The American Environment  
Hist 341-01

Instructor: Dr. Timothy Sistrunk  
Office: 210 Trinity Hall  Office hours: T-Th 10:00-12:00 and by appointment  
email: Tsistrunk@csuchico.edu

Required Reading:  
Steinberg, Ted. Down to Earth, Nature’s Role in American History  
Carson, Rachel. Silent Spring

Purpose and Objectives:

This course is designed to give the student an appreciation of the many ways that Americans have interacted with the natural world and the effects they have had upon it. Different conceptions of nature will also be explored as they have been applied to social, political and economic relationships over time. We will address how Americans fed themselves and thought about food over their history, and we will evaluate the impacts they have had on the long-term viability, complexity and aesthetic qualities of their environment.  

To this end, the class will consist of lectures, films, slide presentations, student presentations and discussions. Our range of inquiry will be dictated, especially, by the original documents and secondary literature that we will be reading, however, throughout the course, there will be ample opportunity to explore students’ special interests.

General Education:

This course is an approved **Upper Division Humanities** course for the **Sustainability Pathway** and the **Food Studies Pathway**.  
We will focus on four of the GE Learning Outcomes in particular:

1. **Critical Thinking.** The cultivation of historical understanding focuses particularly on the problems of evaluating the different types of evidence that have been generated by the activities and ideas of people over time. Historians especially address the challenges of weighing the relevance and credibility of primary sources (or evidence created during the time or because of the events they reflect on) and secondary evidence (every other type of information that can help to appreciate the past). We will practice utilizing these varied sources in course lectures, in your exam essays and objective exercises, in responses on the readings, and in your final personal environmental history projects.

2. **Sustainability.** Central to this course will be the recurrent challenges that Americans faced as they sought to develop economic systems for survival and the distribution of resources and created intricate relationships with each other and with the natural world. These efforts will lay the foundation for subsequent developments and ideas in these areas in history and into our future. They will directly impact the long-term viability, diversity and aesthetic qualities of the natural world. You will be invited to consider the importance of these decisions and their ramifications throughout the course in conversation in class and in your written assignments.
3. **Diversity.** The American experience with the natural world from colonial times has been marked by constant change. Non-native groups have continuously immigrated to American spaces bringing their own food practices, their divergent ideas of managing and harvesting natural resources, and their own cultural needs. This has meant that American environmental history has always been multi-cultural and varied as unique peoples with their own perspectives have fashioned their interaction with nature and with each other as they either maintained or altered older practices. This really is the subject of the course. (You will be invited to consider these issues in course discussion, in exam essays and objective questions, in response essays over the reading and in your research paper).

4. **Global Engagement.** Because the American story has been created to an unusual degree by people from across the globe, we will remain sensitive to the global dimensions of American interaction with the environment. Contact between the peoples of the Old and New Worlds, from its very beginnings, connected the natural world of what will become the United States to international exchange predicated on extracting goods and services from the land. This exchange will become more articulated and complicated over time as global capitalist systems evolve and impact what happens in the American environment. We will treat these issues throughout the semester and you will focus on this specifically in your research paper. Course discussion, responses to readings and exams will also cover global perspectives.

**US Diversity:** This course fulfills the U.S. Diversity requirement for GE. As we discuss and write about the General Education Learning Objectives articulated above, we will naturally remain cognizant of the culturally and historically diverse experiences of the many groups who have created American environmental history. These include different ethnic identities (indigenous peoples and immigrants), gender groupings, and changing minority populations. All these peoples have created the complicated history and current relationships that Americans have with nature and their varied contributions are essential to appreciate American interaction with the natural world.

**Grading:**

Standard Grading scale  (100-90% = A; 89-80% = B etc...)

Paper 30%, Examinations (20% each) 60%, Participation 10%
(1000 pts. total)

**Research Papers:**

You will write a paper describing the transformation of the natural environment of your hometown and integrate your family’s story into the narrative. This project will be made up of three parts that will cover the chronological development of your town and allow you to focus on key characteristics of its landscape and specific themes about them.
The essay projects will be worth 300 pts. of your final grade. Each section will be published on Google Docs. and Group members will comment on them before the groups meet in class to discuss them. The student will then submit a final draft of their work on paper (2 sided) to the instructor.

