

History 1713
Environmental Crisis: How Past Disasters Shape the Present

Prof. Evan Hepler-Smith

Fall 2018

MWF @ 1-1:50pm // Campion Hall 302

heplers@bc.edu // Office Hours: MW 3–5pm, Stokes 274

Today's environmental challenges are the product of a history of crisis: industrial accidents, epidemics, extinctions, toxic chemical emissions, economic downturns, natural disasters, famines. This course addresses the global history of the science, technology, and politics of environmental crisis. Who has suffered most from environmental crises, and why? How have communities used arguments about environmental crisis to seek relief and justice—or power and profit—in the wake of disaster? What is “natural” about natural disasters? How do war and geopolitical conflict relate to environmental crises? We will learn how environmental crises have shaped and been shaped by specific social, cultural, and political contexts (including our own).

This course satisfies the History II Core requirement.



Amusement park abandoned since the meltdown of the Chernobyl nuclear facility in 1986. Photo by Claudia Himmelreich, in Matthew Schofield, “Ruined Chernobyl Nuclear Plant Will Remain a Threat for 3,000 Years | McClatchy Washington Bureau,” McClatchy DC Bureau, April 24, 2016, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article73405857.html>, accessed 22 June 2018.

Syllabus subject to change at instructor's discretion. Latest version posted on Canvas.

Goals

After taking this class, students will have gained an understanding of:

- **Facts:** Students will **understand the causes and effects of a collection of landmark historical environmental crises**, and their role in global history, ranging from antiquity to the present day. They will be able to describe how natural, social, and technological processes interact to bring about environmental crises and within responses to environmental crises.
- **Arguments:** Students will **understand how (different) people develop (different) accounts of environmental crises in specific historical contexts**, according to their specific perspectives and concerns. They will be able to identify arguments and rhetoric within claims about environmental crisis or non-crisis.
- **Science:** Students will **understand environmental science, the division between the human world and the natural environment, and technologies that affect the environment as human-made achievements shaped by human values**. They will be able to analyze scientific understandings of the environment as combinations of natural processes and human choices about which processes matter and how to measure them.
- **Skills:** Students will have sharpened their skills in:
 - **critical reading and contextual analysis**, through examination of primary-source historical texts and consideration of the historical settings in which they were produced.
 - **individual and collaborative verbal reasoning**, through weekly responses, in-class discussion of texts, and collaboration in small groups to prepare and deliver final project presentations.
 - **written communication and argumentation**, including crafting historical arguments, identifying plausible alternative arguments, and justifying their chosen position, through essay assignments.
- **Integrating disciplines:** Students will **appreciate how humanistic and scientific ways of knowing the environment can inform one another**, through specific connections within this Enduring Questions course pairing.
- **Individual and collaborative reflection:** Students will be able **to situate** their everyday surroundings and activities within histories of global-scale environmental crises and sustainability efforts, **to recognize** connections and inconsistencies among their personal values, actions, and environmental concerns, **to communicate** with friends and family about these values and concerns, and **to listen and comprehend** values and concerns that differ from their own.

Lots of goals. We're up to the challenge!

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Course requirements:

- *Participating*: Class engagement and responses 20%
- *Reading, Writing, Paying Attention*: Four short assignments 10%(I,III)/15%(II,IV)
- *Reflecting*: Reflection sessions (*joint with UNAS 1709*) 5%
- *Planning, Researching, Collaborating*: Final project, including presentation and digital component (*joint with UNAS 1709*) 25%

Reading: Our readings for this course include **primary sources** (produced in historical contexts by historical actors) and **secondary sources** (analyses by historians and other scholars), including images, film, and music as well as written texts. Except for the three required books, all readings will be available via Canvas. Each Friday, I will email a guide to the following week's reading, occasionally containing a few *brief* media clips to supplement the week's readings. *Both lecture and discussion portions of each class meeting will assume that you have read the assigned text(s) beforehand. Please do so!*

Responses: Friday reading guide emails will also include discussion questions or exercises, sometimes addressing the readings for the week, sometimes asking you to draw a connection to the world beyond our syllabus. Before 6pm on Thursday, please submit a response to me by email (unless otherwise indicated). Approximately 150-200 words is plenty, though you are welcome to write more if you wish. I encourage you to be informal and exploratory in these responses—ask questions, identify areas of confusion, make connections.

