

# Hist 007: The History of Humanity on a Changing Planet



## Essential Information:

**Lectures:** Mondays and Wednesdays, 2:00-2:50 PM, ICC 103.

**Professor:** Dr. Dagomar Degroot. Email: [dd865@georgetown.edu](mailto:dd865@georgetown.edu). Website: [DagomarDegroot.com](http://DagomarDegroot.com).

**Professor's Office Hours:** Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:00-4:00 PM, ICC 617B.

**Teaching Assistant:** Douglas McRae. Email: [dvm23@georgetown.edu](mailto:dvm23@georgetown.edu).

**Teaching Assistant's Office Hours:** Tuesdays, 2:00-4:00 PM, ICC 617B.

**Course Website:** [hist007.weebly.com](http://hist007.weebly.com)

## Course Description:

Roughly two hundred thousand years ago, anatomically modern human beings evolved on the African Savannah. Their big brains and nimble appendages helped them adapt to a world rocked by violent climate changes, and they quickly spread across the planet. They soon overwhelmed other sapient species, and gradually developed ways of bending nature to their benefit. Eventually, they broke with all other life on Earth by self-consciously transforming nature on a global scale. The pace of this grand experiment has quickened of late, raising the prospect of a very uncertain future.

In this course, we will contextualize that future by exploring the deep history of human relationships with environments around the world. You will learn about the discipline of **environmental history**, which draws from both the sciences and the humanities to explore how humanity has altered, and been altered by, the nonhuman world. As environmental historians, we will travel through 200,000 years of time, stopping to consider some of the most important examples of humans interacting with nature on a grand scale.

*Please note that, if you have received or expect to receive AP or IB credit or placement for History, you cannot take HIST 007 for credit.*

## Course Goals:

Like other courses offered by the Department of History, this course will help you:

1. Gain a deeper appreciation of the nature and practice of history as a discipline, and as the study, based on evidence, of human experiences, interactions, and relationships as they change over time.
2. Learn that history does not consist of a simple succession of self-evident facts, and that evidence-based interpretation and analysis are central to all historical work.
3. Hone reading, writing, and oral communication skills.
4. Develop your capacity to think historically: to situate events and developments in their historical context for the purpose of critical analysis.
5. Expand your ability to engage with complex causal analysis, and to articulate arguments that integrate supporting evidence and analytical commentary.
6. View the world from perspectives other than your own.

This course in particular will also help you:

1. Understand historical relationships between environmental changes and human activities as they played out through deep time.
2. Broaden your appreciation for diverse scholarly disciplines, and their distinct ways of deciphering the past.
3. Appreciate the human and environmental contexts behind present-day environmental crises.

## Breakdown:

Participation:	20%
Digital Presentation:	10%
Museum Assignment:	20%
Book Review:	20%
Exam:	30%



## Evaluation:

### Participation:

You will earn half your participation grades for attending seminar. The other half will reflect both the quantity and especially the quality of your comments. When we break into groups for debates and primary source exercises, I will evaluate your group participation. If you want top grades, I strongly encourage you to keep notes from your readings. You should aim for at around two pages of single-spaced notes per week.

### Digital Resource Presentation:

#### PRESENTATIONS BEGIN ON 23 SEPTEMBER

Starting in our third discussion seminar, one or two students per seminar will give a presentation that evaluates a non-academic, born-digital resource relevant to that week's topic. The resource can be a website, a video game, even a movie, but it cannot be a journal article, a book, or a copy of a primary source. You are urged to find something more original than an encyclopedia article.

You will carefully analyze the digital source alongside weekly course readings, asking such questions as: who created the source? For whom? How? How reliable is the historical information provided by the source? How can we use it?

In discussion, you will give a 15-minute presentation that analyzes both the strengths and weaknesses of your digital source as a means of learning about the past. You are encouraged but not required to use PowerPoint.

Your grade will reflect the strength of your presentations, with bonus points if you explore a particularly unusual or challenging source. This assignment will help us weigh what diverse digital sources can tell us about the (environmental) past: both where they excel, and where they fall short.

