Introduction to the course. This is an introduction to the geography of the western United States, starting with an overview of the physical and biological nature of the American West, and then focusing on the complex human-environment interactions in that region. One of the distinctive characteristics of the American West is that human impacts on the landscape often seem small and insignificant. On a two-lane highway through the “sagebrush ocean” of the Great Basin, or even on a mountain above San Francisco Bay, it can be difficult at first to pick out many features of the modern landscape that would not have looked much same two hundred or even two thousand years ago. Yet almost everywhere in the American West, there are human activities that have become contentious and complicated issues because of their effects on the landscape, from cattle ranching in the Great Basin to fire control in the coastal mountains of California and ski resort development in Colorado. There is also a growing acceptance of the view that humans significantly altered the vegetation of at least some parts of the West over much longer timescales, from hundreds to thousands of years, although debate continues on the details of these long-term human impacts.

At the same time, the landscapes of the West have their own impacts on human activities. Since prehistoric times, people have been highly creative in finding new ways to survive and prosper in western North America. Nonetheless, the climate, landforms, and ecosystems of the West have placed clear limits on the possibilities. Vast areas of the Interior West are too dry, cold, or rocky to support intensive agriculture and dense settlement except in small favorable patches, and they remain sparsely populated and isolated today. One important consequence is that much of the West is public land, where the federal government is the land manager and is also a target for all sides in environmental battles. Where intensive agriculture was possible, it usually required development of irrigation systems, and some of the largest cities of the West depend on water drawn from mountains hundreds of miles away. While these water systems are often seen as examples of humans’ ability to overcome environmental limitations, their design was in fact strongly controlled by the geography of natural stream systems. They are also highly susceptible to small changes in winter snow accumulation in their mountain sources. The natural landscape did offer at least one unique opportunity: The scenery of the mountains and canyons that became the core of National Park and wilderness systems and made tourism of all kinds an economic mainstay of the West.

The first goal of this course is to provide a basic understanding of the West’s climate, landforms, biogeography, and history of long-term environmental change, which is essential background for understanding present-day land use, environmental issues, and environmental politics in the West. The second objective is to apply that understanding to major people-environment interactions in the West, using case studies.

Geographic Focus. We will use a somewhat arbitrary but long-standing definition of the American West: It is the part of the United States lying west of the 100th meridian. In addition, the primary focus will be on the Interior West, with less attention given to coastal California, Oregon, and Washington, and leaving out Alaska and Hawaii completely. This is mostly a matter of time available, and if you would like to see more attention paid to certain parts of the west, please let me know.

Assigned readings (and why they are important). There are no required textbooks but there will be fairly extensive required and optional readings, mostly short articles or book sections. These will be discussed in class and I would like to hear your opinions on them. They will often be chosen to provoke thought and discussion. Furthermore, you will be required to respond to many of these readings in the out-of-class assignments (discussed below). Most readings will be on electronic reserve through the UW-Madison Libraries. The only exceptions to this will be readings from magazines that are available online at no cost.
Course website. I will post material related to the course on a password protected Learn@UW site, including copies of the syllabus, assignments, updated reading lists, outlines of exam topics, and most slides shown in lecture. An online gradebook will also be available.

Grading. The course grade will be based on a quiz (10%), two exams (25% each), and three assignments (40% total). The quiz and exams will include a combination of short essays, short-answer and multiple-choice questions, related to lecture material and required readings (the quiz is shorter and covers less lecture material). Before each exam, I will hand out an outline of the topics to be covered. The assignments will involve application of concepts covered in class to case studies of specific issues and places in the West. For example, you may be asked to identify a current local environmental or land use issue in some particular part of the West that you are personally interested in or familiar with. You will then need to place that issue in the context of local climate, landforms, hydrological systems, and impacts of past human land use. The product might include some short essays (not lengthy papers), illustrations or maps, and links to other sources of information. To complete these assignments you will need to use the assigned readings, online data sources, Google Earth images, and other resources. All assignments will be submitted electronically, through the Learn@UW drop box.

Lecture and exam schedule. The quiz and exam dates listed are fixed, but the schedule of lecture topics is tentative. In fact, please note that time allotted to some of these topics will almost certainly expand while time reserved for others will shrink, as we move through the semester, and some new topics may be added. A separate reading list for the first few weeks of the semester will be handed out on the first day, and is also available from the course Learn@UW site. Lists covering later topics will be handed out in lecture and posted on the course website.

1/19. Introduction to the course. What sets the West apart from the rest of the U.S.? Overview of course organization


3/2 Exam 1.

3/9 (second half), 3/11.  **Mining and Energy Resources (Case study: San Juan Mountains and Colorado Plateau).**  Hard-rock mining, and its legacies. Coal, oil, gas and uranium: where they are and environmental impacts of getting them out of the ground. Mining and energy booms and busts, and impacts on western communities.


3/23 Quiz (part of lecture period).


4/20, 4/22.  **Cities in Western Landscapes (Case studies: Denver and the San Francisco Bay Area).**  Environmental setting of major western cities, and the limitations and opportunities of those settings. Water supply and water wars. Urban sprawl, suburban and exurban development, open space and fire control issues.


5/4.  **The Future of the West.**

5/6  Exam 2 [no exam during finals week]