

Sample Questions from Past 460 Final Exams

Questions Covering Material Since the Midterm Exam:

Over the course of the twentieth century, advocates for environmental conservation have argued for quite different policies regarding the appropriate roles of government in shaping human uses of the environment. Why did government look like part of the solution to some and part of the problem to others? Use specific political arguments from at least three different historical figures or episodes to support your answer.

In the second half of the semester we encountered several examples of the idea that science and technology can solve but also cause environmental problems. Select 3-5 of what you regard are the most significant case studies that illustrate this point and explore their effects on American environmental history and politics.

The ghost of Gifford Pinchot appears before you as you study for your American Environmental History final exam. Peering over your notes on the second half of the semester, he scoffs and says, “Bah! Population explosion? The atomic bomb? Wilderness? Love Canal? Global warming? What do any of these have to do with conserving resources for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time?” How might you explain to Gifford Pinchot’s irate ghost the changes that have occurred in U.S. environmental thought and action since the Progressive conservation movement that he led? What aspects of modern environmentalism seem like fulfillments of Pinchot’s vision, and which ones might be more difficult to explain to him, given his early-twentieth century understanding of people, capital, and natural resources?

Since the late nineteenth century, the “Fisherman’s Problem” (also known as “the Tragedy of the Commons”) arguably contributed to a wide range of environmental problems including deforestation, wildlife declines, air and/or water pollution, toxic waste, and global climate change. Analyze responses to three of these problems, evaluate their effectiveness, and describe how the nation’s approach to common property resources changed over time.

In this course we’ve discussed how Cold War fear of nuclear holocaust and atomic science gone awry became pervasive in American culture in the decades following WWII, inspiring, for instance, a stream of science fiction films such as *Godzilla* in 1954 and *The Day The World Ended* in 1956. Using specific examples, describe what you think were the most pervasive environmental fears of the following four periods: the era of Progressive Conservation; the New Deal; post-World War II environmentalism; and the 1980’s to today. Explain how and why the dynamics of fear were different in each of these periods. To help you identify differences, you might also consider thinking about who or what Americans trusted during these periods as well.

Questions Covering Material from the Entire Course:

The producers of a podcast about contemporary environmental issues have invited you to be a guest on an upcoming episode exploring the idea of unintended consequences. Your role is to provide a historic perspective; you've been asked to offer three detailed examples, taken from any period from colonial times to now, that illustrate the ways in which humans have made choices with dramatic but unexpected effects on the environment (both positive and negative). Please prepare a short introduction explaining the virtues of thinking about the environment historically. Then, describe and explain each of your three examples, incorporating concrete details that will be engaging on a podcast, in such a way that listeners can appreciate that unintended consequences have always been a part of American environmental history and, as such, are essential for understanding how relationships between humans and the world around them have changed over time.

You've been invited back to your high school to offer advice about ways in which the U.S. history survey course should be modified in light of new scholarship. In particular, your old teachers are seeking your advice about how to include more material from the relatively new field of environmental history. To make your answer as useful and concrete as possible, describe five major episodes, themes, or approaches drawn from environmental history that you believe are important enough to be added to a standard U.S. history survey course and would significantly contribute to a high school student's understanding of the American past.

In a 1953 novel, L. P. Hartley wrote, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." While we know that people in the past had their own reasons for making the choices they did, we also know from a semester of studying environmental history that we live in a world shaped by these past choices (just as our own choices are shaping the world of the future). Use three carefully chosen case studies to explore some of the most important ideas and uses of nature that have shaped today's landscapes in intended and unintended ways.

For more than 150 years, romanticism has influenced Americans' experience of nature and their efforts to protect it. Using examples drawn from both halves of the course, trace the persistence and transformation of romantic ideas through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Several times this semester Bill suggested that this course could be reorganized as a history of "energy consumption." Reflecting on the full sweep of American environmental history as it has been presented this semester, what examples from the course would you use to justify Bill's comment? Can all of American history be explained through a history of energy consumption? Which topics or themes might become more prominent? Which ones might become less prominent? If you were teaching this course, would you choose to reorganize it around energy consumption?

From colonial times to now, human beings have become increasingly successful in their efforts to control nature. Do you agree? Use specific historical examples from the full sweep of the course to evaluate the effectiveness of American efforts to control nature.

"The people of plenty were a people of waste." Do you agree? Why or why not?

You have old family friends in Boston who want your advice in planning a cross-country trip this summer. To experience the continental U.S. from the perspectives of two radically different forms of transportation, they are proposing to fly from Boston to Chicago and then to San Francisco or Los Angeles; they will then return home by driving cross-country back to Boston via whatever route you advise. They are extremely interested in environmental history and have been nagging you to give them a synopsis of some of the major themes and insights of this course. After they describe this proposed trip to you, you say: "you don't need a synopsis from me! You can understand some of the most important themes of American environmental history just by looking out the windows of your plane and automobile during your trip." Your friends are confused by this statement, so you decide to write them an email explaining why the trip they are proposing is a nearly ideal way to start learning about the environmental history of the United States, using specific examples from the course to illustrate your points. What are the most important things you would want them to observe and understand during their summer travels?