

HIST205 and Sustainability

HIST205 is a new 200-level survey of the field of environmental history. It will be taught for the first time in the fall of 2010. Participating in the Chesapeake Project in May 2010 allowed me to integrate sustainability issues on several levels into this class:

1. Some historians have explicitly used sustainability as a yardstick in order to judge past historical interactions between humans and their environments. For example, the historian Mark Elvin posited that the last 3,000 years of Chinese present a pattern of unsustainable growth. This statement will be used as a guiding discussion question for one week of this lecture.
2. Discussions such as the one cited above beg the question: What exactly is sustainability? Any good class in the humanities tries to promote critical thinking skills, and HIST205 is no exception. Therefore, students will learn and discuss how the idea of sustainability originated in early Modern European states reorganizing their forests. What, in other words, are the historical preconditions for sustainability? Why was forestry the first field in which the concept was applied? What does this legacy mean for the idea of sustainability today? How does one differentiate legitimate efforts at sustainability from greenwashing?
3. Since the early 20th century, conservation and preservation have been important forces in the United States. How different are they from sustainability? This question will be aiding discussions during one week.
4. Finally, students will be asked to evaluate the current American patterns of consumption and resource extraction in light of the historical evidence gathered in this class. How does the US compare to the historic Chinese or European patterns?

7/28/2010 Thomas Zeller