

Thinking Historically, Acting Locally: The Power of Local Environmental History



How good is the view from Ithaca College?
There is so much we do not see.

Foundations and context

Aldo Leopold proposes a “land ethic”, 1949

“The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or, collectively: the land. This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave?

. . .

A land ethic changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members and also respect for the community as such.”

Foundations and Context

David Orr on a truly meaningful liberal arts education,
1992

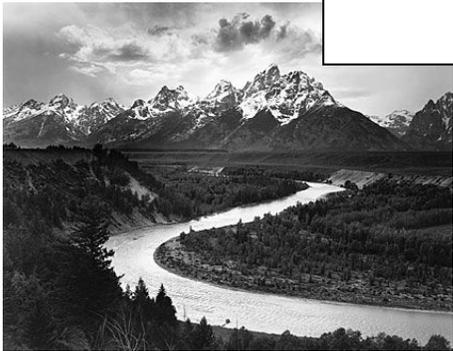
“A genuine liberal arts education will equip a person to live well in a place. To a great extent, formal education now prepares its graduates to reside, not to dwell. The difference is important. The resident is a temporary, rootless occupant who mostly needs to know where the banks and stores are in order to plug in. . . . To reside is to live as a transient and as a stranger to one’s place .

. . .

Those who dwell can only be skeptical of those who talk about being global citizens before they have attended to the minute particulars of living well in their place.”

Foundations and Context

**HISTORY
OF AMERICAN
ENVIRONMENTAL
THOUGHT**
(HIST/ENVS-270)



Doing History: The third goal of the course is for you to learn a bit about the craft of history—that is, how do historians look at sources from the past (including the landscape) and use them to tell a story that both makes sense and is well-supported by the sources. We will do this in two ways:

[Historical analysis of curated primary sources]

Working in teams you will undertake an investigation of some dimension of local (i.e. Tompkins County) environmental history. Working with the History Center (the local historical society) you will examine primary sources, develop an argument-based report (both written and oral) based on your experience finding and interpreting those sources, and present your findings to the public. I will explain all of this more fully during the first half of the semester, though we will not begin this work in earnest until after spring break.

Learning Locally



THE
HISTORY
CENTER
in Tompkins County

Thinking Historically, Acting Locally
Wells College
October 2, 2018

The Prompt:

Down to Earth, Flight Maps, “The Mappist”, and the other readings for this course provide some important insights into the role of nature in American history and culture over the past 500 years. **But what has been the relationship between human beings and their environment at the local level? What can we learn about this relationship from studying and interpreting the sources local people have left behind? Can we develop a more complex and meaningful understanding of ecological citizenship as a result of this study?**

Using the resources of the History Center in downtown Ithaca, the holdings at the Ithaca College and Tompkins County Public libraries, the readings you have been assigned for the course, and your own historical imaginations, you will be working in teams to investigate some aspect of local environmental history.

The Power of the Archive



“So often in my classes I simply use the internet. This project forced me to get away from the internet crutch.”

“It was refreshing to not start a presentation or paper with the Google search engine, and I proved to myself that I can use other ways to gather information.”

“[The History Center] seems old fashioned compared to the Internet age we’re in now, but it’s also entirely necessary and more personal than doing Internet research. It’s nice to work with real people, and the staff is passionate about history and about getting students excited and curious in their hunt to answer questions and make connections . . . ”

The Power of the Archive



“I saw for the first time in what feels like forever that people still research in a traditional way instead of opening up my homepage of google.com and typing in a keyword. Instead of scrolling through web pages and quickly skimming tons of material from online sources and databases, I put on a pair of gloves and gently turned the pages of a scrapbook created by someone in 1925. It made the experience so much more real; I was *doing* history instead of just reading about it. This really created a feeling of intimacy with this project; I certainly feel more connected with it and the things I have learned than if I would have done this research the traditional way”

Community connections



“By researching this area where I have been living for three years, it has opened my eyes so much more to the history of the area . . .
... By focusing on a smaller area, an area which is closely connected with all students in Ithaca, it offers so much more insight and turned the sometimes static, sometimes lifeless disconnect that students often have with history into a more living, breathing past.”

