Course Description

“The city has blossomed into a scholarly frontier of environmental history,” writes Chris Sellers in a recent overview of the subject. While early scholarship often emphasized wilderness, rural landscapes, and the conservation and preservation of “wild” places, recent trends in the field show increased focus on more urbanized areas, where most of us spend most of our time, and where much of our thinking about “nature” and “environment” has been formed. Cities are the sites of humanity’s greatest environmental alterations, and, though they seem the most artificial of environments, cities are never removed from nature and natural forces (as Hurricane Katrina demonstrated, for example). Moreover, the metropolis and its hinterlands (locally and globally) are intricately connected in complex social, economic, and environmental systems. And they are frequently the sites of environmental politics, activism, and efforts to achieve environmental justice.

This course examines the American city, from the colonial period to the present, focusing particular attention on its environmental impacts and consequences. Cities are at the heart of American historical development and experience—as engines of economic development,
geographical expansion, and population growth, and as places of new social and cultural expression, of dynamic natural and built landscapes. They have been at the center of Americans’ complex “dialogue” with nature for nearly 400 years.

Required readings will include both primary sources and secondary materials, some of which will be available via Blackboard. Students will be evaluated based on their performance on two exams, one paper assignment, and the quality of their participation in class discussion.

Course Format & Requirements
This course will combine lecture with discussion, often weaving the two together to make class sessions interactive. Brief lectures will generally build upon, not simply recapitulate, readings. Students are responsible for completing reading assignments by the time indicated on the syllabus. These assignments will often provide the basis for class activity; students are expected to attend all class meetings and participate actively. Note: because of the critical role of discussion in this course, excessive absence from class (more than 4 absences) will result in a failing grade. Grades will be assigned according to students’ performance on the following:

- Midterm examination (30 percent).
- Paper/annotated document (see below) (30 percent).
- Final examination (30 percent).
- Quality of class participation (10 percent).

Academic integrity is important. I will hold all students to the UO “Standards of Conduct.” Plagiarism will not be tolerated; all work must be your own, written for this class.
Annotated Document Assignment

As if you were contributing to a collection of annotated documents on the environmental history of cities in colonial America and the U.S., select an interesting, illuminating, or significant document and provide a short introduction, annotations, two or three questions for discussion, and a short explanation of why you chose it.

Selection of the document: You may choose a relevant primary source from any period of American history, but your selection should be short (no more than a 2-3 pages) and distinctive. Primary sources may vary considerably and might include letters or journal entries, official documents or reports, charts or maps, literary or artistic works. It can be a visual rather than textual, but do not underestimate the complexity of reading historic images. Do not simply recycle a document from some existing collection. If you choose a longer document, you must edit it for length, making sure that the excerpt is clear and informative, and that your introduction or annotations offer necessary context and explain ellipses.

Introduction: Your introduction should briefly (in approximately 500 words) explain the origin and author or producer of the document, place it in some context, offer necessary background information, and perhaps suggest how and why one might read it profitably.

Copy of the document: Include a copy of the document, with a full citation to its original source. (A scanned or electronic version is fine.)

Annotations: The document should be lightly annotated, as necessary and appropriate, to allow readers to understand obscure terms and important references. In addition, include a section of brief interpretive readings (3-5, approximately a paragraph) of elements, passages, or sections of the document that highlight or model how readers might analyze, interpret, or contextualize it.

Questions for consideration: Following the document, provide two or three short, key discussion questions that might aid students in assessing the meaning, significance, and implications or consequences of the primary source.

Explaining your choice: In approximately 250 words, explain how and why you selected this particular document.

