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 used, labored in, abused, conserved, protected, rearranged, polluted, cleaned, and thought about it. In addition, we will explore how various characteristics of the natural world have affected the broad patterns of human society, 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 past into the study of nature, we will begin to see the connections and interdependencies between the two that traditional history often overlooks.

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Call me “Chris” (he/him/his)

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

Drop-In Hours

I will hold standing office hours (when you can drop in to talk with me) this semester in my office, Olin-Rice 249c, on Monday 1:10-2:10, Thursday 1-2, and by appointment. To meet with me, just show up! You can also reserve a time, if you’d like, here. If you’d like to meet but the scheduled times don’t work, email me with a few times that will work for you and I’ll check them against my calendar.

Talking to students is one of my favorite things about being a professor. No question is too small, and no pretext to talk is too flimsy: 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 confronting 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. It’s hard to predict what will happen on any given day. This course engages difficult issues that can at times be actively discouraging. Despite these challenges, let’s try to be kind and patient with one another and with ourselves. Let’s learn and explore and aim as high as we’re able while acknowledging that there are limits on our time, energy, capacity, and attention that external circumstances will dictate. I’ve designed this course with a great deal of flexibility and with your success as a top priority. If things aren’t working for you, whatever the reason, please let me know and I’ll do what I can to help.

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 college book store:

- Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth* (3rd edition)
- Chris Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar America*

Although both are available in the bookstore, please note several things:

1. Both of these texts are available as a free download (requires login) from Macalester's library ([Down to Earth; EJ in Postwar America](#)). If you are comfortable reading on a device and do not want to own a physical copy, you do not need to purchase anything for the class.
2. If you get a physical copy, please make sure you acquire the 3rd edition of *Down to Earth*, which is not the most recent edition (but is available as an ebook from the Macalester library).
3. For reasons I will explain in class, an audio recording of *Down to Earth* (with me as narrator) is also available on our course Moodle page (requires login).

Attendance, Engagement, and Participation

The success of this class hinges on your active engagement with course texts and your participation in class discussions and activities. Our project in class meetings will be to explore connections between events, to answer questions, to clear up any confusion, to discuss the major themes of the course, and above all to engage with the big ideas in the assigned texts. Please remember that we are all in this together and we are all responsible for the success of the course. As eager as I am to share with you what I know, I expect that you will learn at least as much (and probably a lot more!) in conversation with one another as you will from me. It is vital that we all respect one another’s time, space, values, and ideas by coming to class on time and prepared to engage in respectful, intellectually challenging discussions. In practice, this means you should:

1. Answer framing questions regularly before class.
2. Read and engage with assigned texts before class, and show up ready to discuss the day's material and participate in class activities.
3. Attend class regularly. Since this is a discussion-based class, it is obviously important to be in class in order to discuss the material. These are unusual times, however, and COVID-related disruptions are likely. If you are ill or are coming down with something, you SHOULD NOT come to class. Everyone may miss six classes (two full weeks of class) without explanation or penalty. That is a lot! If you miss more than three classes, please consider talking to me privately so that we can figure out how to accommodate whatever challenges you are facing (without needing to share any details) and develop a plan for you to succeed in the class. If you miss more than six classes it is essential that we talk. Together we can try to come up with some reasonable arrangements to help you stay on track.
Helpful Resources

Many wonderful resources exist that will help you with this class. To book an online appointment with a writing counselor at the MAX Center, visit WCOnline. You can find the center’s guide to working remotely with a writing tutor here. Our research and instruction librarians are also a great resource for many writing-related questions. You may book an online appointment with one of them here. Another useful resource is Macalester’s Write Well video series. Please also spend some time perusing Prof. Zachary Schrag’s helpful advice about doing well in a history course.

Academic dishonesty

Academic dishonesty erodes the basic foundations of higher education: exchange, debate, and the thoughtful consideration of what we know, how we know it, and why it matters. It has no place at Macalester or in this course. Find Macalester’s academic integrity policy here. For help avoiding plagiarism, visit the Library’s Academic Integrity materials here. For the Quick Guide to the Chicago Manual of Style, the citation system used by historians, visit here (requires login).

Accommodations

I am committed to supporting all students in my class. If course design ever poses barriers to your ability to access or to demonstrate mastery of course content, please let me know. I will make reasonable academic accommodations in such cases. If you have a known disability and think that you may need formal accommodations, email, call 651-696-6275, or use the online scheduler. Even if you do not need formal accommodations, you may find yourself needing things that you normally would not. In those cases, please let me know that you are struggling (though I don’t need to know details about why). I may be able to make reasonable accommodations that will help.

Covid Caveats

Given the uncertain and ongoing nature of the pandemic, everything in this syllabus is subject to change, although I am hopeful that no significant changes will be necessary. In the meantime we will follow Macalester’s well-fitted mask policy and wear face coverings in class, regardless of our vaccination status, through at least Sep. 14 when the college reassesses the policy.
Writing Assignments

This course fulfills Macalester’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, including two short reflection papers, as well as at least one opportunity to write a longer, more formal paper.

