

The Environmental History of Modern Japan

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When we conjure up the environment in our mind's eye, what do we see? Perhaps we envision mountains, trees, streams, and waves—scenes where humans don't appear or make only transient visits. Some of us think about holistic linkages among all living creatures and their surroundings. Others among us imagine how human societies have exploited and polluted relationships to non-human spaces. We also see worldwide phenomena that are less obviously visible from a single vantage point, most notably climate change.

This course will make us reflect upon the multiplicity of environmental thinking around the world, at a moment when the most pressing issue of our time—climate change—is often framed without further comment as a unified, global, and pan-human problem. Some questions are: How have particular ways of understanding the environment, sustainability, and nature emerged? Why is it important to realize that not everyone around the world shares a common understanding of environmental problems? Should everyone share a common understanding, and if so, whose?

The course will introduce you to the multi-stranded field of environmental history, which is animated by desires both to understand the past on its own terms and to bring the past to bear on present-day problems. This field takes seriously the idea that we need to study specific places and peoples in order to understand how circulating ideas related to “the environment” have taken on local lives of their own.

The course will press us to think about how environmental ideas structure people's everyday lives and inform their political priorities. We will consider these issues by looking closely at the Japanese archipelago and its surroundings. We will explore how concepts of nature, human artifice, resources, pollution, science, conversation, war, and food have functioned in Japan. We are lucky in this course to have a rich space in which to pursue these ideas 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.