

**Lawrence Culver**  
**Nature's Nation: Issues in American Environmental History**  
**University of California, Los Angeles**  
**Spring 2003**  
**Topics: North America, United States**

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**Wednesday, 2:00-4:50, Bunche A152**

**Instructor: Lawrence Culver**

**Email: [lculver@ucla.edu](mailto:lculver@ucla.edu)**

**Office: Bunche 2121**

**Office Hours: Wednesdays, 10:00-12:00, or by appointment.**

**Course Overview:**

Environmental History is the study of the relationship between human societies and nature, and how that relationship has changed over time. Americans have long claimed a special relationship with nature, and even asserted that they were citizens of "Nature's Nation." In the nineteenth century, Euro-Americans proclaimed that the North American wilderness, and the advancement of the American frontier westward across that wilderness, made the United States unique. Americans seized upon spectacular landscapes such as Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon as proof of the nation's distinctiveness. The U.S. federal government created the first national park system, and the United States, particularly the regions of New England and California, served as the primary birthplace of Preservation, Conservation, and the Environmental Movement. At the same time, however, Americans wrought vast ecological changes in North America, and some proved catastrophic. American capitalism converted nature into a set of natural resources, which could be used to fuel industry and create wealth. As a result, the United States became an economic, technological, and industrial superpower. Perhaps America is indeed "Nature's Nation," but the relationship between the nation and the nature it encompasses is a profoundly complex one.

**Course Goals:**

This course is not designed to serve as a comprehensive overview of American environmental history. Neither is it intended to be a history of the American environmental movement. Instead, this course will consider important issues in American environmental history, and serves as an introduction to the field, which students can pursue further in the papers written for this class. We will begin with readings on the place of nature in American culture, ideas, and historical thought, and then examine readings which provide a broad overview of American environmental history from the arrival of Europeans to the present. Next we will focus on a series of specific issues in American environmental history – preservation and conservation, food and labor, water, disaster, and cities and suburbs. We will conclude with readings on the modern environmental movement, and the place of nature in modern America. As this course is being taught at UCLA, we will give special consideration to issues in the environmental history of Los Angeles and California. Further, we will use this historical subject as a means to learn how to think historically and historiographically, and to read scholarly and primary texts critically. This is a "Writing II" class, with an intensive reading and writing schedule. In addition to expanding our knowledge of environmental history, course assignments and our weekly discussions will also be utilized to improve written and oral communication skills.

**Required Reading Materials:**

Course Reader, available at Westwood Copies, 1001 Gayley Avenue, Suite 104.

**Assignments:*****Weekly reading response essays (2-3 pages) – 30% of final grade***

In these weekly assignments, you will concisely analyze each week's readings, discussing the author's arguments, evidence, and conclusions. I may also provide you with a question or questions asking you to consider the week's readings as a whole. **Weekly response essays must be turned in at the beginning of class.**

***Book review (6-8 pages) – 25% of final grade***

For this assignment, you will select a scholarly book examining some aspect of the history of the American environment or the American environmental movement. I will give you a list of potential titles available at UCLA, and we can discuss other possible texts as well. You will summarize the book, and evaluate its arguments, evidence, and conclusions. Your paper will not be a report on an historical topic. It will instead be an analysis of the perspectives, arguments, and sources the author of your book uses to examine an historical topic. You will also present a brief report (approximately five minutes in length) to the class summarizing the text and your critique of it.

**First draft due April 23<sup>rd</sup>. Final draft due May 7<sup>th</sup>.**

***Primary Source Paper (6-8 pages) – 25% of final grade***

The final assignment for this course will require you to critically evaluate a primary source. Such sources could include books by nature writers, naturalists, or environmentalists. Government documents, such as publications of the National Park Service, Environmental Protection Agency, and other relevant government agencies, as well as records of government hearings or urban planning documents, are also acceptable. You could also look at publications by organizations such as the Sierra Club or Audubon Society. We can also discuss other possible sources. (I will provide you with a list of primary sources available at UCLA.) What does the primary source tell you about American environmental history, or American environmentalism? In what ways do the weekly readings you have read inform this primary source? As with your book review, you will present a brief report on your primary source to the class.

**First draft due May 21<sup>st</sup>. Final draft due June 4<sup>th</sup>.**

**Attendance and Participation:**

This course is a seminar, not a lecture class. Your participation in discussion is essential, and will determine **20%** of your final grade. Simply showing up to class does not constitute active participation. Your participation grade will depend upon your contributions to our weekly discussions. Joining in these conversations demonstrates your understanding of the readings, and allows you to share your views on the topics we discuss.

