



HIST XX: Water and Environment in Latin America

Instructor: Handy Acosta Cuellar

Office Hours: T & Th – 3:30-5:00pm, and by appointment.

Service Learning Contacts:

<https://servicelearning.txst.edu/>

Digital Humanities Contact:

<https://www.library.txst.edu/research-and-publishing/gis-data-visualization.html>

Research Support:

The Library offers individual research consultations to help at any stage of your research project. Check: **Texas State University Library Guide for History** [Library Guide: History](#) — This guide provides curated access to databases, archival collections, maps, and digital resources relevant to topics in history..

Course Credit

Undergraduate: 3 Credit Hours

Course description:

This course examines the environmental history of Latin America through the lens of water. From pre-Columbian irrigation canals and sacred lakes, to colonial drainage projects, sugar mills, hydraulic mining, hurricanes, hydroelectric dams, and contemporary water wars, the course emphasizes the centrality of water to power, technology, labor, and environmental justice. Readings will combine classic environmental history texts with newer scholarship, while films and digital projects will highlight lived experiences and applied approaches to environmental history. This course will challenge History majors and minors to apply analytical skills to ecological topics. Students will refine writing, research, and presentation abilities, and practice integrating environmental history with interdisciplinary perspectives, including ethics, political ecology, and digital humanities

Course Objectives

- To define environmental ethics and explain their relationship to Latin American history.
 - To identify and explain developments and processes in the environmental history of Latin America.
 - To analyze sourcing and situation in primary and secondary materials on environmental history, that is, to analyze evidence in terms of its creation and context.
 - To analyze arguments in scholarship and connect them to broader historiography.
 - To use historical reasoning (comparison, causation, continuity & change) to make connections across regions and periods.
 - To develop skills in digital/applied history to visualize water's role in Latin America past and present.
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Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Outline the major role of water in Latin American environmental history.

- Compare experiences of water management across Indigenous, colonial, and modern contexts.
- Explain ethical and philosophical assumptions about human-water relations.
- Evaluate the links between poverty, politics, and environmental decision-making.
- Connect Latin American water struggles to global climate and justice debates.
- Produce a research project that integrates historical evidence with digital or applied tools.

Themes:

Exchange:

Just the name Latin America a history of exchange. From colonization to globalization Latin America has been defined by its relations to the outside world. Yet, exchange is a two-way street; events and individuals in the Americas have had a significant impact abroad and around the globe. While the assigned readings for this section focus on economic history, development, and international relations, the examples and incidences of exchange and the cultures they produced are limitless.

Peoples:

Another theme explores the tensions between the collective and the individual. By introducing stories of individuals who alternately represent and defy dominant identities and hegemonic group behavior, the theme seeks to expose you to a wide variety of personalities and human actions in Latin America. This unit provides an opportunity to read Latin American history against the grain, by focusing on the exceptions to the norm. In terms of methodology, it asks how scholars employ and navigate biography, oral history, “life histories,” testimonials, and popular mythology in their analysis of Latin American society.

Water:

Water has been a defining feature of Latin American history. From Tenochtitlán lakes and Tawantinsuyu (Inca) irrigation systems to colonial drainage projects, sugar mills, silver mining, hydroelectric dams, hurricanes, and modern “water wars,” water reveals both the possibilities and limits of human societies in the region. For Indigenous peoples, water has often carried spiritual and communal significance, while for imperial and modern states it has been a tool of extraction and control. Studying water in Latin America allows us to connect environmental history to politics, technology, and culture. It also places Latin America in the center of global debates about climate change, environmental justice, and sustainability.

Optional Service-Learning Component:

In addition to the regular assignments, students may choose to pursue a Service-Learning Excellence track. This option allows students to connect the course themes with community-based projects. Check: <https://servicelearning.txst.edu/>

- Activities may include:
 - Partnering with a local watershed, environmental non-profit, or historical society to document water histories.
 - Oral history interviews with community members about floods, hurricanes, or water access.
 - Developing StoryMaps or Google Earth Web projects that highlight Louisiana/Texas water challenges.
- Deliverables:
 - A short reflection journal (2–3 entries) connecting field experience to course readings.
 - A public-facing component (StoryMap, exhibit, or presentation) shared with the partner organization or community.
- Attend the Service Learning Orientation
- Participate in in-class discussions on Service Learning
- Two Service Learning Reflections:
 - Write a one page “Preflection” stating that you accept the responsibilities and commitment related to the project and discuss your expectations and goals for your participation. You must cite information from course readings that we have covered including information on New Orleans’ Latinx population and the Eby article.
 - Write a two page Critical Reflection to your work regarding service learning. Guidelines will be given out in class.