Each week, sometime before Thursday at 6pm, please email me an informal reading response (appx. 150-200 words) raising questions, observations, and/or connections regarding one or more of the week's readings. You are encouraged to engage with questions from the weekly reading guide email.

Drafts & rewrites: I will be happy to meet during office hours or by appointment to read and comment on work in progress (up to the class before the due date). I will accept rewrites of I & II submitted within one week after I return graded assignments. (No rewrites on III or IV.) The final grade will be the average of the initial and rewrite grades.

Required books (any edition is fine; available at BC bookstore and online):

- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002 [1962]).
- Jacob Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Week 1: Should we be freaking out?

Monday, August 27 *Introduction*

Wednesday, August 29 *Environmental crisis and the modern world*

- Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), IX–52 (Introduction through Epilogue) [[link](#)].
- Rob Nixon, “Slow Violence and Environmental Storytelling,” *Nieman Storyboard* (June 13, 2011), <http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/slow-violence-and-environmental-storytelling/>.
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1–9.

Please also make an appointment for a quick 15-20 minute meeting with me in Stokes 274 during Week 2 or Week 3 (Tues 9/4 - Weds 9/12). If none of the available times slots work for you, please let me know, and we will find an alternative time.

Week 2: Plague & famine

****Intro meetings (please make an appointment)****

Friday, August 31 *Famines and plagues in the premodern world*

Monday, September 3 *NO CLASS—LABOR DAY*

Wednesday, September 5 *Exploration and empire*

- Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1–7, 171–216.

Friday, September 7 *Exercise: Close-reading a primary source*

- Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Joyce Chaplin (New York: Norton, 2018), 33–45 (preface, chapters I-II). (originally published in 1798)

Week 3: Natural disasters

Monday, September 10 *Finding meaning in floods*

- Konrad Lykosthenes, *The Doome: Warning All Men to the Iudgemente...*, trans. Stephen Batman (London: Ralph Nubery, 1581), entries for 1171–1205 C.E. (plus illustrations in 1557 Latin original).
- Eve Driver, “Coastal Cambridge,” *Harvard Political Review*, August 14, 2018, <http://harvardpolitics.com/redline/coastal-cambridge/>.
- Flood blues: Bessie Smith, “[Back-water Blues](#)” (1927) and “[Muddy Water](#)” (1927); Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, “[When the Levee Breaks](#)” (1929).

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Wednesday, September 12 The profits of disaster

- Phil O'Keefe, Ken Westgate, and Ben Wisner, "[Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters](#)," *Nature* 260 (1976), 566–567.
- "[Executive Summary--ProsperityNOLA: A Plan to Drive Economic Growth for 2018](#)," June 2013.
- Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Co, 2007) ([excerpt from the introduction](#))

Friday, September 14 Exercise: Making a historical argument

- Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 46-77 (chapters III-VII).

Week 4: Pollution

Monday, September 17 Filthy cities and toxic stories

- Lawrence Buell, "Toxic Discourse," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (April 1, 1998): 639–65.

Wednesday, September 19 Sanitation and infrastructural crisis

- Charles E. Rosenberg, [The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 [1962]), 1–9, 13–39 (Introduction and Chapter I: The Epidemic, 1832).
- Nikhil Anand, "The Banality of Infrastructure," *Just Environments* (June 27, 2017), <https://items.ssrc.org/the-banality-of-infrastructure/>.

Friday, September 21 Field Trip: Deer Island Wastewater Treatment Plant

- Charles Monroe Haar, *Mastering Boston Harbor: Courts, Dolphins, and Imperiled Waters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 21–25, 48–63, 115–133.

