



## Perspectives on Teaching Environmental Oral History in the Media and Communication Classroom

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### Abstract

Environmental oral history is an emerging discipline to collect and study first-hand accounts of people's connection to their local environment and how people are responding to rapid environmental shifts such as climate change. This highly interdisciplinary field is an excellent way to engage communication and journalism students through oral history methodology, environmental studies, and project-based learning.

As the 2022 Basler Chair of Excellence at East Tennessee State University (ETSU), Jason Davis taught an environmental oral history class to a small group of undergraduate and graduate students as part of the ETSU Department of Media and Communication. While oral history is frequently taught in higher education settings, to date this was the first university class dedicated solely to environmental oral history. In addition to learning about oral history methodology and environmental studies, students in the class conducted an individual environmental oral history project for which they interviewed and video-recorded a local resident speaking about their connections to the local environment.

This paper discusses the learning objectives, outcomes, and challenges of this environmental oral history class, and suggests approaches for successfully integrating environmental oral history into the communications and journalism classroom.

### Overview

In Fall 2022, I (Davis) taught a course in Environmental Oral History as the Basler Chair of Excellence at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) in the department of Media and Communication. The department grants undergraduate degrees in Media and Communication with capstones in Journalism,

Advertising and Public Relations, Radio, Television, Video and Film, and a Master of Arts in Brand and Media Strategy. The department has 12 full-time and 10 part-time faculty and around 250 undergraduate and graduate students. The average class size is 15 students although some of the hands-on classes are smaller.

**Keywords:** Environment, Oral History, Project-based learning, Interviewing, Student Engagement

While oral history courses are frequently offered in higher education settings, to my knowledge this course was the first university course solely focused on environmental oral history. The class included four undergraduate and three graduate students from a variety of disciplines, including communications, storytelling, photography, biology, and filmmaking.

### Environmental Oral History

Environmental oral history is an emerging approach for examining the intersections between the natural world, environmental change, and culture through the lens of personal life experiences. Environmental oral history provides a forum for listening and talking with others about the unprecedented changes underway in the global biosphere and local ecosystems, arguing that personal engagement with the environmental crisis is necessary for creating and sustaining lasting cultural change.

Environmental oral history builds off the established fields of environmental history, which is the study of the interaction between human cultures and environments in the past, and oral history, which is an approach to understanding historical events through the first-hand testimony of those who lived through them. Environmental oral history is a highly interdisciplinary field, using the methods of oral history such as interviewing, recording, and transcription alongside the fields of geography and ecology. By necessity, environmental oral history incorporates multiple perspectives and promotes diverse ways of engaging with the world.

Authors have only recently begun to publish articles and books examining environmental oral history from a scholarly lens. Brian Williams and Mark Riley detail the “disruptive” impact of oral history on the field of environmental history (Williams and Riley, 2020). Stephen M. Sloan and Mark Cave’s *Oral History and the Environment, Global Perspectives on Climate, Connection, and Catastrophe* examines oral history projects centered on environmental themes, such as the responses of wheat farmers to severe drought in southeast Australia and volunteers’ perspectives on wildlife rescue after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 (Sloan and Cave (eds.), 2022). Debbie Lee and Katherine Newfont’s *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History* features oral histories connected to landscape and public lands in North America (Lee and Newfont, (eds.), 2017). Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall’s

*Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative, and Environment*, describes oral history projects centered on both rural and urban environments, on themes such as deindustrialization and gendered perspectives of environmental change (Holmes and Goodall (eds.), 2017).

Researchers have argued that environmental oral history is an effective methodology to engage community members with environmental issues such as pollution and community activism (Endres, 2011). Teaching oral history is also a productive framework for classes in journalism and communication; journalism scholar and teacher Mark Feldstein (2004) called journalism and oral history “kissing cousins” in that they both use interviews and research to develop and tell the stories of others.