Classroom Expectations and Grading

Health and Wellbeing

The Dean of Students Office manages [Here to Help](#) to assist students experiencing crises or emergencies or displaying concerning behaviors. Submissions are received directly by the Dean of Students Office’s [CARE Center](#). This process takes an individualized and

holistic approach to assessing submissions and determining an appropriate course of action or referral based on the information provided in the submission.

The Counseling Center provides counseling, telemental health, and educational workshops and videos for students. For students, the Student Health Center provides evaluation and medical management of these common mental health issues and others.

Bobcat Balance serves the legal, financial, and mental health needs of faculty and staff. LinkedIn Learning is available to all faculty, staff, and students and includes resources on well-being, career development, time management, and other skills and knowledge.

Student Absences and Absence Notification

Faculty have discretion in managing student absences, including those due to illness. Faculty members determine appropriate arrangements for students who miss class. Please refer to UPPS 02.06.03 and UPPS 02.06.01 for absences related to student participation in university-sponsored events and religious holy days.

For faculty who ask students requesting excused absences to contact the Dean of Students Office, students should be directed to the information available on the Dean of Students' Absence Notifications webpage. Students should only be referred to the Dean of Students Office if they are unable to complete the on-line request due to access limitations or emergencies/crises. For questions, contact the Dean of Students Office at (512) 245-2124.

Class Instruction Modes and Substantive Interaction

Classes will be fully implemented in the instruction mode that appears on the fall 2023 Schedule of Classes in Catsweb. In all courses, faculty members provide regular and substantive interaction with students. This interaction is instructor-driven, content-oriented, frequent, and consistent throughout the semester.

Statement on Civility in the Classroom and Instructional Settings

Civility in instructional settings is fundamental to an effective educational process and is everyone's responsibility. The university's shared values, sense of community, and collective commitment to respect, civil dialogue, and the free exchange of ideas are the cornerstones of successful teaching and learning. If students have questions about appropriate behavior in a particular class, they should address them with their instructor

first. Although rare, disciplinary procedures may be implemented for refusing to follow an instructor's directive, disrupting classroom activities, posting offensive comments on class discussion boards, or disregarding university policies. For more information regarding conduct in the classroom, please review policies at [AA/PPS 02.03.02](#), Section 03: Courteous and Civil Learning Environment, and [Code of Student Conduct](#), number II, Responsibilities of Students, Section 2.02: Conduct Prohibited.

Academic Integrity and Student Conduct

1. [Code of Student Conduct](#)
 2. [The Honor Code](#)
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Emergency Management

In the event of an emergency, students, faculty, and staff should monitor the [Safety and Emergency Communications web page](#). This page will be updated with the latest information available to the university, in addition to providing links to information concerning safety resources and emergency procedures. Faculty, staff, and students are encouraged to sign up for the [TXState Alert system](#).

Sexual Misconduct Reporting (SB 212)

Effective January 2, 2020, state law (SB 212) requires all university employees, acting in the course and scope of employment, who witness or receive information concerning an incident of sexual misconduct involving an enrolled student or employee to report all relevant information known about the incident to the university's Title IX office. According to SB 212, employees who knowingly fail to report or knowingly file a false report shall be terminated in accordance with university policy and [The Texas State University System Rules and Regulations](#). Please access the webpage of the [Office of Equal Opportunity and Title IX](#) for more information.

