

Global Environmental History

Dr. Peter Vale

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Office hours: by appointment

This course introduces students to debates and historiography in environmental history. In particular, we will structure our trajectory and discussion around the concept of the “Anthropocene,” an epoch defined by humans’ ability to dramatically alter the planet on a geological scale. In exploring this idea of the “Anthropocene,” readings and discussions will consider the transformation of the earth by human societies; the transformation of human societies by non-human forces; and the transformation of ideas about the “environment.” Historically, we will traverse the experience of human societies from the earliest forms of settlement and agricultural cultivation to the extractive, fragile, and disaster-prone 21st century. In so doing, we will engage with a variety of themes, including industrialization, sustainability, climate change, empire, animal studies, urban-rural binaries, forests, and waste.

Learning Objectives:

- Introduce students to key methodological, theoretical, and historical questions in the field of environmental history. Examples include:
 - What is the Anthropocene? When does it begin?
 - In what ways has modernity reshaped the environment and in what ways have environmental changes shaped ideas of modernity?
- Provide a survey of important historiographical developments in environmental history
- Understand and communicate how environmental, political, and social systems shape and constrain individuals
- Offer and integrate feedback on scholarly works

Expectations and Assessment

Weekly Participation (30%)

- *Weekly Expectations:*
 - On Sunday night each week, you will post an analytical/interpretive question that came up for you as you were doing that week’s readings (forum for posting TBD)
 - In class, participation and discussion require your presence and prepared engagement. At a minimum, you are expected to raise one question (at the beginning of class) and offer one substantive comment.
- *Respect:* You are expected to be respectful of your fellow students and colleagues. Scholarly argumentation will certainly arise but should not transcend their historical dimensions into personal attacks.

Recap Leader//Class Discussion Leader (15%)

- Each week one student will recap the major themes and questions from the previous week’s discussion for ~5 minutes, organizing the key concepts, arguments, and historical trajectories for the rest of the class. Students will publish their notes on a shared class document.

Final Paper (55%)

- Your final paper (~5000-7000 words) should offer a historiographical analysis of a theme or region in environmental history.
 - As a part of this project you will submit a short proposal with an annotated bibliography prior to our Week 5 meeting.
 - Citation format should follow the *Chicago Manual of Style* guidelines
- Due: 22 May 2026

Course Outline

Readings should be prepared prior to class that they are listed for

Additional readings are all optional, but you are encouraged to engage with them for your paper assignments

Week 1: 2 March 2026, 15:00

What is Environmental History?

Piero Bevilacqua et al., "Forum: What is Global Environmental History?" *Global Environment* 1, no. 2, 2008, 228-249

William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1:1 (1996): 7-28.

Additional Reading:

- J. R. McNeill, "Global Environmental History: The First 150,000 Years," *A Companion to Global Environmental History* (2012), 1-17
- J.R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History." *History and Theory* 42, no. 4 (December 1, 2003): 5-43
- Julia Nordblad, "The Nature of Planetary Habitability: A Conceptual History of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services" *Environmental History* 30:2 (2025)
- Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009), 197-222
- Timothy LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (2017), "Natural-Born Humans" (p. 67-139)
- Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor, "More-Than-Human Histories," *Environmental History* 25 (2020): 711-735.

Week 2: 9 March 2026, 15:00

What is the Anthropocene?

Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene" *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000), 17-18.

Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2016), 78-115

Timothy James LeCain, "Against the Anthropocene: A Neo-Materialist Perspective" *International Journal for History, Culture, and Modernity* (2015), 1-28

Additional Reading:

- Frank Uekötter, *The Vortex: An Environmental History of the Modern World* (2023)
- Eileen Crist, "On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature" in *Environmental Humanities* 3 (2013)
- Donna J. Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1, 2015, 159-165
- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993)
- Bruno Latour, "Can We Get Our Materialism Back Please?" (2007)

Week 3: 16 March 2026, 17:00

Political Thought and the Environment

Paul Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability: Nature and Destiny c. 1500-1870* (2018)

- Introduction (1-16)
- Chapter 1: Living from the Land, c. 1500-1620 (17-57)
- Chapter 3: Ambition and Experiment, c. 1590-1740 (102-143)
- Chapter 7: Political Economies of Nature, c. 1760-1840 (265-307)
- Chapter 8: History and Destiny, c. 1700-1870 (308-349)

Alyssa Battistoni, *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 2025)

- Chapter 1: Theory of the Free Gift (23-52)

Additional Reading:

- Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (Polity, 2021)
- Stefano Ponte, Christine Noe, and Dan Brockington, *Contested Sustainability: The Political Ecology of Conservation and Development in Tanzania* (James Currey, 2022)

Week 4: 23 March 2026, 17:00

Climate Histories: Cold, the Little Ice Age, and Resilience

Sam White, "Cold, Drought, and Disaster: The Little Ice Age and the Spanish Conquest of New Mexico," *New Mexico Historical Review* 89:4 (2014): 425-458

Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, the Little Ice Age, and the Dutch* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)

