

## Expos 20: Humans, Nature, and the Environment

Deforestation, overpopulation, pesticide use, toxic oceans, endangered species, global warming. How are we to make sense of the many environmental problems facing the Earth today? Although the sciences provide a factual account of environmental threats and ways of countering them, scientific facts seem not to be enough, since artists, writers, filmmakers, and even scientists find themselves turning again and again to their imaginations to respond to the environmental predicaments of industrial society. They may be doing what English Romantic poet Percy Shelley powerfully described 200 years ago as an essentially human and creative impulse: “to imagine that which we know.” How, then, have creative minds imagined – in essays, books, and movies – the very idea of nature, the place of humans in it, and their power to change the environment?

In this course, we will consider both the possibilities and the problems that writers and filmmakers have imagined about human interactions with the natural world. We begin with the nineteenth century, when Romantic writers were urgently contemplating the meaning of nature in an age of increasing industrialization. In the first unit we interpret “[Walking](#)” (1862), the naturalist Henry David Thoreau’s seminal nature essay that imaginatively explores the concept of wildness. In previous semesters, the class has walked at Walden Pond to better reflect on Thoreau’s essay, as you can see in this short student [video](#) filmed in a snowstorm. In the second unit we will critically compare the arguments of two books by scientists – Rachel Carson’s landmark [Silent Spring](#) (1962), and James Lovelock’s [The Revenge of Gaia](#) (2006), both of which belong to the genre of popular environmental writing. Student essays from unit 2 of the course have been published on Harvard’s [Sustainability](#) website, allowing the writers to connect with a wider audience. And in the final unit we will examine the techniques of documentary movies about relationships between humans and animals – Werner Herzog’s [Grizzly Man](#) (2005) and Gabriela Cowperthwaite’s [Blackfish](#) (2013).

I love teaching this course because it brings together a number of my personal and academic passions – nature, language, Romanticism, human-animal relationships, environmental ethics, eco-cinema etc. – which I’m keen to share with you. While this is not a course *in* activism, it will give you the intellectual background and critical skills to better understand the many debates about the environment that fill the news media and the internet. It will also give you the tools to enter these debates yourself, if you chose to, and make a difference in the world.