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This is/was the best course that I have taken at Ithaca College and it couldn't have come at a better time. This course has really helped me to evaluate what I hold most dear in my life and what convictions I want to uphold in my unclear professional life that is rapidly approaching. I hope that these acclamations come across as sincere because they are indeed accurate and candid. ...

The biggest thing that I've taken away from this class and will keep with me hopefully forever is the historical process of man's connection with our natural world and how hard it is to change what history has instilled into a society. It is so hard for people to act for the future and so easy for them to bitch about the past (Workshop V, 3). In an environmental sense, this statement has never been more true than it is today in our nation. For example, we know how crazy it was to drive the passenger pigeon to extinction, yet we have trouble ensuring that it won't happen again (i.e. strengthening the Endangered Species Act). Tompkins County's ability to defy this statement by putting the Bell Station to rest is what fascinated me most about the local history project. It was a local moment in history that echoed a national movement of environmental wisdom and forethought.

Senior biology major

While I anticipate a question regarding ecological citizenship to arise on the final day of class, this topic will strike my mind first. It has been a building process in my mind throughout the semester, and my idea of ecological citizenship is that of responsibility. Growing up on a dairy farm, I always feel as though I am connected to the environment. At first, I had a somewhat “snobbish” perspective on the concept of a “sense of place” or connection to the environment. I am used to thousands of acres that I cannot even walk across in one day. I am used to thousands of animals, fresh air, working the land for 16 hours a day, and barely seeing other people than my family. I had a class with Elan Shapiro, titled Sustainable Agriculture, and the discussion of connections always led to “small” examples. For instance, my peers would relay their experiences with a small walking park in their suburban community, or a large maple tree in their one-quarter acre back yard. While I downplayed all of these examples in my mind for so long, this class has made me realize how crucial it is for these people to have these connections, as small as they may seem.

Junior social studies major

“Seeing the concepts we learned about in class sprawled out before me to walk through really connected me to both the Ithaca area and our course material. I am a tactile and visual learner, so even though I find history intriguing I sometimes struggle to wrap my head around it since it can be so intangible at times. Doing research within the community, in tangible spaces, helped to bring the history of Tompkins County to life. It is all too easy to not think of the places we live and stay in as participating in historical trends, or even as a part of history! This project provided new context to me and made Ithaca feel like a piece of history. Granted, this was my first semester in Ithaca, but I had never even heard of the cemetery before this project! I am glad to have learned about its rich history.”

Sophomore ENVS Major (transfer student)

“. . . The research process filled me with solid facts and more curiosity. Learning about Route 13 allowed me to think differently about this region that I have spent my whole life in. Investigating Ithaca in this way has made me feel confident investigating other places that I may end up in life. It was especially interesting for me to study suburbanization and sprawl as it related to the Ithaca region, because it is easy to view Ithaca as a bubble separate from the outside world. Infact Ithaca was a very important city at certain points in the history of New York and the U.S. The information we discovered, as well as that which the other groups presented combined to complicate my perceptions of Ithaca. I have more questions than answers. I am now more firmly committed to using history as a lens for viewing the complexities of the present.”

Senior ENVS Major

Learning from the collaboration: keys for success

- ▶ Advance preparation with museum staff
- ▶ Finding institutional support
- ▶ Scaffolding for students
- ▶ Community connection

Applying the Local Environmental History Model: A Different Context Sabana Grande, Nicaragua

Context

- Former war zone
- Severe deforestation (and associated problems)
- One of the poorest regions of the 2nd poorest country in Latin America
- Women very marginalized
- Unemployment of 50%+
- History of a subsistence economy supplemented by episodic wage labor

Doing Advanced Local Environmental History



- Food
- Energy
- Water

Thank you!

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