Course Description

People have always had to contend with the natural world, but only recently have historians begun to explore the changing relationships between people and their environments over time. In this course, we will examine the variety of ways that people in North America have shaped the environment, as well as how they have been shaped by it. Conceived, protected, reimagined, polluted, cleaned, and thought about it. In addition, we will explore how various characteristics of the natural world have affected the fabric of human societies, sometimes harming or hindering life and other times enabling rapid development and expansion. By bringing nature into the study of human history, and the human impact into the study of nature, we will begin to see the connections and interdependencies between the two that traditional history often overlooks.

Contact Information

Prof. Chris Wells
well@macalester.edu

You can always reach me by email. I will usually get back to you quickly, and always within 24 hours on weekdays. You have my full attention.

Call me "Chris"

(651) 699-912 (.Socket)

Students are sometimes not sure what to call their professors. Like many others at Macalester, I invite you to see my first name, though if you're feeling formal, Professor Wells or Dr. Wells are both fine. Please be sure to share what you would like to be called, as well!

Office Hours

My standing office hours this semester will be on Tuesday, 11-10 am (in person outside), and on Wednesdays from 12-1 (via Zoom). If either of those times works for you, you can claim a spot without asking me first. If the scheduled times don't work, send me an email suggesting a few times that will work for you so that I can check them against my calendar.

Telling students is one of my favorite things about being a professor. No question is too small, and no problem is too silly. If you want to talk, we can talk.

Challenging Times

These are challenging times. As one wise colleague put it, we aren't all in the same boat, but all of us are rowing in the same storm. The pandemic is rough. Public health protocols are rough. Climate change is rough. Racial inequality is rough. Our national politics are rough. Despite these challenges, let's try to be kind and patient with one another, and with ourselves. Let's learn and adapt and aim as high as we are able, while acknowledging that there are limits on our time, energy, capacity, and attention that external circumstances will dictate. If things aren't working for you, whatever the reason, please let me know and I'll do what I can to help.

This syllabus does not stand on its own!

Our Moodle site (moodle.macalester.edu) is not just a crucial resource, but is also our primary point of contact for this class. In addition to hosting this syllabus, it is where you can find our complete daily schedule, as well as links to all of our readings, discussions, activities, and assignments—in short, anything and everything related to the course. Please familiarize yourself with the Moodle site before doing anything else, and let me know promptly if you have any questions or run into any problems!
Required Texts

Two books are available in the English textbook store:

Although both are available in the bookstore, personal e-reader systems are allowed.

1. Both of these texts are available. As we download a term, this text will be downloaded onto your class e-reader (Down by Earth or Online Textbook). If you are comfortable reading on a device that you have access to in class, you will not need to purchase anything for the class.
2. As a final physical copy, please make sure you acquire the 5th edition of Down by Earth, which is the most recent edition (it's available as an e-book from the Macmillan Store).
3. For reference, this is an outline covering Down by Earth's fifth edition and can also be downloaded from us on our class website's course materials section.

Attendance, Engagement, and Participation

Achieve engagement and motivation in class doesn’t involve doing the same old things like passive lecture-taking. Instead, let’s try something new and creative. Your participation in class and engagement with assigned readings is tracked and reviewed. Please remember that what we do in class together will influence your success in the course. The more you participate in class and engage with the material, the more you will learn and understand the concepts and principles we discuss.

The participation and attendance portion of your grade will be determined based on the average of these factors:
1. Attendance: Regular attendance is necessary to fully participate in discussions and activities.
2. Engagement: Engaging actively during class discussions and activities shows your commitment to learning.
3. Homework: Completing homework assignments on time demonstrates your effort and dedication.

Helpful Resources

Many thanks to the resources that will help you with this class. To ensure a comfortable experience, we will be using a computer lab at the Library (Room 101). Feel free to use the lab whenever you need to work on homework or study for exams. We will also provide additional resources to support your learning journey. Please check the course syllabus for specific details and any updates that may be announced during the semester.

Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty undermines the basic foundation of higher education: ethics, and ultimately, our shared value. Academic dishonesty in our class will be handled according to the Academic Honesty Policy. Feel free to ask questions about the Academic Honesty Policy or any other academic policies by email, phone, or in class. We encourage you to ask questions and participate in discussions.

Accommodations

I am committed to supporting all students in my class. If you have a disability or need any accommodations, please reach out to me as soon as possible. I am here to support you and ensure your success in the course. If you have any concerns or questions, feel free to reach out to me during office hours or via email. I am always here to help. If you are interested in learning more about accommodations, please see the resources provided by the Disability Services Office.

Covid Caveats

Given the current circumstances and ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, everything in this syllabus is subject to change. Although I am hopeful that significant changes will not be necessary in the near future,

- Your final Fall Classes/Exams will be conducted either online or in-person, depending on the vaccination status of the class and the overall health recommendations provided by health authorities. Please be prepared to move between formats as needed.
- Class size and class accommodations may be adjusted to ensure the health and safety of all students.

Our goal is to provide a safe and conducive learning environment for all students. If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. I am here to support you and ensure your success in the course.
Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890

Weekly Reflections

Over the course of the semester, you will have eleven opportunities to submit a weekly reflection (2-3 double-spaced pages long). You must submit at least six of these total, including at least one from each unit. Taken together, these are significant writing assignments for the course. The purpose of the assignment is to give you the chance to synthesize what you have learned each week, to clarify your thinking, and to put it in dialogue with the ideas of your classmates. A good reflection will identify and briefly summarize the week’s big takeaways points and connect those points to relevant readings and class discussions. It will then discuss more deeply some aspect of the week’s material that you find particularly interesting, significant, or confusing, drawing on specific passages and ideas to illustrate your points. The best weekly reflections tend to engage the week’s most interesting questions, to explore tensions, connections, and resonances with previous class material, and to reflect on how understanding this history changes the way you see the world today. In general, it is better to choose one or two key points to focus on rather than try to be comprehensive. Each weekly reflection should be 2-3 double-spaced pages long, and it due on Moodle by 11 pm on Friday. All reflections will be graded on a credit/no credit basis according to criteria posted on Moodle. You may drops one request, and we will generally grant a 48-hour extension to submit weekly reflections.

Writing Assignments

This course fulfills Macatoran’s Writing Practice (WP) General Education requirement. That means the course will provide frequent, low-stakes opportunities for you to express your ideas in writing, as well as two more formal papers.

Papers

You will write two papers for this class. The First Paper (3-7 double-spaced pages, due just before fall break) will give you a chance to synthesize and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the material we discuss together in the first two units of the class. I will distribute the prompt for this paper two weeks before it is due on Moodle. The Final Paper asks you to integrate your own historical research with what you have learned about the themes and questions of environmental history. Drawing on course materials and themes, you will select a place in the U.S. that you know well (or can research readily) and write an 8-10-page interpretive essay and its environmental history. We will discuss this assignment in class as we due date approaches, and additional details will be available on Moodle.

Late Work Policy

Late work will be subject to a standard late penalty of one-third of a letter grade per day. However, for both of the longer papers, as long as you turn in complete work of passable quality by the due date, you may request an extension up to a penalty-free extension of 72 hours to work on it further.

Final Grades

Your final grade will be calculated as follows:
- Paper 1 (5-7 pages): 20%
- Paper 2 (8-10 pages): 25%
- Weekly Reflections: 25%
- Participation and Engagement: 30%
Course Topics

Week(s)
1

What is environmental history?

Timeline
15th-18th centuries

2-3

Biological Revolution

Co-invasers
Commodification
The lay of the land
Fields, fences, and agricultural change

19th Century

4-8

Market Revolution

Railroads
Expanding Markets
Accelerating Commodification
Protecting Nature? Conservation

Paper 1

1900-1945

9-11

Consumer Revolution

Urban change
Rural change
Cars
Consumer goods, trash, and pollution

1945-1990s

12-15

Environmental Revolution?

Postwar Environmental Movement
Environmental Justice
Neoliberal Globalization

Paper 2

Towards the future

21st century