

# Climate Change and the Environmental History of the Himalayas

## Pitt in the Himalaya |Spring 2020

Jonathan Seefeldt |jonathan@seefeldt.org



Born from a violent collision of continents, the Himalayas have long been a zone of disruptive environmental change. Anthropogenic climate change is now rapidly intensifying this legacy, transforming both the mountain chain and the sprawling regions through which its waters flow. This course examines how climate change is unfolding in the Himalayas by contextualizing it within long-running processes of environmental change and conflict distinctive to the region. In doing so, it uncovers the extent to which intensifying changes in climate are transforming these historic dynamics.

The course is structured as a careful walk through each of the basic components with which humans interact in the Himalayan landscape: forests, animals, fields, micro-organisms, water, and buildings. While we will survey pan-Himalayan dynamics, particular attention is paid to the regions where students will live and travel: Garhwal, Kumaon, and Ladakh. The course leverages the considerable field time afforded to students by linking weekly readings and research assignments to subsequent excursions and conferences planned as part of the overall Pitt in the Himalayas program. Each week follows a two-part rhythm: we first examine historic dynamics surrounding the landscape

component in question, then use a contemporary case-study to analyze how climate change may be altering these dynamics.

Attentive and engaged students should leave the course with 1) an improved capacity to analyze the environmental stakes involved with Himalayan climate change and 2) an ability to re-articulate specific stakeholder perspectives in a theoretically robust and historically literate manner.

## UNITS

1. **Forests: Commons & Conflict**
2. **Animals: Relationships & Agency**
3. **Fields: Productivity & Exhaustion**
4. **Micro-organisms: Health & Disease**
5. **Water: Power & Scarcity**
6. **Buildings: Migration & Urbanization**

## ASSIGNMENTS

1. **Reading Reflections:** One class meeting a week (your choice), you will prepare a brief written reflection on the day's assigned reading. Reflections should use the following template:
  - a. Choose and describe the three most important aspects of the reading, briefly justifying your choices.
  - b. Identify two aspects of the reading you don't understand and briefly discuss why these confusing aspects interfered with your general understanding of the reading.
  - c. Pose one question you still have about the subject of the text. The question should go beyond the basic content of the text and your areas of confusion listed above.Please submit the assignment via our online portal at least two hours before class. Be prepared to share and discuss each other's reflections. Reflections will be graded based on clarity of thought and timely completion.
2. **Post-trip Reports:** For two of the seven field-trips listed on the schedule below, you will prepare a brief written report re-assessing our previous week's texts and discussion in light of your experience on the trip. Your report should include a discussion of perspectives presented by local stakeholders you engaged with on the trip (this can include discussions mediated by your trip leader). One of your written reports should be accompanied by a brief in-class presentation. Reports will be assessed on evidence of careful observation, critical thinking, and clarity of expression.
3. **Conference Q&A:** As part of the Pitt in the Himalayas program, we have the privilege of participating in an international conference on Himalayan Healthcare hosted by the Hanifi Centre. During the week leading up to the conference, you will choose one of the listed

speakers, read one of their recent academic publications, and write a reflection using the format listed in Assignment #1 above. This will count as your reading reflection for the week. Pay special attention to crafting the concluding question of your reflection. You will then pose your prepared question to the speaker at the conference.

4. **Final Project:** For the culminating project of the semester, you will choose one of the six units of the course and prepare a formal research paper and presentation. Your research should incorporate academic sources beyond those discussed in class. You are free to choose any geographical area within the Himalayas or address the region as whole. Specific rubrics for both the presentation and the academic paper will be provided separately. You are expected to incorporate instructor and peer feedback from your presentation into your final paper.