- Chapter 3: Sailing, Floating, Riding, and Skating through a Cooler Europe (109-151)
- Chapter 6: Tracing and Painting the Little Ice Age (253-276)
- Chapter 7: Texts, Technologies, and Climate Change (277-299)
- Conclusion: Lessons from Ice and Gold (300-309)

Additional Reading:

- Dominik Collet et al., "The Little Ice Age: The History and Future of a Traveling Concept," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* (2025): 1-17.
- Sam White, *A Cold Welcome: The Little Ice Age and Europe's Encounter with North America* (Harvard University Press, 2017): Ch 4, 6, 8
- Degroot et al., "Towards a rigorous understanding of societal responses to climate change," *Nature* 591 (2021): 539-550.
- Leah Aronowsky, "Gas guzzling Gaia, or: a prehistory of climate change denialism," *Critical Inquiry* 47:2 (2021), 306-327
- On Barak, *Heat, a History: Lessons from the Middle East for a Warming Planet* (University of California Press, 2024)
- Degroot et al., "The history of climate and society: a review of the influence of climate change on the human past," *Environmental Research Letters* 17 (2022): 1-35.

ASSIGNMENT: Prepare Proposal and Annotated Bibliography for Final Paper (due 10 April 2026)

Week 5: 13 April 2026, 17:00

Empire and Environments: Insects

J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

- Chapter 2: Atlantic Empire and Caribbean Ecology (15-62)
- Chapter 6: Lord Cornwallis vs *Anopheles quadrimaculatus* (195-234)

Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (2002)

- "Can the Mosquito Speak?" (19-53)

Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Organic Vehicles and Passengers: The Tsetse Fly as Transient Analytical Workspace," *Transfers* 6:2 (2016): 74-93

Additional Reading:

- Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, *The Mobile Workshop: The Tsetse Fly and African Knowledge Production* (2018)
 - "How Vanhu Managed Tsetse" (29-48)
- Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Big Game Hunters, Bacteriologists, and Tsetse Fly Entomology in Colonial Southeast Africa: The Selous-Austen Debate Revisited, 1905-1940s," *Icon* 12 (2006): 75-117.
- Paul Sutter, "Nature's Agents or Agents of Empire? Entomological Workers and Environmental Change during the Construction of the Panama Canal" *Isis* 98 (2007)
- Alfred Crosby, "The 'Virgin-Soil' Epidemic as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America", *WMQ* 33 (1976)
- Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1973)
- Elinor G. K. Melville, *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico* (1994)
- John Ryan Fischer, *Cattle Colonialism: An Environmental History of the Conquest of California and Hawaii* (2015)

Week 6: 20 April 2026, 15:00

Cities and the Environment

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (W.W. Norton, 1991)

- Chapter 3: Pricing the Future: Grain (97-147)
- Chapter 4: The Wealth of Nature: Lumber (148-206)
- Chapter 5: Annihilating Space: Meat (207-262)

Additional Reading:

- Timothy LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge University Press, 2017): "Chapter 4: The Longhorn" (140-184)
- Ruth Rogaski, *Knowing Manchuria: Environments, the Senses, and Natural Knowledge on an Asian Borderland* (University of Chicago Press, 2022)

Week 7: 27 April 2026, 15:00

Trees, Fungi, and Forests

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015)

- Chapters 11-16 (149-226)

James Fairhead and Melissa Leach. "False Forest History, Complicit Social Analysis: Rethinking Some West African Environmental Narratives" in *World Development* 23 (1995)

Cheng Li and Yanjun Liu, "Selling Forestry Revolution: The Rhetoric of Afforestation in Socialist China, 1949–61," *Environmental History* 25:2 (2020): 62-84

Additional Reading:

- Anna Tsing, "AURA's Openings: Unintentional design in the Anthropocene," *More Than Human* Vol. 1, 43-52
- Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species, for Donna Haraway," *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012):141-154.
- Cheng Li, *Contested Environmentalisms: Trees and the Making of Modern China* (2025)
- Jared Farmer, *Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees* (Basic Books, 2022)
 - Introduction; Venerable Species; Pacific Fires; Latest Oldest
- Jared Farmer, "On Emblematic Megaflora," *Environmental History* 15:3 (2010): 533-547
- Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (University of California, Press, 2013)

Week 8: 4 May 2026, 17:00

Mining and Remains

Gabrielle Hecht, *Residual Governance: How South Africa Foretells Planetary Futures* (Duke University Press, 2023)

- 28-33 ("Residual Governance")
- Chapter 2: The Hollow Rand (47-83)
- Chapter 3: The Inside-Out Rand (85-127)

Rosalind Morris, "The Miner's Ear," *Transition* 98 (2008): 96-115.

Additional Reading:

- Robyn d'Avignon, *A Ritual Geology: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savanna West Africa* (Duke University Press, 2022)
- Israel G. Solares, *Underground Leviathan: Corporate Sovereignty and Mining in the Americas* (2024)
- Timothy LeCain, *Mass Destruction: The Men and Giant Mines that Wired America and Scarred the Planet* (Rutgers University Press, 2009)
- Simone Müller, *The Toxic Ship: The Voyage of the Khian Sea and the Global Waste Trade* (University of Washington Press, 2023)

FINAL PAPER due 22 May 2026