Papers

You will write two short reflective papers for this class and will have an option to write a slightly longer third paper with a minor research component. The two Reflection Papers (4-5 double-spaced pages, due just before fall break and at the end of the course) will give you a chance to synthesize—and demonstrate a deeper understanding of—the material we discuss together in the first and second halves of the class. Additional details are available in Moodle. The optional Place Paper asks you to integrate a small amount of 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 easily) and write a 6-10 page interpretive essay on it and its environmental history. We will discuss this assignment in class as its due date approaches, and additional details are available in Moodle.

Late Work Policy

For each of the two reflection papers, as long as you turn in a complete draft by the due date, you may request—and I will always grant—a penalty-free extension of 72 hours to work on it further. Because there is a great deal of choice in reading engagement assignments, however, I will not accept reading engagement assignments once the class period in which we are discussing the text begins. In the case that you find yourself in unusual circumstances, or find yourself needing extra time to complete your work in a way that demonstrates what you are learning, please let me know what is going on. As in other areas of the course, I may be able to make reasonable accommodations that will help.
Grades, Grading Philosophy, and Grading System

My grading philosophy is that grades ideally ought to do a few things. First, they ought to encourage learning—that is, to give you reasons (whether carrots or sticks) to take advantage of the opportunities for learning that the course provides. Second, they should reflect how much work you have put into the class—that is, how much genuine effort you have made to learn the things I have asked you to learn and to do the things I have asked you to do. Third, they should measure how well you have demonstrated mastery of the course’s content—that is, your performance on high-stakes assignments that I have designed to measure your knowledge and skill relative to other students.

The problem is that there is often tension among these three things, which can generate a lot of angst and ambiguity for students and professors alike. If one student displays exceptional effort and improvement, should she get a higher grade in the course than her actual performance on high-stakes assessments says she should? What about the brilliant slackers? The ones who miss a bunch of class, rarely contribute to discussions, and make a habit of texting during class—yet somehow manage to perform well on important tests and papers? And then, of course, we continue to find ourselves caught squarely in the midst of ongoing crises caused by the twin threats of a global pandemic and racial injustice. Send me a quick email, subject line Easter Egg, and let me know you've read this!

Given the circumstances, grading in this course will be quite different in some ways—and very similar in others—from norms you have likely experienced in the past. I have structured the grading system, as best I can, to encourage serious learning, reward effort, and acknowledge achievement—while remaining as flexible as possible under the unusual circumstances that define the moment. In an effort to encourage experimentation, reward effort, and provide an honest assessment of your mastery of course content and goals, I will determine your grade this semester using a system called “Specifications Grading.”
Specifications Grading

In a nutshell, here’s how it works:

- You will have tremendous flexibility to choose which assignments to do, as well as how many activities and assignments you would like to take on, depending on the ultimate grade you would like to earn in the class.
- In what is definitely the most unusual aspect of this system, everything that is graded—participation, reading engagements, papers, in-class activities—will be evaluated on a credit/no credit basis. “Credit” will be awarded for work that fulfills all of the specifications for an assignment according to a clear rubric (available on Moodle). The specifications for all assignments are set at B+ quality work. If you do B+ quality work or higher, you will get credit. You will not receive credit for work that does not earn at least a B+.
- Every time you earn credit for a graded course component by meeting its specifications, you will earn a point in the appropriate category. Your final grade will be determined by how many points you earn across each of the four main categories of the course:
  ○ Participation points (from attending and contributing to class discussions--39 possible points)
  ○ Framing Questions (53 from assigned readings + another 5 from optional readings = 58 possible points)
  ○ Reading Engagement assignments (53 possible points from assigned readings + another 5 from optional readings = 58 possible points)
  ○ 2 Reflection Essays (4-5 pgs each), one due in week 8, the other in week 15 (1 point each)

Tokens

Sometimes we don’t quite manage to do everything we intend to do, despite our best efforts. If this year is anything remotely like the last two and a half years, I expect this to remain doubly true. Tokens are designed to recognize this reality and give you a bit of additional flexibility to meet the goals you set for yourself. Everyone in the class will begin the semester with three tokens, which you may use in whatever combination you want at the following exchange rates:

- 1 token = 2 framing question points, 1 reading engagement point
- 2 tokens = 1 discussion point
- 3 tokens = 1 reflection essay point

If you fall behind and find yourself needing to do extra work to catch back up to where you would like to be, be sure to talk to me. There is likely a reasonable way to earn extra tokens to get back on track.
Course Topics

Week(s)

1

What is environmental history?

2-3

Biological Revolution

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

15th-18th centuries

4-8

Market Revolution

Railroads
Expanding Markets
Accelerating Commodification
Protecting Nature? Conservation

19th Century

Paper 1

9-11

Consumer Revolution

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

1900-1945

12-15

Environmental Revolution?

Postwar Environmental Movement
Environmental Justice
Neoliberal Globalization

1945-1990s

Towards the future

Paper 2

21st century