

## ENVIRONMENT & SOCIETY

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*"The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope."*

Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*

### Course Objectives

It is foolhardy to discuss either "humanity" or "the environment" in isolation from the other. Some sort of human beings have been integral parts of ecosystems in a growing number of places on the planet for four million years. Paleolithic hunters and gatherers came to our area about 12,000 years ago as the ice sheet of the last ice age receded. They immediately set to adjusting their natural environment to fit their short-term needs by slaughtering all the ancient elephants, driving them to extinction. This drastic ecological change made possible the foresting of Rensselaer County. The issue that confronts us is not whether human society ought to affect the biosphere of which it is part; it has always done so, and could not do otherwise. The questions that confront us are to what extent, with what means, and for what ends should people interact with and shape the natural world. You, students in a technological university, have the special opportunity and responsibility to wrestle with and work to resolve these questions. The main theme of the course, which carries social science credit only, is sustainability: what it is, how it might be achieved, how it can be maintained. We explore the theory and practice of sustainability in three parts: 1) through an examination of the concepts, actors, and processes of environment and society; 2) through an analysis of environmental philosophies and models for action, and 3) by addressing the problems and possible solutions of building sustainable societies. By the end of the course you should be prepared for more specialized study of environment and society (in, for example, a 400-level environmental STS course); should have polished your analytical skills, skills in the use of evidence, and research skills; should be more accomplished public speakers and writers of policy papers; and should, finally, be more critical, informed, and independent-thinking citizens.

### Course Requirements

Course components include readings, lectures, discussions, journals, class presentations and research papers. The structure of the course makes attendance and vigorous participation in discussions mandatory. If you miss a class for an acceptable reason, you may make the class time up by completing extra reading and writing a brief essay about it, in addition to the assignment for the missed class. We will negotiate the extra reading. You may miss no more than four out of our twenty-seven classes. Come to class having read and thus prepared to discuss the material assigned for that day. Bring the day's book(s) with you to class. Maintain a computer-printed journal with twice-weekly entries.

Each entry should have two parts: 1) a one-to-two page essay about the readings for that day, and 2) a one-to-two page essay about the class for that day. Journals are not reading or lecture notes, but instead critical reactions to readings and class activities, especially points found intriguing or valuable, weak or confusing. You should pursue issues and thoughts provoked in class and by the readings and should raise questions about matters not understood. You are welcome to include relevant, unassigned material such as a newspaper clipping or your review of an environmental broadcast or video to supplement (not replace) course material. The first part of each entry is submitted in class on the day the reading is assigned. The second part of each entry is due the following class meeting. Be alert to themes for your entries while reading and while participating in class. The centerpiece of the course is an environmental audit of the Rensselaer campus. Collective oral presentations and research papers—developed as part of a team—on an area of campus life (solid waste, water, energy, food, etc.) serve as vehicles for reporting your results. We will combine the various single-issue audits into a comprehensive report. Campus Ecology, one of our course texts, acts as your guide on how to proceed with your share of the audit. Additional supporting materials (e.g., a copy of the Oberlin College audit report) are on reserve at Folsom Library. Steve Trowbridge, campus greening coordinator, has agreed to act as a resource person for us, and we can expect cooperation from other Rensselaer officials. Our completed audit report will be formally presented to the campus community late this or early next semester, and we might invite senior administrators and the news media to class to hear our presentations. Institute regulations governing academic dishonesty—review your Rensselaer Handbook—are in effect. You are most welcome to visit me during office hours to review notes, clear up misunderstandings, continue class discussions, receive advice on presentation and paper, or talk about campus environmentalism.

### **Course Evaluation**

There are 1000 points possible in this course. The class presentation, journal, class participation, and the audit paper are each worth 250 points or 25% of your grade. Grades for the oral presentations are based on content and organization, delivery (communication skills), visual aids, and ability to handle questions. Audit papers are evaluated on style (grammar, syntax, diction, and flair) as well as content. They should be thorough, comprehensive, well-researched, critical, well-written, and 15-20 double-spaced pages long. Presentation teams are evaluated jointly, but individual members who do not do their share will fail the exercise. Under the circumstances, tardy audit papers are simply not acceptable. Journals are evaluated largely in terms of the degree to which they exhibit serious intellectual engagement with the issues raised in the course. The more reading done, the more thoughtful and readable the writing, the more integration of the material, the better. Unargued opinion will not be favorably received. Each entry receives a grade of either "good," "pass," or "fail." Late entries will only be accepted in conjunction with an excused absence. Tardy journals will be penalized at the rate of one full grade/day. A= 1000-900; B= 899-800; C= 799-700; D= 699-

### **Required Texts**

The following books are available at the Book Store in the Union. One copy of each is also on 2-hour reserve at Folsom Library for your use while studying there, and not as a substitute for buying it. Several additional, relevant books and articles are also on reserve for the class. Photocopied material (journal articles, newspaper articles, etc.) will be periodically handed out in class; you are responsible for copying costs. There may be additional materials costs (I have in mind a three-ring binder to store materials presented by students). Regular reading of a national daily newspaper (e.g., The New York Times) is highly recommended.

