

Getting Over Wilderness:

Ideas of Nature for the Environmental Journalism

Fall 2006

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office hours: by appointment, Tuesdays 9:30-12:30

Course description:

This is a background course in the intellectual history behind the American environmental movement, from Henry David Thoreau and John Muir to Rachel Carson and her contemporary heirs. How have our culture's peculiarly religious ideas about nature, and fixation on wilderness, colored the way we cover the environment? Why are so many environmental stories framed as zero-sum contests between Man and Nature? How else might these stories be framed? Journalists writing about the environment are powerfully influenced by a set of cultural ideas that we Americans take for granted, but that in fact have little grounding in the science of ecology or history of the American landscape. We'll read environmental history, nature writing and writings in ecology; each student will write a substantial piece of environmental journalism based on a case study.

Expectations:

Students will attend and participate in all classes and do all the reading with care. Any absences, apart from illness or emergency, must be cleared in advance. No more than one such absence will be permitted. Students are expected to come on time with cell phones turned off. Students who enroll will be expected to put the reading and writing for this course at the center of their focus and energies for this semester.

Writing:

You'll write one substantial piece of narrative journalism (or reported essay) related to the class's case study, which will be the politics, ecology, and management of the Point Reyes National Seashore. You will be expected to take several research trips there, at least one with the class and others on your own as needed. You will identify a relevant story, deliver and write a pitch, and complete a first draft of a piece of between 3000 and 5000 words.

In addition, you will write a weekly one-page assignment on that week's reading, either a critique, set of questions for discussion, or personal response. This paper is due the day before the class meeting, at noon on Monday. It should be emailed to me as an attachment, slugged with your name and the class session number. Students may choose to skip one of these assignments over the course of the semester. All written submissions should be slugged with your name and also have your name, email, and phone number at the top of the first page; please paginate as well.

Class Schedule:

August 29: Session one

Introduction. Writing about nature in America. The structure of the course. What does it mean to be an “environmental journalist?” What, by contrast, is ecological journalism? What does one have to know to do it well? Procedures and expectations. In-class assignment.

Part I: The Wilderness Tradition

September 5: Session two

What is Nature, Anyway?

“Ideas of Nature” by Raymond Williams

The End of Nature by Bill McKibben

Introduction to Pt. Reyes

SEPTEMBER 8: TENTATIVE FIELD TRIP (SESSION THREE)

September 12: Session Four

American Forebears I: Emerson and Thoreau

“Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Walking;” “Ktaadin”; “Forest Succession” by Henry David Thoreau

Selections, *The Natural History of Point Reyes*

September 19: Session Five

American Forebears II: Walden

Walden by Henry David Thoreau

Excerpts, *Natural History of Point Reyes*

First story meeting

September 26: session six

Beyond Wilderness

William Cronon on Wilderness, and his critics

Cathedral Pines hypothetical (Harper’s Magazine, April 1991)

DEADLINE: Article queries

Part II: The Lens of History and Science

October 3: session seven

What is Environmental History?

Changes in the Land by William Cronon

Excerpt on bison from Tim Flannery’s *Eternal Frontier*

Pt Reyes history, tk.

October 10: no meeting, no reading. Schedule reporting trips to Pt Reyes.

October 17: session eight

20th Century Environmentalism

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson

The Endangered Species Act of 1973

October 24: session nine

History in Ecology

Discordant Harmonies by Daniel Botkin

Hypothetical

Part III: The Human Place in Nature: Agrarians and Deep Ecologists

October 31: session ten

From Utilitarianism to a Conservation Ethic

Dust Bowl Chapter in *Nature's Economy* by Donald Worster

Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold

Deadline: outlines

November 7: session eleven

Ecology in History

1491 by Charles C. Mann

class visit by Charles Mann

DEADLINE: research memos

November 14: session twelve

Earth First! And other Biocentrism

The Monkeywrench Gang by Edward Abbey

Readings TK on deep ecology

DEADLINE: article overtures

November 21: session thirteen

The New Agrarianism

The Unsettling of America by Wendell Berry

“Preserving Wildness” by Wendell Berry

November 28: session fourteen

Toward a Garden Ethic

Second Nature by Michael Pollan (selections)

The Botany of Desire by Michael Pollan

December 5: session fifteen

The Crisis of Environmentalism

The Death of Environmentalism by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus

And responses thereto at: www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-intro/
DEADLINE: article drafts

Books:

The End of Nature Bill McKibben
Walden Henry David Thoreau
Changes in the Land William Cronon
The Natural History of Point Reyes Jules Evans
1491 Charles C. Mann
Discordant Harmonies Daniel Botkin
A Sand County Almanac Aldo Leopold
Silent Spring Rachel Carson
The Monkeywrench Gang Edward Abbey
The Unsettling of America Wendell Berry
The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry
Second Nature Michael Pollan (note: can use Reader)
The Botany of Desire Michael Pollan

Reader:

“Ideas of Nature” by Raymond Williams
“Nature” entry in *Keywords* by Raymond Williams
“Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson
“Walking,” “Ktaadin”; “The Succession of Forest Trees” by Henry David Thoreau
Cronon essay on Wilderness from *Uncommon Ground* and responses (Gary Snyder etc)
John Muir, “A Windstorm in the Forest” (in Finch)
Only Man’s Presence Can Save Nature: Forum from *Harper’s Magazine*, April 1990
Gifford Pinchot reading TK
Dust Bowl chapter in *Nature’s Economy* by Donald Worster
The Endangered Species Act of 1973
TK readings on Deep Ecology and Dave Foreman
“Preserving Wildness” by Wendell Berry
Selections from *Second Nature* (“Nature Abhors a Garden,” “The Idea of a Garden”)
“The Death of Environmentalism” by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (on web)

Secondary Sources:

(read at least one during course of first half of semester)

Nature’s Economy by Donald Worster
The Machine in the Garden by Leo Marx
Wilderness and the American Mind by Roderick Nash