Week 5: Extinction

*Monday, September 24 The struggle for existence***Assignment 1 due***Wednesday, September 26 Extinction and invasion*

- H. E. Strickland and A. G. Melville, *The Dodo and Its Kindred* (London: Reeve, 1848), 3–7.
- Aldo Leopold, "The River of the Mother of God," in Aldo Leopold, *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*, ed. Susan L. Flader and J. Baird Callicott (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993 [1924]), 123–127.

Friday, September 28 Exercise: Historicizing objects & environments

- Camilla Røstvik, "'Feminine Waste Only!!!' A History of the UK Sanitary Bin in the Twentieth Century," *Technology's Stories*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.technologystories.org/feminine-waste-only/>.

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Week 6: Global toxicity

Monday, October 1 *Fallout*

- John Hersey, "III. Details are Being Investigated" in "[Hiroshima](#)," *The New Yorker* (August 31, 1946). (Wikipedia has a [list of characters + summary of parts 1 and 2](#) worth checking out before you get into our reading)

Tuesday, October 2, 6pm *Reflection Session: Environmental Crisis Story Slam, Part I*

Wednesday, October 3 *Indigenous peoples and environmental crisis*

- No reading for today; we will watch and discuss the documentary *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock*, dir. Josh Fox and Myron Dewey, 2017, 89 min.

Friday, October 5 *Agriculture and industry; how to read a book*

- Carson, *Silent Spring*, chapters 1–3, 16, and one of 4–15 (as assigned).



View of Donora, Pennsylvania, around the time of the fatal smog of 1948.

Photo from Donora Smog Museum, reproduced in Erin Peterman, "A Cloud With a Silver Lining: The Killer Smog in Donora, 1948," Pennsylvania Center for the Book Literary and Cultural Heritage Map of Pennsylvania (Spring 2009), <http://pabook2.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/DonoraSmog.html>, accessed 22 June 2018.

Week 7: Environments at war

Monday, October 8 *NO CLASS—COLUMBUS DAY / INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S DAY*

Wednesday, October 10 *War and nature*

Friday, October 12 *Cold war and catastrophic environmentalism*

- Jacob Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Week 8: Climate change

All of this week's readings are shared with UNAS 1709

Monday, October 15 How global climate became a scientific object

- IPCC. 2014. [Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report](#). Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC. pp. 2–25.
- Oreskes, Naomi. 2004. "The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change." *Science* 306 (5702): 1686–1686.

Wednesday, October 17 Modeling and simulations

- Steffen, W., et al. 2018. "Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (33): 8252–8259.
- Stern, N. H. 2007. "Economics, Ethics, and Climate Change." In *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*, 23–40.

Friday, October 19 Consensus, catastrophe, and (un)certainty

- Lomborg, B. 2007. "Global Warming: Our Many Worries." In *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming*, 53–112. New York: Knopf.
- Brysse, K., et al. 2013. "Climate Change Prediction: Erring on the Side of Least Drama?" *Global Environmental Change* 23 (1): 327–37.

Week 9: Work and play

Monday, October 22 Conservation and regulation

****We will meet from 2:00–2:50 (UNAS 1709 midterm from 1:00–1:50)****

*Tuesday, October 23, 6pm Reflection Session: Lecture by Gina McCarthy (former EPA Administrator), **Murray Room in Athletics Center***

Wednesday, October 24 Discussion of Gina McCarthy lecture

Friday, October 26 Nature and Identity

- Richard White, "Are you an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living? Work and Nature," in William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 171–185.
- Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 67–91.

****** Final Project groups assigned in class ******

Saturday, October 27 Optional (& fun!) field trip to Harvard Forest in central MA

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Week 10: NIMBY and environmental justice

Monday, October 29 *Presentation on environmental careers* **Assignment II due**

Tuesday, October 30, 6pm *Reflection Session: Environmental Crisis Story Slam, Part II*

Wednesday, October 31 *Racism, privilege, and environmental justice*

- Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, And Environmental Quality*, Third Edition (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2000), 1–20.
- Lisa Sun-Hee Park, *The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America's Eden* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 1-27.

Friday, November 2 *WORKSHOP I: Research skills*



Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge in Wells, Maine, June 2018.

Photos by Evan Hepler-Smith.

Week 11: Crises of knowledge: what is “the environment”?

