History 97d: What Is Environmental History?

Spring 2017 – Tuesdays 12-3pm
Professor Ian Miller

This section gives new History concentrators an introduction to environmental history. Most historians leave the natural world out of the story, but environmental historians regard nature as the inescapable context for human history, including the human impact on nature. We will explore how the histories of the environment and of humans can (and perhaps should) be written together. Is there a "natural archive" which historians can consult in parallel with conventional libraries and archives? Do places have "biographies," just as people do? Can natural entities (mountains, dogs, rivers, microbes, climate) have "agency" in the same way human actors can?

Tentative topics for 2017:

Unit 1: Turning Events to Histories

What does environmental history narrate? Is it the history of environmentalism, environmental change, or environmental crisis? Or is it something else? How does it differ from other kinds of history? Is history writing always an act of *power*? If so, who benefits and how? How does this apply in the case of environmental history?

- What is (or *isn't*) Environmental History?

Unit 2: The History of Environmental History

How do historical interpretations change, accumulate, modify each other, and return? Where are the most salient differences between environmental history and other forms of history or academic writing? Couldn't almost *any* topic be seen as an environmental topic? Where is the line between the sciences and history?

- Narrative and Power: Who or What Counts and How?
- Empire and Environment

Unit 3: Getting Dirty (or Dusty): Material Context and Primary Sources

What is a primary source for most historians and how do environmental historical sources differ? How do these various kinds of information come together most fruitfully for environmental historians? Perhaps more than any other genre of history, environmental history is focused on place and material context.

- *The Organic Machine* and the Importance of Place
- Archives of Extinction: Of Beef, Bison and Birds at Harvard

Unit 4: Synthesis

- The History of the Future?
(readings on the anthropocene, climate change, and the current mass extinction)