### Learning objectives/Course structure/Strategies

In completing the Environmental Oral History course, the students were expected to:

- Recognize the value of oral history for environmental research and engagement.
- Appreciate the deep connections between people, culture, and the local environment.
- Develop focused listening skills.
- Gain and utilize skills in interview planning, execution, recording, editing, and sharing of stories.

Questions that were investigated in the course included:

- How does personal life experience intersect with the natural world and environmental change?
- What are the challenges and benefits of speaking about environmental change through the lens of personal experience?
- How does environmental oral history complement traditional scientific understanding of the environment and environmental change?
- How can we understand environmental justice and environmental racism through the lens of oral history?
- What research methods can we use to engage with interviewees to collect and share oral environmental histories?
- What are the ethical concerns involved in conducting environmental oral history?

The course was structured in both a discussion- and project-based format. Students prepared for each class by studying materials related to environmental oral history, such as scholarly papers, book excerpts, podcasts, or oral history transcripts. Materials were

chosen to encourage student engagement with this interdisciplinary field of studies. Example materials included a review of established oral history projects such as the 9/11 Oral History Project and StoryCorps, an overview of standard oral history literature such as “What Makes Oral History Different” by Alessandro Portelli, and *Where There Are Mountains* by Donald Edward Davis, about the environmental history of the Southern Appalachians.

For most classes, students wrote a short response to a discussion question investigating themes brought up by these materials and the broader field of environmental oral history, and then discussed their responses in class. As an example, students read the article “Sensory Roadmaps: How to Capture Sensory Detail in an Interview and Why Doing So Has Exciting Implications for Oral History” (Werner-Thomas, 2022), then submitted written responses and carried out an in-class discussion about how this approach could be applied to the study of environmental change through the lens of personal experience.

The core of the class was an environmental oral history project planned and carried out by each student. The students were tasked with finding an interviewee in the region around Johnson City, Tennessee, where ETSU is located. Interviewees chosen by students included a local organic farmer, a retired wildlife conservation agent, and a local climate change activist, among others. In class we discussed how to craft interview questions and strategies for effective interviewing such as careful listening and asking follow-up questions. Two weeks of the class were dedicated to audio and video recording training and practice. The students then carried out and video-recorded their interview, created a transcript of a section of the interview, edited the video recording to a 2–5-minute length, and created a short podcast containing sections of the interview with their own narration.

With the help of a graduate student in the class, I created a montage of the video interviews interspersed with video footage of natural environments around Johnson City, accompanied by original music I composed for the project (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xD0RVNuKWuo&t=67s>). The montage was displayed in an on-campus museum along with large-format photographs of the interview-

ees and a Geographic Information Systems Story Map featuring the students’ podcasts. (see <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7925f372ee9e46bc-8d4a9a376814614d>)

### Outcomes and challenges

The class was well received by many of the students and verbal feedback indicated that many found the unique focus of the class, the in-class discussion, and the project-based elements engaging. The “production” goal of creating edited video interviews for inclusion in the museum exhibit montage necessitated the dedication of class time to video recording practice and video editing using the software Premiere Pro. One challenge was the substantial variation in technical media skills among the students—two of the graduate students had professional-level video recording and editing skills, while some of the undergraduate students had no experience. The students with limited experience were at times frustrated with the time and effort required to do video recording and editing, while the graduate students found the technical skills rudimentary.

To address this problem, I asked the graduate students to teach some of the class sessions on technical skills. Ideally, students taking this class would be required to possess basic video recording and editing skills prior to enrolling. This problem could also be addressed by only requiring students to submit an audio recording of their interview and a written transcript, rather than an edited video recording.

### Future directions

There is great promise in building on this pilot course on Environmental Oral History in higher education settings. For example, teachers could target an Environmental Oral History course to the ecology and social or environmental issues specific to their region, such as the local impacts of climate change. Journalism and Communication teachers could integrate modules on oral history interviewing and environmental journalism into their classes, including a hands-on oral history project. To maximize limited class time, the teacher may invite a guest speaker to the class to be interviewed by the students rather than having students find interviewees on their own.

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