Overview:

This class will examine how human society and the environment have shaped each other throughout history. We will proceed chronologically, starting with the dawn of agriculture, but also thematically, using case studies to examine broader trends and topics.

Two main questions will inform our study. First, how have humans thought about, constructed, and debated “nature” as an idea and concept? We will see how nature, far from being an independent, unchanging entity separate from human existence, is in fact a social and cultural construct whose definition is continually changing.
Second, how have humans affected the environment, and how have environmental factors shaped human history? We will study how human history has played out within parameters defined by environmental conditions, and how those environmental parameters have themselves been changed by human development.

The goal of the course is to build an understanding of the role of the environment in key moments of human history, while developing a critical perspective on categories that are made to seem natural – like “nature” itself. Moreover, you will gain literacy in the historian’s craft: reading and interrogating sources, developing a narrative, and writing evidence-based arguments.

**Course Structure and Assignments:**

The course is based on class lectures, readings, and written assignments. Lectures will introduce topics and provide context to assigned readings, which go into greater depth on case studies and themes. Therefore, you should come to class having completed the reading assigned to that class.

*Short written pieces:*

Over the course of the semester, you will write three short assignments of 2-4 pp each, worth a total of 30% of your final grade. These assignments will get you thinking more deeply about important themes of environmental history while practicing a key historical skill: analyzing texts and making written arguments.

Each assignment will be based on an additional reading. The first objective of the written assignment is to provide analysis of the reading. Describe the author’s key point and contribution to the field of environmental history (this is much more than a mere summary of the piece: I want you to describe what the author’s big point is, and why it matters).

Next, share your analysis and thoughts on the piece and how it relates to the theme of the assignment. Put the reading into conversation with other readings and class lectures (since the assignments are fairly short, you will likely only have room to compare one or two, so choose wisely). Do the readings support one another, complement one another, or contradict one other? Shed light on each other somehow? Remember that your claims need to be supported by specific references to the texts (with correct quotations, paraphrasing, and footnotes).

Explain your thoughts and ideas about the piece and what it tells us about environmental history. This is not as simple as saying “this article sucks and is boring” (though hopefully you don’t think that). I want insightful analysis.

Written assignments will be announced in class. I will give you the theme and additional reading at the end of that day’s lecture and you will have one week to finish it.

Over the course of the semester, five written assignments will be offered, but you only have to complete three. So you have the flexibility to choose which assignments to undertake. Choose wisely! If you wish, you may also write more than the minimum three assignments; I will take your three highest grades. And remember: you must complete a minimum of three.
Review exams:

There will be two exams: a mid-term held before spring break and another on the final day of class. These will each be worth 15% of your final grade. I hesitate to call them exams, as they will consist of straightforward short answer questions to test your grasp of lectures and discussions. I am not looking to trick you or stump you, just to make sure you have a sound understanding of the main concepts discussed in class.

End of term assignment:

The end of semester assignment is an 8-10 pp written piece, worth 40% of your final grade. The goal of this piece is for you to apply the two key questions of the course (mentioned above in the course overview) in a more in-depth historical study on a landscape of your choice.

In this assignment you will choose a landscape and investigate its environmental history. How has it been constructed culturally as a landscape, how have people come to think of it as a place in nature (or not in nature)? How has it affected and been affected by human activity? Preferably, you will choose a landscape that you have a personal connection to. Think creatively. It could be a national park you have visited, the street you grew up on, a farmer’s market or supermarket you shop at, or the farm your great grandmother singlehandedly ran.

In the essay you will describe the culture of the landscape and the history of how it came to be constructed that way. You will also describe how the landscape has affected human activity there and how human activity has caused changes in the landscape.

In short, you will break down the cultural assumptions of the nature of a certain place by providing the historical context of its material and cultural development. In doing so, you will need to write as a historian does, by interrogating written sources and arguing a thesis through a narrative based on written evidence.

To get you started on thinking about a topic, you will submit a 1-2 pp outline and thesis statement four weeks before the final paper is due that explains your chosen landscape and indicates your analysis of its cultural and environmental history. You will also list some of the sources you plan to employ. This will give me a chance to provide feedback on your topic and some suggestions for where to take it.