Monday, November 5 *The nature of “nature”*

- Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 1–4, 113–128.
- William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1996), 69–90.
- Lee Vinsel and Andrew Russell, “Whitey on Mars,” *Aeon*, February 1, 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-a-mission-to-mars-morally-defensible-given-todays-real-needs>.

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Wednesday, November 7 *Nonhuman subjects and indigenous knowledge*

- Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 463–484.

Friday, November 9 *In-class debate*

Week 12: Crises of knowledge: the limits of certainty and control

Monday, November 12 *Risk*

- Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 3–14.
- Sheila Jasanoff, "Introduction" in *Learning From Disaster: Risk Management After Bhopal*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 1–21.

Wednesday, November 14 *Uncertainty, doubt, and denialism*

- Naomi Oreskes, "Science and Public Policy: What's Proof Got to Do with It?," *Environmental Science & Policy* 7, no. 5 (October 1, 2004): 369–83.
- Michael D. Gordin, "Separating the Pseudo from Science," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 17, 2012).

Friday, November 16 *WORKSHOP II: Presentation tools **Project Status Reports due***

Week 13: Thanksgiving

Monday, November 19 *Discussion + brainstorming on final project + assignments III-IV*

We will meet from 2:00–2:50 (UNAS 1709 will meet 1:00–1:50)

Weds-Fri, November 21-23 *NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING BREAK*

Week 14: Telling stories about environmental crisis

*** FINAL PROJECT GROUP MEETINGS WITH INSTRUCTOR (outside of class) ***

Monday, November 26 *From "Apocalypse Now" to "Apocalypse from Now On"?* **Assignment III due**

- Susan Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 80-95.

Tuesday, November 27, 6pm *Reflection Session: Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (Hayao Miyazaki, 1984), **O'Neill Library, Room 257 ***

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Wednesday, November 28 *Alternatives to crisis: Technological optimism*

- Stewart Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline: Why Dense Cities, Nuclear Power, Transgenic Crops, Restored Wildlands, and Geoengineering Are Necessary* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 1–24 plus one additional chapter (assigned in class).
- Carson, *Silent Spring*, chapter 17

Friday, November 30 *Alternatives to crisis: Living in the ruins*

- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), xiv, 1–25, 192–202.

Week 15: Final projects and final thoughts

Monday, December 3 *Catching up, wrapping up, and looking forward*

Wednesday, December 5 *Catching up, wrapping up, and looking forward*

Friday, December 7 **FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS**

Monday, December 10 *Closing reflections* **Assignment IV due**



Bumper sticker protesting restrictions on logging in the US Pacific Northwest.

John S. Wilson, *Living the Adventure* (blog), April 27, 2010, <http://johnswilson.blogspot.com/2010/04/two-tidbits-of-awesomeness.html>, accessed 22 June 2018.

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Assignment I: What was Malthus thinking?**Assignment overview**

In approximately four pages* (double-spaced, one-inch margins, 12-point font), answer one of the following questions and present a historical argument supporting your answer. Your argument must draw on evidence from the indicated chapter(s) of Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*; you may also use evidence from the Preface and chapters I-II.

- a) Pick one or more of the environmental crises we cover in weeks 2–4 (famine, plague, natural disasters, urban pollution). What role does Malthus think such crises play as causes and/or effects of the principle of population? (ch. VI-VII, pp. 64-77)
- b) How does Malthus depict the relationship between subsistence, social relations, and the principle of population within a specific “state of mankind”? You may either focus on Malthus’ discussion of one such “state of mankind” or compare his treatment of different ones. (ch. III-IV, pp. 46-55)
- c) How does Malthus think that money can either alleviate or worsen the effects of the principle of population? (ch. V, pp. 55-64)

* Approximately four pages = more than three full pages and no more than five full pages.

Bonus: Write a separate paragraph briefly describing a contemporary environmental crisis that fits what you argue that Malthus was thinking, or contradicts Malthus, or does a little bit of both. (*Worth one free pass on a weekly response email.*)

Assignment II: Was *Silent Spring* “catastrophic environmentalism”?

