Environmental history deals with the reciprocal relations between people and their environments over time. But what does studying the physical environment offer to the discipline of history as a whole? What new questions, methodologies, and approaches have been developed by those who focus on past environments? What can historians in other disciplines take away from the field?

These are the questions that animate this seminar course. The literature in environmental history is interdisciplinary and growing, so by necessity this is a very selective reading list. Instead of surveying the field topically, we will explore how scholars who study the environment approach three fundamental issues that engage all practitioners of history: causality, agency, and boundaries.

Put another way, the material we read will explore the following questions: how have environmental historians analyzed and characterized change? How do they challenge and refine our understanding of who the agents of change are? How have they engaged with and challenged the boundary between nature and culture?

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will become familiar with a selection of key themes and questions in the scholarly literature in environmental history and how the arguments associated with those themes have changed over time.
2. Students will assess how historians construct narratives of environmental change, focussing on the sources, theories, methods, and concepts they use.
3. Students will develop their critical analytical skills through writing three short essays requiring them to demonstrate their understanding of the material by synthesizing, and evaluating it, as well as framing an argument of their own about it.
4. Students will develop their presentation skills, facilitating weekly discussions about the seminar readings.

Requirements and Evaluation

This is a seminar course and its success depends on the active, informed, and respectful participation of all its members. I expect everyone to come to class ready to discuss the readings, having read them carefully and considered them in light of the general question about causality, agency, or boundaries posed at the start of each section.
Of course, these books and articles need to be taken on their own terms as well – not just fit into the categories I put them in. You should be able to identify the author's argument(s) and to say something sensible about the evidence on which it is based, how it's made, and its strengths and weaknesses.

Depending on how many people are in the class, one or two people will be responsible for leading the discussion for one or more of the weeks. Those of you who have worked as Teaching Assistants will have a good idea of what this entails. Seminar leaders facilitate a discussion of the readings. To that end, they should be especially familiar with the readings and will pose a set of questions in advance of our meeting each week that will guide everyone’s reading and act as the basis for our discussions.

In addition to leading and participating in the seminar, you’ll be evaluated on the basis of three short essays. Each essay asks you to synthesize what you have read in each section, developing an argument that assesses how scholars who study the environment write about causality, agency, and boundaries. The specific question you are to address in your essay is found at the start of each section, below, in italics.

The mark breakdown is as follows:

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<table>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>25 per cent</td>
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<td>Short essays (1500-2000 words each)</td>
<td>75 per cent</td>
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Unless otherwise arranged, late papers will be penalized 5 per cent per day, including weekends.

Texts

We’ll read the following books over the course of the term. I will put the library copies on reserve. In addition, they will be available at the campus bookstore, but copies should also be available through the usual online sources (amazon.ca and chapters-indigo.ca). You should also be able to find used copies of these books. Try abebooks.com. The articles and book excerpts are available on the VISTA WebCT site.


**Course Schedule**

**Week 1 / 10 Sept: What is environmental history?**

I’d like you to come to our first meeting having read the articles below, which will form the basis of our discussion. I’m doing this so we can make use of the entire thirteen week-term, but also so I could build in two writing breaks. This is a writing and reading intensive course, and I think you will need those breaks to do your best work and to be able to come prepared to the next class having read the assigned material fully.

There’s one more thing I’d like you to do for this week: William Cronon outlines several different constructions of nature in his article. Please bring in an object (or a photo of it) that exemplifies one or more of those constructions of nature.

I’ll ask each of you to talk about your object as a way of introducing yourself to the rest of the seminar. Given that’s the purpose of this exercise (as well as to get you to engage with Cronon fully), you may wish to choose an object that you encounter in your everyday life. That’s not a requirement – just a suggestion.

What is a requirement is that you have fun with this small assignment!


**SECTION 1: CAUSALITY**

*Questions to guide your reading and discussions for this section: What changes are the focus of environmental history? What explanations for change do historians of the environment provide? Does scale (both temporal and spatial) matter in assessing the importance of the environment as a causal factor? How does focussing on the environment force us to reconsider how we periodize history?*
*Essay question (due Week 6 in class): Drawing on the relevant material in this section, evaluate the extent to which the environment makes history; that is, the extent to which the environment can be considered a factor causing change.

Week 2 / 17 Sept: What accounts for inequality?


Week 3 / 24 Sept: What accounts for environmental devastation?


Week 4 / 1 Oct: Does climate make history?


Week 5 / 8 Oct: Writing (and reading!) break

**SECTION 2: AGENCY**

Questions to guide your reading and discussion for this section: What is agency? How do we know an (environmental) historical agent when we see one? What is the relationship between scale and agency? What kinds of distinctions can be drawn, if any, between human and non-human agents and agency?
*Essay question (due Week 10 in class): How does studying the environment change the way historians conceptualize agency?

**Week 6 / 15 Oct: An army marches on its hooves?**


NB: Essay 1 due in class!

**Week 7 / 22 Oct: Who is domesticating whom?**


**Week 8 / 29 Oct: Bodies as objects and agents?**


Roger Horowitz, “Making the Chicken of Tomorrow: Reworking Poultry as Commodities and as Creatures,” in *Industrializing Organisms: Introducing Evolutionary History* (New York: Routledge, 2003), Susan Schrepfer and Philip Scranton, eds., 215-236;


[“Pedigree Dogs Exposed” – a BBC One Documentary (2008).](#)

**Week 9 / 5 Nov: Writing and reading break**

**SECTION 3: BOUNDARIES**
Questions to guide your reading and discussion in this section: What boundaries do environmental historians study? Do boundaries change over time and space? What purpose do boundaries serve and what’s gained (and lost) by dissolving them?

Essay question (due Week 14 in the General Office by 4PM): How have environmental historians drawn and challenged the nature/culture boundary; i.e. how have they acknowledged both the materiality and the socially constructed nature of nature?

Week 10 / 12 Nov: What is the nature of cities?


NB: Essay 2 due in class!

Week 11 / 19 Nov: Energy unbound


Week 12 / 26 Nov: People and other animals


*Grizzly Man*. Dir. Werner Herzog, Lions Gate Entertainment, 2005.

Week 13 / 3 Dec: Other cultures, other natures?


NB: Essay 3 due 10 Dec 2009 by 4PM!