German 4900: Nature & Culture in Germany
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Course Description
This interdisciplinary course will explore relationships between nature and culture in Germany, from the early 19th century through the present. We draw on multiple disciplines (e.g. the Natural Sciences, Green Studies, Memory Studies, Romanticism Studies, Anthropology, Mythology, History, and Sociology) as we read Andrea Wulf’s 2015 biography of Alexander von Humboldt, the poetic and fairy-tale texts of German Romanticism, and 20th-century reckonings with geography and war. Our course concludes with a unit on practical strategies for environmental engagement today: in Germany and beyond. Students complete weekly written responses, participate in class discussion, and write a final research paper on a topic of their choice, with suggested themes ranging from the earth-conscious mysticism of Hildegard von Bingen to the idiosyncratic treatment of nature in Werner Herzog’s films.

Projected Outcome
By combining close reading/viewing/listening in class with discussion, guest presentations, and field trips, students will gain experiential as well as intellectual understanding of humans’ relationship(s) to nature through the German Studies lens. They will discover that environmental engagement is not new and that it has a rich and at times problematic history in Germany. This course also brings the material closer to home: reading texts about what it means to see the world from a mountaintop, or seeing relationships between plant life, human intervention, and climate, students will be prepared to make connections between what they read and what they sense and observe on a mountain trail in their own backyard—or what they hear as citizens of the world, when they engage in public discourse. Exploring traumatic memory embedded in a garden near Berlin after the Second World War, and then visiting the site of a Shoshone massacre near Cache Valley, as they read varying – and contradictory – accounts of what happened there, students will bring home what they read about in German history. Learning about the figure of the wolf in Norse mythology and German fairy tales, and then hearing about controversies between wolves and ranchers in the western U.S., as well as in today’s Europe, will challenge them to make further connections in their approaches to “wild” and “domestic” life. Finally, exposure to practical environmental solutions and resistances in Germany will help students reflect on how concepts like “environmentalism” and “climate change” are perceived on either side of the Atlantic.

"All forces of nature are interlaced and interwoven … the rest depends on destiny.”  Alexander von Humboldt