This assignment should be submitted electronically in a word file, or as a PDF. Due in class during Week 8 (February 26, in class).
Learning Objectives & Outcomes
By the end of the term, you should be able to:

- Trace the history of environmental ideas and practices in, and emanating from, American cities from the colonial period to the present.
- Explain American cities as “landscape”—that is, as physical space that is simultaneously natural and cultural, even when seemingly highly artificial.
- Trace American urban environmental history as a process that is culturally diverse and politically contested.
- Critically analyze and interpret “primary” historical sources, the basis for historical description, analysis, and interpretation.
- Write in-class essays that present and develop your own argument or thesis, illustrated and supported by historical evidence.
- Assess contemporary urban spaces in the U.S. in terms of the past that created or shaped them.

Assigned Books and Other Readings

*In addition, a number of required readings may be accessed through Blackboard.*
Course Schedule

Week 1: The Urban Idea and American Ambivalence.

*How and why have Americans been ambivalent about cities or even anti-urban in their outlook? How, conversely, have cities been critical in shaping the American experience socially, economically, and physically?*

*What is a city and what relationship does it have to “nature”?*

*Tuesday, January 6: Introduction.*

*Thursday, January 8: Urbanism and anti-urbanism in America.*


Week 2: Early American City

*How and why did cities emerge in colonial America? How did they relate to the colony, metropole, Atlantic World? How did they organize nature and affect environmental experience or alter environments nearby and more distantly?*


Week 3: Antebellum City: Commerce, Urban Growth, and Its Consequences

How and why did cities grow in the antebellum period as engines of commerce and economic development? What problems attended such growth, human and environmental? How were such problems addressed, and in turn what were the environmental consequences of such solutions?

January 20: Antebellum Boston.


Week 4: The Industrializing City

How, why, and where did Americans begin to industrialize? How did the growth of manufacturing transform American landscapes and Americans’ sense of space and the relationship between the country and city? How did industrial production transform cities—what were the proximate and distant environmental consequences? Was there a particular American mode of industrialization, was the U.S. “exceptional”?


Week 5: The Metropolis and the Great West: New Orleans and Chicago

How did the city create its hinterlands, how did such hinterlands enable the metropolis? How did cities create a “second nature”? How did technology transform the city, and what were the environmental consequences of such transformation?

February 3: Mid-American metropolises: Chicago and New Orleans.

**February 5: Midterm Exam.**

Reading: Kelman, 87-156; Cronon, 97-259.

Week 6: Parks, Nature, Wilderness

How did cities reimagine nature and conserve it or reconstruct it in urban spaces? What were origins of urban green space? How “artificial” were/are cities, how “natural”? How did cities help to “create” wilderness and preserve it? How and why did Americans begin to construct “suburbs”?


Week 7: Urban Immigration, Ethnicity, Race, and Environmental Justice

What environmental problems have American cities faced, and how did they particularly affect the poor, particularly newly arrived immigrants and migrants? Were such problems gendered, class specific, or racially and ethnically experienced? How (and to what extent) were such problems solved, and did such solutions create new problems? In reform movements, can we see the roots of an environmental justice movement?

February 17: Congestion, pollution, and health.

February 19: Experiencing cities from the bottom.

Reading: Kelman, 157-221. On Blackboard: brief excerpts from Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900); Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906); Jane Addams, “Public Activities and
Week 8: The Modern and Postmodern City: Los Angeles

How did new technologies, values, interests, and circumstances transform the built landscapes and spaces of American cities? Did cities become more artificial or more able to transcend environmental constraints? What sort of environmental disasters did cities precipitate, and how were such disasters understood, experienced, and addressed?

February 24: Making Modern Los Angeles.
February 26: Late Modern Los Angeles.


Week 9: Cities and Suburbs in the late 20th Century

March 5: Modern/postmodern LA and its environs.

Reading: Kelman, 197-221; begin reading Ernest Callenbach, Ecotopia.


The Los Angeles River, ca. 1990s.

February 26: Annotated Document assignment due in class.
Week 10: Ecotopia/Dystopia?
March 10: Urbanity and the Cities of the Pacific Northwest.
March 12: Conclusions.


Final Examination, 8 a.m. Tuesday, March 17, 2015.