Evaluation:

3 x Short written assignments (choose at least three out of five possible topics), 10% of final grade each (top three grades if more than three completed) = 30%
2 x Review exams, 15% each = 30%
1 x Summary of final paper = 10%
1 x Final paper= 30%

Late policy:

You will be docked points for assignments handed in late: five percentage points for the first day, and two percentage points for each subsequent day (including weekend days). If you have a compelling reason why your assignment will be late, let me know as soon as possible, but this is no guarantee you won’t be penalized for being late.
Attendance, Laptops, Phones and Classroom Conduct:

In this class, attendance will not be taken and you will not be docked marks if you don’t come to class. What you will get from this class depends on what you put into it, and I trust you to make the best use of your time. Be forewarned, however, that you can’t pass the course if you don’t come to lectures and pay attention, and do the assigned readings. Moreover, the five short written assignments will be announced randomly in class. You are responsible for your grade and for keeping up to date on the assigned work.

If you bring a laptop to class, use it to take notes only (but what’s wrong with pen and paper?). If you plan to chat, write emails, watch Netflix, or browse facebook, don’t bother coming to class. Similarly, please silence or turn off your phone and put it away. If you have an emergency phone call, please step out into the hallway to take it. Otherwise, do not use your phone in class. If you don’t respect these policies, I will ask you to leave.

Please show respect for your classmates and me and minimize other disruptions. If you need to leave class early, please take a seat near the door so you can leave quietly, and if you arrive late, take a seat near the door as quietly as you can.

Academic Integrity and Writing Style:

Rutgers takes academic integrity very seriously. This extends beyond plagiarism or passing off another’s work as your own: improper paraphrasing or citation can be construed as breaches of academic integrity, even if unintentional. Take the time to review the university’s policy on academic integrity here: http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/. This is your responsibility.

A very useful primer on proper paraphrasing, citation, and bibliographic methods is provided by Dalhousie University and can be found here: http://www.dal.ca/faculty/arts/history/current-students/style-guide.html. Rutgers Libraries also provide very useful research guides that can help you find resources for your final assignment.

I value direct, bold, straightforward writing in plain, simple language. As George Orwell said, avoid clichés like the plague. Similarly, avoid flowery, empty speech: if your essay starts off sounding like “Since the dawn of time, nature has been an important factor affecting the development of changes in human history,” you’re doing it wrong. I grade for the content of your argument and your organization, not how fancy or smart your writing sounds. When in doubt, make it simple and straightforward.

The best guide to writing is Strunk and White’s The Elements of Style. It is very short and has been published since forever, so you should be able to find a copy for very cheap. If you follow its prescriptions you’ll be a better writer for life.

Class Schedule:

1. Introduction to the class and the syllabus.
2. What is Environmental History?

3. Agriculture, Climate, and the Nomad-Farmer Frontier

4. Europe’s Ecological Expansion

5. Changes in the Land in Eastern North America

6. Sugar and Slavery
   “Sugar? Sure, but Salted With Meaning,” *New York Times*, [http://nyti.ms/1kZVZ7s](http://nyti.ms/1kZVZ7s)
   “Rarely One for Sugarcoating,” *New York Times*, [http://nyti.ms/1k16Tt6](http://nyti.ms/1k16Tt6)

7. Food, the Columbian Exchange, and Africa

8. Changing Environments, Shifting Power
   Or:

9. Cotton and Slavery

10. The Market Revolution and Globalization
11. The Industrial Revolution
Selection, Sakai.

12. Early Conservation: National Parks, Gender, and Race

13. Cities and Supply Chains

14. The Dust Bowl and the New Deal
Reading: TBD.

15. Midterm exam

Spring Break

16. Rivers and the West

17. Environment and the Cold War
Final paper summaries due

18. The Beginnings of the Modern Environmental Movement

19. Land, Property, and Wealth
Reading: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Case for Reparations*, theatlantic.com
Summaries returned with comments

20. Essay writing workshop

21. Chemicals, Endocrine Disruptors, and Our Selves
22. Commodities of the New Millennium I: Oil  

23. Commodities of the New Millennium II: Drugs  

24. Unnatural Disasters  
Reading: TBD

25. Urban Communities, Urban Renewal, and Gentrification  

26. Climate Change and Denial  
Final papers due

27. Challenges of Environmental Justice  

28. Class wrap-up and final exam