



Emily Wakild, Michelle K. Berry. *A Primer for Teaching Environmental History: Ten Design Principles.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 183 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-7148-9.

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Environmental history has dramatically increased in popularity over the past forty years. In response, Emily Wakild and Michelle K. Berry wrote *A Primer for Teaching Environmental History: Ten Design Principles* as a recent addition to Antoinette Burton's *Design Principles for Teaching History* series at Duke University Press. The book fills a gap in published teaching methodologies for environmental history.

With their combined experiences teaching in both high schools and colleges, Wakild and Berry offer a variety of carefully composed and well-thought-out methods and insights for teaching environmental history. The authors provide suggestions for those integrating environmental history into their existing courses, or designing a course dedicated to the subject. They write, "If, by the end, you take out your hatchet and begin to deconstruct our ideas in order to build your own version of environmental history, then we will have succeeded. If, after reading, you feel inspired to plant even one seed in one course about the importance of the environment in the study of the past, then our primary goal will have been achieved" (p. xii). I find it very likely that many readers will be so inspired.

The book is divided into three parts characterized by actions: "Approaches," "Pathways," and "Applications." Part 1 consists of four chapters,

each offering a conceptual metaphor that can be used to anchor an environmental history course: a piece of fruit, a seed, a hatchet, and a llama. The fruit demonstrates how food can connect students to the environment through their bodies. The seed works to provoke thoughts and questions about the environment through other topics of study, "making environmental history something we *do* rather than something we *know*" (p. 27). The hatchet explains that educators do not need to master a new field to teach environmental history; they just need to find environmental angles within the histories, timelines, and geographies they already know. They can then use the hatchet to tear apart old stories and build new ones from the pieces. Finally, the llama reminds readers to see animals as part of the human story, and as a way to connect culture and nature.

Part 2 urges teachers to include scientific literacy, the power of place, and the role of energy in their courses. The authors suggest these not as a list of must-have topics but as avenues through which to access many different stories and lessons. For example, chapter 5 shows how field trips and field courses can help students connect to the nature of the places around them, whether urban, suburban, or rural. These kinds of experiences familiarize students with scientific terms and practices, and encourage them to observe nature with their own

senses. Put simply, getting outside makes environmental history feel real. Such explorations help to ground the power of place as a more approachable concept. Likewise, chapter 7 recommends connecting the study of energy and water in a way that centers nonhuman actors, shifts historical agency away from humans, and “demands acknowledgment of their dependence on the earth’s natural resources” (p. 101).

Part 3 offers guidelines for adopting diversity practices, different technologies, and creative assessments. In chapter 8, the authors propose pairing explorations of environmental justice with project-based learning as a way to approach issues of inequality, pollution, and power. Integrating technology into the environmental history classroom is crucial for reaching today’s students. Waklid and Berry assert, “To ask this digital generation to both celebrate and critique the development of and dependence on various kinds of technology (from horses to cars to those chips in their pockets) is like watching a fish take to water” (p. 142). From incorporating social media into assignments to utilizing in-class polling, the possibilities are endless. Lastly, Waklid and Berry push back against traditional testing to argue that the best assessments encourage students to continue to learn once they have left the classroom, and provide examples based on their experiences. Rather than a yardstick by which to measure the retention of a set doctrine, they argue that assessments should be “opportunities for students to use real-world skills to apply their historical understanding” (p. 142).

Instead of offering any powerful critiques, I want to assert that I agree with the authors on a number of arguments they make throughout the book, and have been positively influenced by their ideas. Most importantly, I agree with their claim that perhaps no field is as poised to encourage climate change consciousness and environmental awareness than environmental history. Teaching students to understand nature’s role in contemporary life is more important than ever, and we

should urge teachers across historical subfields to consider adopting modules on environmental history in their courses.

My praise for *A Primer for Teaching Environmental History* also stems from my own experience using it to design a new course. Before beginning a high school teaching position in 2018, I read the book hoping to find insights on how to adapt my previous college instruction to high school students. I was looking for new methods, techniques, and projects that would make the topic interesting for students that I would see every day and for much shorter bursts of time. Waklid and Berry’s book helped me change my old course into something completely new. I threw out my focus on the United States, retired my adherence to chronology, and taught familiar topics in new ways.

I started my high school course, as Waklid and Berry suggest, with food. After watching and reading *The Botany of Desire* by Michael Pollan, students chose a food product and traced its production and consumption in presentations that illustrated the global links and ecological roots of common consumer goods. I took the authors’ suggestion of pairing energy with another big topic by combining it with the history of capitalism. I slowed down my discussion of the Columbian Exchange to forefront indigenous experiences. We got out of the classroom and went on a hike in the nearby Palisades to explore local histories of development. Finally, we ended the year with a project on climate change that required students to defend their ideas with data on its effects from around the world. The course was very successful and ended up being one of my favorites, due in large part to Waklid and Berry’s book.

Teaching environmental history can change how students envision the world and their role in it. This very timely and important book has ideas for almost every kind of educator, and a little environmental history can go a long way. I have recommended it to friends and colleagues who teach

in both high schools and colleges, and I recommend it to you now.

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