Sherry Cable and Charles Cable, *Environmental Problems, Grassroots Solutions: The Politics of Grassroots Environmental Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995) [CC]

Daniel D. Chiras, *Lessons from Nature: Learning to Live Sustainably on the Earth* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992) [DC]

Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992) [CM]

April A. Smith and SEAC, *Campus Ecology: A Guide to Assessing Environmental Quality & Creating Strategies for Change* (Los Angeles: Living Planet Press, 1993) [AS]

## **Course Schedule and Assignments**

### **PART I ENVIRONMENT & SOCIETY: CONCEPTS AND PROCESSES**

#### **Aug 28 Introduction**

#### **Sep 6 Causes and Consequences of Environmental Crisis**

DC, Chap. 1

#### **Sep 11 Science and Worldviews**

CM, Chap. 2

*Project Teams assigned*

#### **Sep 13 Environment and Society: How to Think About Them**

CC, Chronology of Important Environmental Events, Chaps. 1-2

#### **Sep 18 Economic Growth=Environmental Problems**

CC, Chap. 3

#### **Sep 20 Corporate Power and the Capitalist State**

CC, Chap. 4

**Sep 25 Economic Growth and the American Experience**

CC, Chap. 5

**Sep 27 Big Environmentalism and Toxic Dangers**

CC, Chap. 6

**Oct 2 Contaminated Communities**

CC, Chap 7

**Oct 4 Environmental (In)justice**

CC, Chaps. 8-9

**PART II ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT AND ACTION**

**Oct 11 Deep Ecology**

CM, Chap. 4

**Oct 16 Social Ecology**

CM, Chap. 6

**Oct 18 Ecofeminism**

CM, Chap. 8

**Oct 23 Spiritual Ecology**

CM, Chap. 5

**Oct 25 Green Politics**

CM, Chap. 7

**Oct 30 Bioregionalism**

CM, Chap. 9

**PART III SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Nov 1 Toward an Environmental Ethic**

DC, Chap. 2

**Nov 6 Developing the Ecological Self**

DC, Chap. 3

**Nov 8 Toward Ecological Economics**

DC, Chap. 4

**Nov 13 Green Business, Green Consumers?**

DC, Chap. 5

**Nov 15 Eco-Cities**

DC, Chap. 10

**Nov 20 Third World Development**

DC, Chap. 6

**Nov 27 Sustainability in the South**

DC, Chap. 7

**Nov 29 Sustainable Government and Politics**

DC, Chap. 8

**Dec 4 Global Environmental Politics**

DC, Chap. 9

**Dec 6 Presentations**

**Dec 11 Presentations**

**PROJECT GUIDELINES**

A really exciting component of this course is our audit of the campus environment. Students become part of teams that are assigned on September 11. Each team prepares a written research paper and gives an oral presentation on their part of the audit. Teams devise a division of labor so that individual team members each have specific tasks to

perform. At the same time, team members work collectively and are jointly responsible for the overall project. To ensure productive cooperation, teams may choose a facilitator who is responsible for organizing regular team meetings, maintaining team communication, and coordinating team efforts. The guidelines below must be closely followed throughout preparation and presentation of your project.

### **Class Presentation Preparation**

Keep the following in mind:

- \* Your presentation should last no more than three-quarters of the total time available. The remaining quarter (or more) should be reserved for discussion.
- \* Plan to get your main message across in the first five minutes or so. Use the rest of the time to present details of argument, evidence, and other material that you deem important or interesting. End with a short, snappy conclusion that drives home your main message.
- \* Use visual aids when possible. They assist memory and comprehension (both your own and that of your audience). Don't overcrowd your visuals. Can they be read from the back of the room? Tiny print is a common problem that's easily avoidable.
- \* Check ahead of time to make sure the room has the proper AV equipment and that it works (last semester a team found itself without a functioning overhead projector).
- \* Practice—at least by yourselves; better yet, in front of friends or a camcorder. Take special care to hone your timing and delivery. It's always clear which teams or individuals have practiced and which have not. You don't want to merely read your notes. Familiarize yourself with them so that you only need to refer to them every now and then. Avoid a monotonal delivery.
- \* Arrive ahead of time. Relax. Enjoy yourselves.

### **Paper Format**

You must turn in two hard copies and a copy on a floppy disk (with formatting TBA) of your paper. Your paper should be neat and attractively printed, organized so that a reader with little time can find things readily, and written in clear and concise prose. It must incorporate the following elements, which are designed to make the report accessible to your readers, thus inclining them to accept your message:

- \* Title page (complete with authors' names, Team letter, an abstract of 150 or so words) and other pertinent information).
- \* Table of contents (include page numbers for headings and subheadings).
- \* Body of paper, with clear headings and subheadings.

- \* Visual aids (graphs, tables, etc.).
- \* Citations (style is up to you but be consistent).
- \* Bibliography or References list.
- \* Appendices (if necessary).

Coordinate the several sections of the paper into a seamless web: standardize the approach within them, and make transitions between them. It should not read or look like a patchwork quilt. Each of you are collectively responsible for the team paper. Thus, do not wait until the last minute to stitch it all together. If you take editing responsibilities seriously, it shows.