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<tr>
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<th>Due Dates</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select Paper Focus</td>
<td>Sept. 6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publish Part 1</td>
<td>Sept. 24/5:00 pm</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comment on Colleagues 1</td>
<td>Oct. 1 Class Time</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion Part 1</td>
<td>Oct. 1</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publish Part 2</td>
<td>Oct. 31/5:00 pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comment on Colleagues 2</td>
<td>Nov. 7 Class Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion Part 2</td>
<td>Nov. 7</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publish Part 3</td>
<td>Nov. 26/5:00 pm</td>
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<td>Comment on Colleagues 3</td>
<td>Dec. 3 Class Time</td>
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<td>Discuss/ Presentation</td>
<td>Dec. 3</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Dec. 10 TBA</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Draft all Parts</td>
<td>Dec. 12 Class Time</td>
<td>50</td>
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Late papers will lose ½ their credit value each day that they are not turned in after these dates and comments will receive no credit.

**Participation:**
Be active, alive, awake! Discuss works intelligently, bring up questions in class, and show that you have thought about the reading. Class presentations and discussions will also be evaluated as will overall class etiquette (25 pts). Students will submit a short response paper on Carson’s *Silent Spring* on Nov. 28 (25 pts). Excessive absences will harm your grade (50 pts.).

**Examinations:**
The first exam will cover weeks 1-4; the second exam will cover weeks 5-10; the third exam will cover weeks 11-15. Matching and essay selection. A study sheet will be provided. You may not leave the exam, except for emergencies, and then you will take a make-up exam.

*** You must have a medical excuse from the student health center or on letterhead paper from your doctor if you miss an exam for medical reasons. If something unforeseen happens make-ups will be offered at a time convenient for the instructor. There are no make-ups of make-ups.

** Any student who has a disability of any kind that might prevent the fullest expression of her or his abilities should contact me the first week of the class so that we can discuss class requirements. Likewise, any student who foresees conflicts with assignments because of religious holidays should discuss these with me the first week of class.
Schedule (Subject to Change):

Week 1  (August 27, 29)  Introduction, What is Environmental History
Earth, Preface, Prologue
Problems of Sources

Week 2  (Sept. 5)  Native/Colonial New England
Earth, Chapters 1, 2
Native Foodways North and South

Week 3  (Sept. 10, 12)  Colonial Impacts
Earth, Chapter 3
Mono-cropping
Deforestation

Week 4  (Sept. 17, 19)  Commodification
Earth, Chapter 4
Industrialization of Water
The Tragedy of the Commons: Passenger Pigeon

Week 5  (Sept. 24, 26)  Southern Contrasts
Publish Part 1 Sept. 24
Exam Sept. 26
Earth, Chapter 5
Organizing Agriculture for Gang Labor

Week 6  (Oct. 1, 3)  Discussion/Bison Decline
Comment on Drafts Oct. 1
Dangers of Reliance on Large Migratory Animals

Week 7  (Oct. 8, 10)  Civil War/ New South
Earth, Chapters 6, 7, 8
Food and Disease during War
Sharecropping and the Boll weevil

Week 8  (Oct. 15, 17)  Conservation and the West
Earth, Chapter 9
Organizing Society for Gold
Mono-Culture: Cattle

Week 9  (Oct. 22, 24)  Progressive Urbanization
Earth, Chapter 10
Pigs and Horses in Town
Cleaning Garbage and Waste
Week 10 (Oct. 29, 31) California
Exam Oct. 29
Publish Part 2 Oct. 31
Earth, Chapter 11
Inventing Modern Marketing of Fruits and Vegetables

Week 11 (Nov. 5, 7) Discussion/20th century Acceleration
Comment Draft 2 Nov. 7
Earth, Chapters 12-13
Conservation Creates Wilderness
Feedlot Meat and Industrial Farms

Week 12 (Nov. 14) Built Spaces
Earth, Chapter 14
From Conservation to Environmentalism

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 14 (Nov. 26, 28) Silent Spring
Publish Part 3 Nov. 26
Carson
Insecticides and Biocides and the Balance of Nature

Week 15 (Dec. 3, 5) Discuss/Green Movement
Comment Draft 3 Dec. 3
Earth, Chapter 15
Impacting Environmental Policy

Week 16 (Dec. 10, 12) Globalization
Public Event Dec. 10
Final Draft Due Dec. 12
Earth, Chapter 16
Exporting Global Capitalism: The World Bank and IMF
The Inequalities of the Green Revolution

Final Examination: Tuesday May 17, 12:00-1:50