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The Environmental History of Modern Japan

(Kjell Ericson)

This course introduces topics in the environmental history of modern Japan, focusing primarily on the nineteenth century onward. Environmental history is a wide-ranging and often loosely defined field of study, but it takes seriously the idea that we need to study specific places in order to understand how circulating ideas and practices related to “the environment” have taken on local lives of their own.

Here, our goal is to consider how the environment, broadly construed but historically contextualized, has structured people’s everyday lives and informed their political priorities. We will consider such issues by looking closely at the Japanese archipelago and its surroundings. We will explore problems of nature, human artifice, resources, colonial empire, pollution, science, conservation, war, and food, all with an eye to the possibility (and necessity) of incorporating diverse views and “more-than-human” perspectives. We are lucky in this course to have a rich space in which to pursue environmental history on the ground: the city of Kyoto and its surroundings. By the end of the course, you should be able to speak about environmental issues from new points of view, which may in turn reshape how you see the environment closer to home, wherever that might be.