

HUMN 3109 CATASTROPHE: THE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

Credit Points 10

Legacy Code 102835

Coordinator Gregory Barton (<https://directory.westernsydney.edu.au/search/name/Gregory Barton/>)

Description This subject examines past human interactions with the environment with its primary focus on the ancient Mediterranean and Near East between 2000 BC to 1600 AD. Case studies include Sumer, the lost civilisations of the Sahara, Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Maya and later European colonial empires. Students will assess, evaluate and synthesize data drawn from environmental history to analyse how the limits of natural resources constrain civilisations. The subject asks how catastrophic collapse of civilisations informs the sustainability of our own societies. Key topics will be soil fertility, deforestation, desertification, and climate change from ancient times to the Anthropocene.

School Humanities & Comm Arts

Discipline History

Student Contribution Band HECS Band 4 10cp

Check your fees via the Fees (https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/fees/) page.

Level Undergraduate Level 3 subject

Equivalent Subjects HUMN 3020 - Catastrophe The Environmental History of the Ancient and Modern World

Restrictions

Successful completion of 60 credit points of study in currently enrolled program.

Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this subject, students should be able to:

1. Define the interaction between Nature and Civilisation in the past
2. Explain the concept of resource constraint
3. Evaluate competing paradigms of environmental explanations for the collapse of civilisations in the ancient world
4. Define, with empirical examples, the key concepts: civilization, nature, environmentalism, empire, desertification, desiccation theory, globalism
5. Distinguish civilisations of the world in terms of their relationship with nature

Subject Content

Civilisation and Nature: an overview

The World Inheritance: Religion and Nature

The Sumerians: For the want of a tree a kingdom was lost?

Ancient Greece and Deforestation

Ancient Rome: Soil Fertility and the Rot in the Heart of the Empire

The Mayan Catastrophe: Deforestation and Starvation?

Central Asia: Desertification on the Silk Road

Columbian Exchanges and Encounters 1400-1600
 Colonialism and the fear of Global Desert
 Forests and Power: An Australian Fantasy
 Air Pollution and Climate Change
 The Globalization (and future collapse?) of Nature
 The Natural Limits of Homo Sapiens

Assessment

The following table summarises the standard assessment tasks for this subject. Please note this is a guide only. Assessment tasks are regularly updated, where there is a difference your Learning Guide takes precedence.

Type	Length	Percent	Threshold	Individual/ Group Task	Mandatory
Essay	3,000 words	50	N	Individual	N
Critical Review	750 words	25	N	Individual	N
Presentation	5-10 minute presentation/ written notes 750 words	25	N	Individual	N

Teaching Periods

Autumn (2025)

Bankstown City

On-site

Subject Contact Gregory Barton (<https://directory.westernsydney.edu.au/search/name/Gregory Barton/>)

View timetable (https://classregistration.westernsydney.edu.au/odd/timetable/?subject_code=HUMN3109_25-AUT_BK_1#subjects)

Parramatta - Victoria Rd

On-site

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View timetable (https://classregistration.westernsydney.edu.au/odd/timetable/?subject_code=HUMN3109_25-AUT_PS_1#subjects)

Summer (2025)

Penrith (Kingswood)

Online

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View timetable (https://classregistration.westernsydney.edu.au/odd/timetable/?subject_code=HUMN3109_25-SUM_KW_2#subjects)