Spring 2020
Environmental Humanities 6850/ Ethnic Studies 5940  3 Credits.

The Natural World in the Colonial Americas

Wednesdays 02:00pm-05:00pm. Location FD 618b. Instructor: Thomas Michael Swensen. Email: tms12@utah.edu

Course description:
What were the main environmental transformations fostered by the colonial projects in the Americas? Which ideas and practices on nature emerged amid the centuries-long colonial experience? These are two of the central questions of this seminar. We will explore the Western Hemisphere’s natural and colonial worlds from the African slave cultivation of rice in colonial Brazil to how Russian charted businesses forced the extinction of the Sea Cow in the Bering Sea. The seminar considers the Columbian Exchange, the search for the Garden of Eden, and how Europeans mapped the flora and fauna of the Americas to assess the impact of nature on bodies and temperaments. We’ll inquire into how Potosí in the highlands of the Viceroyalty of Peru replaced the Spanish quest for the golden city of El Dorado. We’ll study the construction of Mexico City over Tenochtitlan after the fall of the Aztec and inquiry into how Caribbean Black healing practitioners employed localized knowledge that contributed to the rise of empirical testing of disease origins and cures. We’ll move north tracking the spread of European diseases among indigenous nations in the North American Southeast and north into the maritime extractive economy of Alaska. This hemispheric approach will allow us to assess the centrality of the natural world to the colonial histories of the Americas as we ponder their legacies.

Image below: La primera imagen del Cerro Rico. Pedro Cieza de León, 1553. The First Image of Rich Hill

Readings include:
Barbara E. Mundy. The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the life of Mexico City. University of Texas Press, 2015.