In approximately six pages* (double-spaced, one-inch margins, 12-point font), present a historical argument addressing the following prompt. Your essay should draw evidence from Carson, *Silent Spring* as a primary source (“what was Rachel Carson thinking?”) and engage Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature* as a secondary source.

Hamblin describes *Silent Spring* as an example of “a kind of catastrophic environmentalism” (163-64, quotation on 163). Maybe so; but the argument in *Silent Spring* has many parts. Hamblin’s claim may be more accurate for some than for others.

Choose one of chapters 4-15 of *Silent Spring*, detail its argument (“what was Carson thinking?”), and determine whether or not this specific part of Carson’s argument is an example of the historical phenomenon that Hamblin calls “catastrophic environmentalism.” You may draw additional evidence from chapters 1-3 and chapter 16 of *Silent Spring*, but your essay should focus on the argument Carson presents in one of chapter 4-15.

* Approximately six pages = more than five full pages, fewer than seven full pages

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A successful essay will accurately explain what Hamblin means by “catastrophic environmentalism,” summarize the argument that Carson presents in the chapter you have chosen, and present an argument grounded in specific evidence of how Carson’s argument does or does not fit Hamblin’s definition.

Assignment III: Perspectives on environmental crisis

Over Thanksgiving, ask a family member or friend—if possible, someone *with whom you expect to disagree*—about their experiences with environmental crisis or their concerns about environmental crisis. Your job is ****specifically not**** to argue with them or convince them of anything. Rather, by listening and asking questions, try to figure out their perspective on environmental crisis, including such factors as:

- their ethical values;
- their most important historical analogies and arguments;
- their ways of understanding cause and effect in nature and society;
- how they respond to crisis-talk and non-crisis-talk.

In an essay of approximately 3 pages, describe your interviewee’s perspective. Conclude your essay with a description of *how you felt* while conducting this interview.

Reflection Sessions: Environmental Crisis Story Slam

From 6-8pm on Tuesday, October 1 and Tuesday, October 30, we will meet and tell each other stories.

You can talk about a moment in which environmental crisis has entered your life, or the life of somebody close to you. You can elaborate upon the observations you’ve written in your response email for the weeks of 9/17 and 9/24. You can tell a similar kind of story about some other object that sustains you in our built environment and connects us to environments beyond our immediate surroundings.

Half of us will tell stories during each reflection session, and we’ll have plenty of time to respond to and reflect on each others’ stories. We will determine lineups for each session on Friday 9/28.

Guidelines:

- Please aim to tell a three-to-four minute long story. It’s worth doing a run-through! Time can get away from you.
- You will have a maximum of five minutes for your story. We will keep time, give you a warning at 4 minutes, and stop you at 5 minutes.
- No grades on these stories, and no right or wrong ways to tell them.

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Rubric for Assignments I and II

- Thesis:* Your paper should have a clearly stated thesis addressing the prompt. The best theses are both supportable and non-obvious.
- Argument:* You should support your thesis with a well-reasoned argument.
- Evidence:* Your argument should be based on appropriate, specific evidence (quoted or paraphrased), drawn from the sources specified in the assignment overview.
- Interpretation:* You should explain how your evidence supports your argument
- Structure:* The length of your paper should fall within the range specified in the assignment overview. It should be organized in paragraphs that introduce your thesis and argument, present each main point of this argument in a logical order, and conclude your argument, reiterating your thesis and noting why it matters.
- Clarity:* Your paper should be written in clear, understandable English. Errors that make your argument difficult to follow are a problem; occasional minor errors in grammar etc. are not.
- Citation:* Your paper must cite the sources of all quoted or paraphrased evidence using an acceptable citation style as discussed in class and posted on Canvas. Citation should be sufficient to allow a reader to locate any bit of evidence that you cite without too much trouble.

Collaboration & academic integrity

You are warmly encouraged to consult with one another and with others outside of class on your assignments. All individual work that you submit for evaluation should reflect your own thinking and writing about the topic. For questions about plagiarism and university policy, please refer to BC's [Academic Integrity policy](#).

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