## GRADING

Reading Reflections (5, lowest score dropped): 20%

Conference Reflection and Q&A: 10%

Post-Trip Reports: 20%

Final Presentation: 10%

Final Paper: 30%

Participation: 10%

## SCHEDULE

Mon, Jan 13	Week 1 – Setting the Anthropocene: Nature-Culture & Climate Change	<b>Readings:</b> Cronon, 1996 <i>Optional:</i> Guha, 1989
Wed, Jan 15		Singh, <i>Defining Spaces</i> , 2019 <i>Optional:</i> Bauer & Bhan (Ch 1, 2)
Mon, Jan 20	Week 2 – Forests: Commons & Conflict	Guha, <i>Unquiet Woods</i> p. 1-98
Wed, Jan 22		Guha, <i>Unquiet Woods</i> p. 99-210
Jan 28 – Feb 9   Trips to Majkhali and Corbett (read Trautmann, Govindrajan)		
Tue, Feb 11	Week 3 – Animals: Relationships & Agency	Govindrajan, <i>Animal Intimacies</i>
Thu, Feb 13		Mathur, 2015 <i>Optional:</i> Jalais, 2005; Mathur, 2016
Feb 15 – Feb 22   Trips to Surkanda Devi and Rishikesh		
Mon, Feb 24	Week 4 – Fields: Productivity & Exhaustion	Scott, 2017 (excerpts)
Wed, Feb 26		Shiva et. al., 2009 (Part 4) Aase, 2017 (Intro, Ch 2 & 10)

Feb 27 – Feb 28   Trip to Sainji/GEMS		
Mon, Mar 2	Week 5 - Micro-organisms: Health & Disease	*choice of one article by conference speaker
Mar 5 – 8   Himalayan Healthcare Conference (read choice of one published article from conference speaker list   complete Q&A reflection piece)		
Mon, Mar 9	Week 6 – Water: Power & Scarcity	Amrith, 2018 (excerpts)
Thu, Mar 12		Drew, 2017
Mar 16 – 23   Trip to Har ki Dun		
Thu, Mar 26	Week 7 – Buildings: Migration & Urbanization	Singh, <i>Riverbank to Hilltop</i> , 2019 Goodall, 2004 Sati, 2013 <i>Optional</i> : Herle, 2017 (excerpts)
Mar 29 – Apr 5   Trip to Ladakh		
Mon, Apr 6	Week 8 – Conclusions: Research Presentations & Final Discussion	Student Presentations 1
Wed, Apr 8		Student Presentations 2

## READINGS

Aase, Tor Halfdan, ed. *Climate Change and the Future of Himalayan Farming*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Bauer, Andrew M., and Mona Bhan. "Materializing Climate and Assembling the Anthropocene," in *Climate without Nature: A Critical Anthropology of the Anthropocene*, 1–47. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996): 7.

Drew, Georgina. "Contested Modernities: Place, Subjectivity, and Himalayan Dam Infrastructures." In *Trans-Himalayan Borderlands*, edited by Dan Smyer Yü and Jean Michaud, 147–66. Livelihoods, Territorialities, Modernities. Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

Goodall, Sarah K. "Rural-to-Urban Migration and Urbanization in Leh, Ladakh." *Mountain Research and Development* 24, no. 3 (August 2004): 220–27.

Govindrajan, Radhika. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas*. University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Guha, Ramachandra. "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique." *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 1989), 71–83.

Herrle, Peter. *Tibetan Houses: Vernacular Architecture of the Himalayas and Environs*. Boston:

Birkhäuser Verlag, 2017.

Jalais, Annu. "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food.'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 17 (2005): 1757–62.

Mathur, Nayanika. "'It's a Conspiracy Theory and Climate Change': Of Beastly Encounters and Cervine Disappearances in Himalayan India." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, No. 1 (March 2015): 87–111.

Sati, Vishwambhar. "Trends of Urbanization and Its Implications on Environment and Economy in the Uttarakhand Himalaya: A Case Study of Dehradun Municipal Corporation." *ENVIS Bulletin on Himalayan Ecology* 21 (August 1, 2013): 9–14.

Scott, James C. *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. Yale Agrarian Studies. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

Shiva, Vandana and Vinod Kumar Bhatt eds. *Climate Change at the Third Pole: The Impact of Climate Instability on Himalayan Ecosystems and Himalayan Communities*. Dehradun: Navdanya, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology; Distributed by Natraj Publishers, 2009.

Singh, Chetan. *Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions*, 253–71. SUNY Press, 2019.

Trautmann, Thomas R. "The Retreat and Persistence of Elephants," in *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History*, 1–49. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.