“The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.”
--Raymond Williams

Course Description:

This course explores the complicated relationships between humans and their environments over several centuries. Students will gain an appreciation for the varying roles of culture and economy in transforming the planet’s ecosystems. The course will also highlight the ways in which these natural systems helped to determine particular human outcomes. Topics will include: Indigenous ecologies, the role of human disease and introduced species, the conflict between competing cultural systems, the spread of European agriculture and its reliance upon oppressive labor regimes, the conquest and destruction of New World environments, the rise and expansion of industrial capitalism and its attendant urban civilization, the push for conservation of resources and the preservation of so-called scenic spaces, the catalyzing role of race, class, and gender at work in environmental struggles, state schemes of resource modernization, the anxieties accompanying the Atomic Age and fears of environmental ruin, the emergence of the Environmental movement and its affects, the rise of an environmental justice movement, climate change and globalization. The course will walk a balance between an understanding of objective environmental changes and the recognition that the idea of nature was and is always determined by culture. Culture is never an absolute, as class, race, and gender divisions fracture it. The course will emphasize the idea that the concrete relationships by which humans exploit nature necessarily involve efforts to exploit human labor.

While maintaining a focus upon American environmental history, this readings course crosses the traditional borders of national history telling. We will read widely across time and space. Narrow case studies will be buttressed by several key texts that offer more comprehensive interpretations and critical methodologies. While the seminar will stress a global comparative approach, it will endeavor to explore the multi-vocal histories that find coherence in the contests between the local and the global. We will not attempt a seamless chronological analysis. Because film has become such a powerful interpreter of interactions between humans and the environment, this course will devote considerable time to a number of important films. This course will ask students to consider the myriad ways in which cinema has shaped how we see, think about, consume, and politicize nature.
Required Reading:
Please read the assigned books prior to each week’s class meeting.

Ted Steinberg, Down to Earth: Nature’s Role in American History
Jared Diamond, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed
Barbara Freese, Coal: A Human History
Richard White, The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River
Mike Davis, Planet of Slums
Michael Pollan, The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals
David Pellow, Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago
Rick Bass, Caribou Rising: Defending the Porcupine Herd, Gwich-’in Culture, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
Jon Krakauer, Into the Wild
James Galvan, The Meadow

Course Requirements:

• Class attendance and participation in discussion, including timely completion of the course readings (Please note: an attendance sheet will be passed around at the beginning of each class. Be sure to sign in.) 30%

• Reaction papers: Choose 4 of the course books and write short review essays. These essays will be due the week following the reading assignment. Each review is worth 10%. 40%

• Film Reviews: Choose two films screened in class and write a short essay reviewing each film. Each film review is worth 10%. 20%

• Final Project: The details for this project will be outlined in the course. 10%

Note well: More details regarding the above-mentioned assignments will be discussed in future class meetings.

Course Schedule:

Week One: Introductions
January 9:

Week Two: What We Think About When We Think About Nature
In class film: Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance (1983, 87 min.)

Week Three: When Societies Fail:
January 23: Read Diamond, Collapse, Parts Two and Three, pp. 120-416
In class film: 11th Hour (2007, 92 min.)

Week Four:
January 30: No class, finish reading Collapse, Part Four, pp. 417-539
Week Five: Releasing the Hidden Energies Beneath—The Path to Industrialization
February 6: Read Barbara Freese, Coal: A Human History.
In class film: Coal Country, (2009, 84 Min.)

Week Six: Nature’s Role in American History
February 13: No class, Read Steinberg, Down to Earth, pp. 3-169

Week Seven: Designing Nature—High Modernist Worlds
February 20: Read Richard White, The Organic Machine
In class film: The Unforeseen (2007, 88 min.)

Week Eight: Consuming Nature
February 27: Read Steinberg, Down to Earth, pp., 173-300
In class film: If a Tree Falls (2012)

Week Nine: Global Connections
March 6: Read Mike Davis, Planet of Slums
In class film: Darwin’s Nightmare (2005, 107 min.)

Week Ten
March 13: Spring Break, no class.

Week Eleven: Trashed, The Struggle for Environmental Justice
March 20: Read Pellow, Garbage Wars
In class film: Trashed (2012) depending on availability

Week Twelve:
March 27: No assigned reading.
In class film: To be announced

Week Thirteen: The Big Food Industrial Complex
April 3: Read Michael Pollan, The Omnivore’s Dilemma.
In class film: Food, Inc. (2008, 94 min.)

Week Fourteen: Northern Refuge?
April 10: Read Rick Bass, Caribou Rising
In class film: Being Caribou (2005, 72 min.)

Week Fifteen:
April 17: Read Krakauer, Into the Wild
In class film: Grizzly Man (2005, 100 min.)

Week Sixteen: Homeground
April 24: Read James Galvin, The Meadow.
In class film: Sweetgrass (2009, 101 min.)

Final Project due: May 1