

## Special Section: Global Environmental History

### Beginning in the Belly, Ending in the Atmosphere: An Approach to Teaching Global Environmental History

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As historian Donald Worster once remarked, “environmental history begins in the belly.”<sup>1</sup> Worster’s comment not only reflects the importance of food consumption as a multi-faceted relationship between humans and non-human nature, it also suggests the ambition of environmental historians to relate the personal to the global. To connect students with both meanings is among the goals of a course that I currently teach at Amherst College, “Global Environmental History of the Twentieth Century” (GEH). This introductory-level survey of global environmental history from 1900 to the present is a fourteen-week course, which focuses on Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and China. The class meets for two eighty-minute periods per week. GEH blends a lecture format with in-class discussions about readings and assignments. Enrollment ranges from 60 to 75 undergraduates, and students receive credit in either the history department or the environmental studies program. The course is a prerequisite for students majoring in environmental studies.

When developing GEH, I had three aims in mind for my students. The first was to help them investigate the ways in which societies and cultures outside the U.S. and Europe have interacted with their environments over the past century. The second was to introduce them to comparative and transnational methods in world history. The third was to show them the practical uses of environmental history. In addition to studying the past, GEH participants explore how to use historical knowledge in the formulation of policy recommendations and grassroots initiatives for addressing contemporary environmental issues. I integrated these experiences into the four units of my semester-long course on global environmental history. GEH begins with Latin America, proceeds to Sub-Saharan Africa, and then moves to China. In the fourth unit of the semester, students compare topics and themes from the three regions. Many of the readings, films, and assignments focus on food production and consumption. The final course sessions revolve around “atmospheric” issues – such as climate change – that transcend regional, national, and continental boundaries. When choosing the three geographical zones for GEH, I wanted to focus on places that are underrepresented in U.S. media coverage and inadequately addressed in many environmental history curricula. I struggled with my decision to eliminate India, North Africa, and the Pacific World from the course agenda. In the end, I opted for a pragmatic approach. The areas we study in GEH are places where I have travelled widely, sites where I have conducted research, locations that I have studied extensively, or territories that are not covered by my other course offerings. The GEH format could easily be adapted to accommodate other nations or regions.

I have also designed the course to integrate the “spatial turn” that history has undergone. In recent decades, historians

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between biodiversity protection and economic development. His book is useful for upending many of the basic assumptions that underpin North American approaches to wilderness conservation. Previously, I used Elizabeth C. Economy's text, *Beyond the Wilderness: Environmental Conservation in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). Ten years on from its publication, Economy's book is somewhat dated. Chapters 4 through 6, which focus on the institutional causes of China's environmental problems, are by far the most useful sections and retain their relevance. These chapters could easily be excerpted and assigned separately from the remainder of the text.

For the "World" unit, I am currently teaching Alan Weisman's *Worldwide: The Last True Wilderness and How We Lost It, Why We Need It, and How to Find It* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2007). Weisman's book, modeled after what Germans call a *Gedankenexperiment* (thought experiment), contemplates the destruction of human civilization and the subsequent rewilding of the planet. Despite the fact that *Nature*

Sunday Book Review editor Jennifer Schuessler accused Weisman of "giving way to the rhetoric of eco-hell re," students have been drawn to Weisman's imaginative use of environmental history.

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: During the second week of the semester, I will provide you with a list of possible essay topics for the three short papers that you will write this semester. Each of these topic questions will ask you to use your knowledge of environmental history to form, a+7tu4;[+ ]q;'';7'hq@ ]q;'';77[ ]q;'';7uvqt@

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