You will receive a presentation schedule in the first seminar.

### Museum Assignment:

DUE DATE: 12 OCTOBER

Venture beyond the classroom and find an exhibit in a Washington, D.C. museum. Now, write a five-page environmental history of the topics in your exhibit. Make sure you begin your paper by describing the exhibit and what it represents.

Support your paper with **at least** four books. You may also use articles, but one book will equal two articles. In other words: you may use two books and four articles, one book and six articles, or three books and two articles.

Environmental History Book Review:

DUE DATE: 21 NOVEMBER

Write a five-page book review that evaluates the strengths and possible weaknesses of a short but important book in the discipline of environmental history. The books you may review are:

Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*.

John Richards, *The World Hunt: An Environmental History of the Commodification of Animals*.

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*.

All are widely available in local libraries, and can be purchased for less than ten dollars on Amazon. All of them touch on topics that we will explore from 24 October to 18 November.

A good book review will give the author's argument, describe how she or he proves it, and explain its significance. It will then evaluate the quality of the argument, the evidence used to support it, and the clarity of the presentation. In other words: a review should never simply describe what an author does in a book!

Exam:

DATE: 16 DECEMBER 12:30-2:30 PM

LOCATION: ICC 103

The exam will **likely** be divided into three sections:

1. Multiple choice.
2. Images (possibly including a map, graph, or painting).

3. Essays (either one long answer or several short answers).

Questions will use information from both your readings **and** your lectures, including guest lectures. You will receive further details in lecture.

### **Grading Criteria:**

*Each of these criteria will be worth approximately a third of your grade:*

#### Clarity:

Are you using words that appropriately and formally express your meaning? Are your points sourced correctly? Do your sentences precisely express your meaning, and are they grammatically correct? Is there a clear thesis that presents an argument and outlines how that argument will be defended? Is there a coherent organization that culminates in a conclusion that references the thesis?

#### Research:

Are your secondary sources serious works of scholarship, and are they relevant to your argument? Do your primary sources illuminate the issue you are investigating, and to what extent? Are those primary sources relevant to your argument, and do you present them in the context of your secondary sources? Is your interpretation of your primary sources creative but nuanced?

#### Ideas:

How creative and nuanced are your arguments? Are you merely repeating the claims of other scholars, or are you evaluating them against their colleagues, and against primary sources (where you are asked to use them)? To what extent can you build new knowledge rather than re-interpret old ideas?

### **Required Course Texts:**

John R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Brooke, John L. *Climate Change and the Course of Global History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Ruddiman, William. *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum: How Humans Took Control of Climate*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

McNeill, J. R. *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

You may find one or more of these books freely available online, through your Georgetown library resources.

## **Important Notes:**

### House Rules:

You may use your laptops or tablets to take notes or to look up information in class. However, you may **not** use your phones, and you may **not** record your professor's lectures. You may also not access social media in class, which is distracting both for you and for your classmates.

Do not show up late to lectures or discussions. This detracts from your learning and disturbs your classmates. If you are repeatedly late, your professor may lower your participation grade without informing you.

### Emailing Us:

Those who teach large survey courses usually place limits on email correspondence, and we are no exception. If you have a question or comment that requires substantial reflection and discussion, hold on to it and come to our office hours. Note that your professor has office hours right after class. They are your opportunity to chat about your assignments, tests, or participation. In particular, if you are unhappy about a grade you **must** come to the office hours of the person who graded your work.

You may, however, email your professor or TA if you need to be absent from discussion. Consult the schedule on our course website to see which of us will be directing your discussion on the date you plan to be absent.

### Submitting Assignments:

Assignments are due **at the beginning of class**. Any assignment submitted after the first 15 minutes of class is late. Late assignments will receive a 5%/day penalty. We will not grade assignments that are more than one week late, unless you have negotiated an extension with us (see below).

### Extensions:

You may ask your professor for a **short** extension *before the assignment is due*. I am more likely to grant your request if you A) give me a convincing explanation for your tardiness; B) give me a roadmap that outlines how you will complete your assignment; and C) propose a new due date.