Grading Scale

Students' final grades will be determined according to the following scale:

A 90-100% (excellent) B 80-89% (good/very good) C 70-79% (average) D 60-69% (passing) F 0-59% (failing)

Required Texts:

- Soluri, John, Claudia Leal, & José Augusto Pádua, eds. *A Living Past: Environmental Histories of Modern Latin America* (New York: Bergahn, 2019).
- Attfield, Robin. *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Selected Readings posted online

Recommended Readings (available in the library or online):

- Candiani, Vera. *Dreaming of Dry Land*. Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Carey, Mark. *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers: Climate Change and Andean Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Crosby, Alfred. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. 2d. ed. New York: Praeger, 2003.
- Cockburn, Alexander & Susanna B. Hecht. *The Fate of the Forest*. University of Chicago Press, 2010. Second edition.
- Funes Monzote, Reinaldo. *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba: An Environmental History Since 1492*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Leguizamón, Amalia. *Seeds of Power: Environmental Injustice and Genetically Modified Soybeans in Argentina*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.
- Lucero, Lisa. *Water and Ritual. The Rise and Fall of Classic Maya Rulers*. University of Texas Press, 2009.
- McCook, Stuart. *States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.
- McNeill, J.R. *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Miller, Shawn W. *An Environmental History of Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Mundy, Barbara. *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City*. University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Schwartz, Stuart B. *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Vitz, Matthew. *A City on a Lake: Urban Political Ecology and the Growth of Mexico City*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

- Wolfe, Mikael D. *Watering the Revolution: An Environmental and Technological History of Agrarian Reform in Mexico*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

COURSE ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION:

- **Map Quiz (5%)**
Students will be tested on their knowledge of basic geographical landmarks, rivers, features, political boundaries, and cultural regions of Latin America.

Students might choose to attend a free **Workshop/Session on Arcis StoryMaps** instead. (5%) Check: <https://www.library.txst.edu/research-and-publishing/gis-data-visualization.html>. In such case, students must provide the certificate before the last week of classes.

- **Film Critique (10%)**
Students will submit **one critique** of films assigned in class (*Even the Rain*, *Silent River*, *Once Upon a Time in Venezuela*, or *Belo Monte: After the Flood*). The critique (2–3 pages, double-spaced) should connect the film to course readings and themes such as colonial legacies, environmental justice, or water rights.
- **Oral Summary + Discussion (10%)**
Each student will select one assigned reading (article, book chapter, or audiovisual source) and deliver a **5-minute oral explanation** to the class. A brief 1-page written summary will also be submitted. Students will lead discussion on multiple occasions during the semester.
- **Attendance and Participation (20%)**
Attendance is mandatory. Grades will reflect contribution to discussions, attentiveness, short in-class assignments, and preparation. Excessive absences or tardiness will lower the grade.
- **Digital Research Project (35%)**
This assignment is divided into three stages:
 - **Research Paper (15%)** – a written case study on a water-related issue in Latin American history.
 - **StoryMap Presentation (15%)** – students will transform their research into an interactive StoryMap, integrating text, maps, and images
 - **Class Discussion (5%)** – students will present their findings in class and respond to questions.
Examples of StoryMaps can be found at: [ArcGIS StoryMaps](#). Final projects will be uploaded to the course’s digital exhibit space.

Student Work Showcase: Previous student StoryMaps could serve as inspiration for your digital projects:

- [Simón Bolívar StoryMap](#)

- [Latin American Studies StoryMap](#)
- [European Encounters in Latin America](#)
- **Final Exam (20%)**
A comprehensive in-class exam covering major course themes, readings, and films. The exam will emphasize synthesis, critical thinking, and historical reasoning.

DISCLAIMER: This syllabus is a guideline of what to expect over the course of the semester, however, it is subject to change.

Class Schedule

Week 1 – Introduction to Environmental History

- *Class 1 (Tues):* Course overview; J.R. McNeill, “Environmental History,” in Ulinka Rublack, ed., *A Concise Companion to History* (2012).
 - Core Question: What makes environmental history distinct from other historical approaches?
 - Discussion and applied examples (Latin America case studies).

Week 2 – Environmental Ethics

- *Class 1 (Tues):* Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics* (2018), Ch. 1.
 - Core Question: How do ethical frameworks shape the study of environment?
- *Class 2 (Thurs):* Attfield, Ch. 2 + discussion of ethical dilemmas in Latin American water conflicts.
- Assessment: Map Quiz (Feb. 20).

Week 3 – Sacred Waters and Pre-Columbian Civilizations

- *Class 1 (Tues):* Lisa Lucero, *Water and Ritual* (2009), Ch. 1.
 - Core Question: How did Maya rulers use water rituals to legitimate political power?