**Attendance is mandatory.** Unexcused absences will lower your participation grade. You should make every effort to be present when we meet. The first absence will result in the lowering of your participation grade by a full letter grade. The second absence will result in a zero for your participation grade. To avoid these penalties, you must speak with me at least one week prior to any absence except in the case of an emergency. If an emergency occurs, contact me as soon as possible to be excused from class.

**Grading:**

All graded work received on time will be returned as promptly as possible. If your book review or primary source report is turned in late, it will receive a reduced grade (1/3 of a letter grade a day) unless you make arrangements with me well in advance.

You are expected to proofread and revise your written assignments before turning them in. Even before you turn in the first version of your papers, I encourage you to meet with me to discuss a topic, thesis statement, introductory paragraph or preliminary outline for your essays.

**Reading Assignments:**

You are expected to complete each week's reading prior to attending class. These assigned readings provide the core materials for the course, and will enable you to participate in discussion. Failure to complete reading assignments will endanger your participation grade and make it impossible to successfully complete your written assignments.

## Course Schedule

### Week 1 (April 2<sup>nd</sup>)

#### Introduction; Discussion of Course and Syllabus

### Week 2 (April 9<sup>th</sup>)

#### Conceptualizing the Field: "Wilderness" and the American Mind

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," (1893). Available on the web at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/chapter1.html>

Roderick Nash, "The American Wilderness" and "Henry David Thoreau: Philosopher." Chapters in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1982): 67-95.

William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Essay in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1996): 69-90.

### Week 3 (April 16<sup>th</sup>)

#### Historical Perspectives

Tim Flannery, "The Fatal Impact" and "America Under the Gun." Chapters in *The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and Its Peoples* (2001): 301-324.

Richard White, "Animals and Enterprise." Essay in *The Oxford History of the American West* (1994): 236-273.

Adam Rome, "What Really Matters in History?: Environmental Perspectives on Modern America." *Environmental History* Vol. 7 (April 2002): 303-318.

**Select text for book review paper.**

### Week 4 (April 23<sup>rd</sup>)

#### Water

Video: *Cadillac Desert, Episode One: Mulholland's Dream*

**First draft of book review due.**

### Week 5 (April 30<sup>th</sup>)

#### Conserving, Preserving, and Improving Nature

Alfred Runte, "Catalysts: Nationalism, Art, and the American West" and "Monumentalism Reaffirmed: Yellowstone." Chapters in *National Parks: The American Experience*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, rev. (1987): 11-47.

Karl Jacoby, "The Havasupai Problem" and "Farewell Song." Chapters in *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (2001): 148-191.

Anne Whiston Spirn, "Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmstead." Essay in *Uncommon Ground* (1996): 91-113.

#### **Week 6 (May 7<sup>th</sup>)**

##### **Food and Labor**

Richard White, "Salmon." Chapter in *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1995): 89-113.

Eric Schlosser, "On the Range" and "The Most Dangerous Job." Chapters in *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001): 132-147; 168-190.

**Final draft of book review due. Book reports presented to class.**

#### **Week 7 (May 14<sup>th</sup>)**

##### **Cities and Suburbs**

Mike Davis, "How Eden Lost Its Garden" and "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn." Chapters in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998): 59-147.

Adam Rome, "From the Solar House to the All-Electric Home: The Postwar Debates over Heating and Cooling." Chapter in *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (2001): 45-86.

**Select sources for primary source paper.**

#### **Week 8 (May 21<sup>st</sup>)**

##### **Disasters, Natural and Otherwise**

Stephen Pyne, "Initial Attack: The U.S. Forest Service Fights Fire." Chapter in *World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth* (1995): 183-218.

Ted Steinberg, "Disaster as Archetype" and "Do-It-Yourself Deathscape." Chapters in *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (2000): 25-68.

John McPhee, Description of 1989 Loma Prieta/San Francisco Bay Area Earthquake. Excerpt from *Annals of the Former World* (1998): 608-621.

**First draft of primary source report due.**

#### **Week 9 (May 28<sup>th</sup>)**

##### **The Environmental Movement and the Environment in Modern America**

Robert Gottlieb, "Reconstructing Environmentalism: Complex Movements, Diverse Roots." Essay in *Out of the Woods: Essays in Environmental History* (1997): 144-160.

Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature." Essay in *Uncommon Ground* (1996): 171-185.

Jonathan Spaulding, "Yosemite and Ansel Adams: Art, Commerce, and Western Tourism." *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 45 (November 1996): 615-39.

Jennifer Price, "Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company." Essay in *Uncommon Ground* (1996): 186-202.

#### **Week 10 (June 4<sup>th</sup>)**

**Final draft of primary source report due. Primary source reports presented to class.**