**PART I: REGIONS**

**Week 1: Beginnings**
9/8: Introduction
9/10: Native American ecologies
Reading: Steinberg (prologue and chapter 1)

**Week 2: The North**
9/13: European settlers in the “wilderness”
Reading: Steinberg (22-28); Merchant (66-70, 75)
9/15: The Native American experience of colonization
Reading: Steinberg (28-39); Merchant (34-36, 36-37)
9/17: Ecology and the “market revolution”
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 3); Merchant (178-81, 181-84)

**Week 3: The Midwest**
9/20: The early frontier
Reading: A. Taylor, “Wasty Ways”; Merchant (171-73, 281-83)
9/22: Case Study: Settling Lorain County
Reading: T. Sherman, A Place on the Glacial Till (selection); “The Swamp that Different”
9/24: Industrialization and commodification
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 4)

**Week 4: The South (1)**
9/27: Review and Discussion
9/29: Quiz
10/1: Plantation ecology
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 5); Merchant (106-111, 210-11)

**Week 5: The South (2)**
10/4: The Civil War: An environmental perspective
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 6)
10/6: The closing of the commons
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 7); Merchant (220-23)
10/8: Deforesting America
No new reading

**Primary source essay due by Friday 8PM.**

**Week 6: The West (1)**
10/11: Mining and ranching
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 8)
10/13: Conservation and national parks
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 9)
10/15: Film and discussion: The damming of Hetch-Hetchy and American wilderness
Reading: Merchant (356-60, 365-72, 379-88)
Week 7: The West (2)
10/18: Water and power
10/20: Boom, bust, and dust in the Great Plains
   Reading: Merchant (295-310)
10/22: Quiz

Week 8
**Fall Break**

PART II: THEMES

Week 9: Environmental Inequalities
11/1: Industrial disasters and environmental protection in the 20th century
   Reading: Steinberg (240-60); Merchant (437-40)
11/3: Pollution, race, and poverty
   Reading: E. McGurty, “From NIMBY to Civil Rights”; Merchant (503-06)
11/5: (Un)natural disasters and unequal impacts
   Reading: T. Steinberg, “Do-It-Yourself Deathscape”

Week 10: Food
11/8: The industrialization of American agriculture
   Reading: Steinberg (chapter 11)
11/10: The industrialization of American animals
   Reading: Steinberg (chapter 12); Merchant (392-94)
11/12: Film and discussion: Food, Inc.
   No new reading

**Historiography essay due by Friday 8PM.

Week 11: Cities and Suburbs (1)
11/15: From the “organic city” to the “sanitary city”
   Reading: Steinberg (chapter 10); Merchant (394-96)
11/17: The automobile addiction
   Reading: Steinberg (203-15); Merchant (421-24)
11/19: Suburbanization
   Reading: Steinberg (216-24); Merchant (415-20)

Week 12: Cities and Suburbs (2)
11/22: Film and discussion: Robert Moses and New York City
   Reading: K. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier (selections)
11/24: Film and discussion (cont.)
No new reading
11/26: (Thanksgiving Holiday – No Classes)

**Local/contemporary issues essay prospectus due by Wednesday 5PM.

**Week 13: America and the Global Environment**
11/29: The global impact of American consumption
Reading: Steinberg (chapter 14)
12/1: America and global environmentalism
Reading: R. Guha, “How Much Should a Person Consume?”
12/3: Quiz

**Week 14: Comparisons and Contrasts**
12/6: Canada
12/8: Australia and New Zealand
12/10: South Africa and Mexico
No new reading this week

**Week 15: Conclusion**
12/13: Contemporary environmental issues in historical perspective

**Local/contemporary issues essays due 12/21 by 4PM (as your “final project”). Late papers will not be accepted.**