I will only grant requests for an extension on or after the assignment due date in truly exceptional circumstances (a death in the family, for example, or a very serious illness). In such cases, I may ask for written verification.

Be sure to contact your deans in case of absences, difficulties meeting due dates, and other problems.

#### Missing Assignments:

If you fail to hand in an assignment, you will receive a zero for that assignment. You will not fail the course, but your ability to pass the course will be in serious jeopardy. You will **not** receive a message from your professor or your TA that inquires about your missing assignment. We expect you to handle your obligations yourself.

#### Missing Discussions:

You have only **one** excused absence per term. If you think that you will need to miss several seminars for significant and predictable reasons (such as religious observances, or University-sponsored athletic events), you must inform your professor of the specific circumstances and dates **at the start of the term**.

I will try to accommodate requests for a reasonable number of such absences. You must make sure that the details of the situation are clear to me early on, so that you may have a chance to enroll in a different class if I cannot accommodate your circumstances.

Note that you receive a grade for every discussion you attend. If you do not attend a discussion and you have already had your one excused absence, you will receive a grade of **zero** for the discussion you missed. This will significantly lower your overall grade.

#### Taking the Exam:

There are **no** alternative, “make up,” or rescheduled final exam times. If you have a conflict, you will take the conflicting exam on the conflict day as scheduled by the registrar.

Students should check exam times and make sure they do not have a conflict. Students who, for legitimate university reasons **confirmed by the dean’s office** (a death in family, for instance), cannot take the final on the scheduled date must take the final on the conflict day, no matter what their prior travel arrangements are.

#### Academic Honesty:

Plagiarism is not just about copying someone else’s writing. Any time you present ideas without correctly citing them, you are committing plagiarism. This is the most serious intellectual offense you can commit at a university, and we take it very seriously.

It is **your** responsibility to familiarize yourself with the [Georgetown University Undergraduate Honor System](#). It is your professor's duty to refer academic misconduct - including plagiarism - to the Georgetown Honor Council. If the Council decides that you have plagiarized, you will fail this class and suffer additional penalties.

### Beyond the Course:

Your professor is committed to supporting survivors of sexual misconduct, which includes relationship violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault. However, university policy requires faculty to report any disclosures about sexual misconduct to the Georgetown Title IX Coordinator, who directs the University's response to sexual misconduct.

Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professionals who provide support and assistance to survivors of sexual assault and other forms of sexual misconduct. They include:

Jen Schweer, MA, LPC, Associate Director of Health Education Services for Sexual Assault Response and Prevention. Contact: (202) 687-0323, [jls242@georgetown.edu](mailto:jls242@georgetown.edu).

Erica Shirley, Trauma Specialist, Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS). Contact: (202) 687-6985, [els54@georgetown.edu](mailto:els54@georgetown.edu).

More information about campus resources and reporting sexual misconduct can be found at: <http://sexualassault.georgetown.edu>.

### **Schedule:**

- *This schedule may be changed by your professor.*
- *Please complete all readings by the start of your discussion on Fridays.*

### **Section 1: Introducing New Histories**

#### **Week 1**

31 August: Course introduction.

2 September: Introductory discussion.

#### Reading:

- No readings for your first week.

#### **Week 2**

5 September: NO CLASS (Labor Day).

7 September: Introduction to world and interdisciplinary histories. Grappling with human/environment interactions.

9 September: Discussion.

## DIGITAL RESOURCE PRESENTATIONS ASSIGNED

### Reading:

- J. R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory*, 42 (2003), 5-43.
- Sam White, "Climate Change in Global Environmental History." In *A Companion to Global Environmental History*, edited by John McNeill and Erin Maulden, 394-410. London: Blackwell, 2012.
- McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 3-8.

## **Section 2: The Deep Past**

### **Week 3**

12 September: Earth before people: an introduction to big history and the deep past.

14 September: Human evolution on an unstable planet.

16 September: Discussion.

### Reading:

- Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History*, 1-54.
- Ruddiman, *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum*, 1-24.