- *Class 2 (Thurs):* Barbara Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan* (2018), Ch. 3.
 - Core Question: How did water shape the urban and sacred landscapes of Tenochtitlan?
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Week 4 – Colonial Drainage and Urban Waters

- *Class 1 (Tues):* Vera Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land* (2014), Intro + Ch. 1.
 - *Class 2 (Thurs):* Candiani, Chs. .
 - Core Question: What does Mexico City's drainage project reveal about colonial technology and environment?
 - Assessment Assigned: Oral Presentations of Texts starts
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Week 5 – Mining, Hydraulics, and Empire

- *Class 1 (Tues):* *A Living Past* (2019), Introduction
 - *Class 2 (Thurs):* Screening of *Water for Life* (2023)
 - Core Question: How did mining reshape landscapes, labor, and water systems in colonial Latin America?
 - Assessment Assigned: Oral Presentations of texts continue
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Week 6 – Sugar, Slavery, and Water Power

- *Class 1 (Tues):* Reinaldo Funes Monzote, *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba* (2008), Intro + Ch.3
 - *Class 2 (Thurs):* Selected readings of Jason W Moore and Sidney Mintz on Sugar Cane and Slavery.
 - Core Question: How did sugar and slavery transform Caribbean?
 - Assessment Assigned: Oral Presentations of texts continue
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Week 7 – Epidemics, Floods, and Urban Sanitation

- *Class 1 (Tues):* Matthew Vitz, *A City on a Lake* (2018), Intro + Ch. 1.
- *Class 2 (Thurs):* Vitz, Ch. 2–3.

- Core Question: How did floods and disease expose social inequalities in Mexico City?
 - Assessment Assigned: Oral Presentations of texts continue
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Week 8 – Colonial Legacies?

- *Class 1 (Tues)*: Film screening *Even the Rain* (2010) followed by discussion.
 - Core Question: How does the Cochabamba Water War reflect colonial legacies and modern privatization?
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Week 9 – Glaciers, Climate, and Water Futures

- *Class 1 (Tues)*: Mark Carey, *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers* (2010), Intro + Ch. 1.
 - *Class 2 (Thurs)*: Carey, Ch. 2–3.
 - Core Question: How do Andean communities interpret glacial retreat as social and spiritual crises?
 - Assessment Due: Digital Research Proposal.
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Week 10 – Agribusiness, Soy, and Water

- *Class 1 (Tues)*: Mikael D. Wolfe, *Watering the Revolution* (2017), Intro + Ch. 1.
 - *Class 2 (Thurs)*: Amalia Leguizamón, *Seeds of Power* (2020), selections.
 - Core Question: How do irrigation systems and soy monocultures create new water conflicts?
 - Assessment Assigned: Oral Presentations of texts continue
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Week 11 – The Amazon: Dams, Indigenous Rights, and Environmental Conflict

- *Class 1 (Tues)*: Hecht & Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest* (2010).
- *Class 2 (Thurs)*: Philip Fearnside, “Tucuruí Dam” (2001) + “Belo Monte and the Tapajós” (2016); Film: *Belo Monte: After the Flood* (2016).

- Core Question: What do Amazonian dams reveal about development vs Indigenous survival?
 - Assessment Assigned: Film Critique 2 (due Week 13).
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Week 12 – Transboundary Waters and Border Conflicts

- *Class 1 (Tues)*: Kyle Haines et al., “Water challenges at the U.S.-Mexico border” (*Ecology & Society*, 2024).
 - *Class 2 (Thurs)*: Film: *Silent River* (2021).
 - Core Question: How do transboundary conflicts show the tension between local needs and state authority?
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Week 13 – The Caribbean Revisited: Storms, Sugar, and Sanitation

- *Class 1 (Tues)*: Stuart Schwartz, *Sea of Storms* (2015).
 - *Class 2 (Thurs)*: J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires* (2010); Stuart McCook, *States of Nature* (2002).
 - Core Question: How did hurricanes, mosquitoes, and irrigation shape Caribbean society and empire?
 - Assessment Due: Film Critique 2.
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Week 14 – Water Conflicts and Environmental Justice

- *Class 1 (Tues)*: Joan Martínez-Alier, *Land, Water, Air and Freedom* (2023), selections.
- *Class 2 (Thurs)*: Film: *Once Upon a Time in Venezuela* (2020) + student presentations.
 - Core Question: How do modern water conflicts connect with global struggles for justice?
- Assessment Due: Digital Research Project (final submission & presentations).
- Final Exam: Scheduled during exam week.