### **Week 4**

19 September: Migrations and extinctions.

21 September: Domestication and agriculture.

23 September: Discussion.

## FIRST DIGITAL RESOURCE PRESENTATION

### Reading:

- Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History*, 55-164.
- McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 9-24.

### **Week 5**

26 September: The first complex civilizations: environmental causes and consequences.

28 September: Environmental crises of ancient empires.

30 September: Discussion.

Reading:

- Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History*, 165-212.
- Ruddiman, *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum*, 55-75.

**Week 6**

3 October: The mysterious catastrophe of 536 CE.

5 October: NO CLASS

7 October: Discussion.

Reading:

- McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 25-81.
- Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History*, 317-349.

**Section 2: The Global Middle Ages****Week 7**

10 October: NO CLASS (Columbus Day).

12 October: Medieval climate change: global warming and its consequences.

14 October: Discussion.

Reading:

- McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 82-115.
- Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History*, 350-392.

**Week 8**

17 October: The “organic economy.”

19 October: Collapse: Mayan drought, European rains, and the Black Death.

21 October: Discussion.

Reading:

- Turner, B. L. and Jeremy A. Sabloff, “Classic Period Collapse of the Central Maya Lowlands: Insights About Human–Environment Relationships for Sustainability,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109 (2012): 13908–14
- Media-Elizalde, Martín and Eelco J. Rohling. “Collapse of Classic Maya Civilization Related to Modest Reduction in Precipitation.” *Science* 335 (2012): 956-59.
- Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History*, 413-466.

### **Section 3: The Early Modern World**

#### **Week 9**

24 October: Conquering the world with plants, animals, and microbes.  
 26 October: Douglas McRae guest lecture on early modern Brazil.  
 28 October: Discussion.

#### **Reading:**

- McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 116-212.

#### **Week 10**

31 October: The seventeenth-century Global Crisis. A climate change disaster story?  
 2 November: The Dutch Golden Age. A climate change success story?  
 4 November: Discussion.

#### **Listening:**

- “A Conversation with Dr. Geoffrey Parker.” Available at:  
[historicalclimatology.com/interviews/a-conversation-with-dr-geoffrey-parker](http://historicalclimatology.com/interviews/a-conversation-with-dr-geoffrey-parker)

#### **Reading:**

- Morgan Kelly and Cormac Ó Gráda. “The Waning of the Little Ice Age: Climate Change in Early Modern Europe.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44:3 (2014), 301-325.
- Sam White, “The Real Little Ice Age.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44:3 (Winter, 2014): 327-352.
- Geoffrey Parker, “Crisis and Catastrophe: The Global Crisis of the Seventeenth Century Reconsidered.” *American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 1053-1079.

#### **Week 11**

7 November: Climate changes and human responses in the Arctic.  
 9 November: NO CLASS  
 11 November: Discussion.

#### **Reading:**

- Ruddiman, *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum*, 117-146.
- Lawrence Culver, “Seeing Climate Through Culture.” *Environmental History* 19 (2014): 311-318.

- Sam White, “Animals, Climate Change, and History.” *Environmental History* 19 (2014): 319-328.
- Endfield, Georgina H. “Exploring Particularity: Vulnerability, Resilience, and Memory in Climate Change Discourses.” *Environmental History* 19 (2014): 303-310.

## **Week 12**

14 November: The environmental consequences of colonization.

16 November: The world hunt: whales, beavers, and dodos.

18 November: NO DISCUSSION.

### Reading:

- McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 155-267.

## **Section 4: The Modern Anthropocene**

## **Week 13**

21 November: Global scientific revolutions and new ideas about nature.

23 November: Industrialization and a new world economy.

25 November: NO DISCUSSION (Thanksgiving Holiday).

### Reading:

- McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, xxi-117.

## **Week 14**

28 November: The Anthropocene and the Great Acceleration.

30 November: Q and A with J. R. McNeill.

1 December: Discussion.

### Reading:

- McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 118-266.

## **Week 15**

5 December: Global warming: the science and the skepticism.

7 December: Environmental history for an uncertain future. Exam outline.

9 December: Exam and course review in discussion.

### Reading:

- McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 267-362.