

Sustainability Approaches (Political Ecology)

ERS 400 | Fall 2020

School of Environment, Resources and
Sustainability
Faculty of Environment
University of Waterloo

Office Hours:
Mon. 2:30-4:00pm (Derek A.) EV2-2013
Wed. 11:00 am - 12:30 pm (Ella M.) EV2-2021
or by appointment

“You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.” - Angela Davis

“The power of education extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success. It can contribute to nation-building and reconciliation.” - Nelson Mandela

Overview: In this course you will critically examine how individuals and societies can respond to social-ecological complexity, uncertainty and change, and in ways that are more equitable and just. We will build on material covered in previous SERS courses, and further emphasize the application of critical systems thinking concepts in the context of real-world cases and your own interests. In doing so we will explore selected approaches, concepts and tools to foster sustainability using a lens of political ecology.

Political ecology is an emergent field of inquiry that draws on theory, concepts and methods from several disciplines, including geography and environmental studies/science, anthropology, political science, development studies and economics. At its core, political ecology integrates political economy perspectives and ecology to analyze the underlying contexts and processes of human-environment interaction. Political ecological research has provided valuable insights into the challenges created by overlapping institutional arrangements, local access and distribution conflicts, the narratives concerning science and modernization, marginalization of certain groups, the devaluation of local knowledge systems, and the governance of natural resources from local to global scales.

As an analytical framework, political ecology incorporates broad themes in human-environment interaction with critiques about power within society and institutions of governance, and the mediating influence of class, gender, identity and knowledge. Challenges to economic globalization, neo-liberal development strategies, and inequitable power relationships have been linked to the loss of local culture and knowledge systems and increasing livelihood vulnerability. Political ecology is not without its critics, however, and there are many fascinating

issues, debates and new directions emerging. We will engage with these ideas and debates to examine how societies govern their interactions with nature, and the implications for sustainability.

Course approach and objectives: We live in a human-dominated earth system. Sustainable responses to local and global challenges will test our individual and collective capacities to cope, adapt and deliberately transform our interactions with nature. This course will emphasize actionable concepts and encourage transdisciplinary thinking as a foundation to foster sustainability.

Our approach to the class is: 1) systemic - thinking in terms of social and ecological connections and feedbacks across scales; 2) critical - not accepting the obvious explanation and challenging the relationships of power and narratives that influence sustainable outcomes (generally and in regards to your own interests); and 3) applied – developing and using concepts, tools and skills in the context of some real-world challenges, with an emphasis on your own interests and career aspirations.

At the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Reflect on your own training and experience as it relates to social-ecological complexity, uncertainty and change (local to global), and to broader efforts to advance a just and equitable sustainability;
- Understand and assess various approaches, concepts and ideas as they are applied at local to global scales to deal with sustainability challenges;
- Critically assess the assumptions underlying sustainability ideas and applications and by extension, your own interests and experiences;
- Carefully consider the role of narrative, discourse and power with regards to knowledge, science and governance of resources and the environment; and
- Leverage your critical understanding of linked social and ecological system sustainability, and to propose and communicate strategies for change with reference to your own interests and future aspirations.

Course activities involve a mix of remote lecture, experiential assignments and some 'synchronous' (i.e., real-time) interactive discussions. Lectures will be relatively short, focus on key themes and give guidelines for your reading of the text and application of ideas.

We will use a range of examples and cases, both close to home and internationally. Guest speakers and additional multi-media (e.g., video) will be used to supplement course content.

Readings and Resources: Required readings are identified in the class schedule. Readings are drawn from the course text (see below) and selected articles that will be made accessible on the course LEARN site. Additional resources (e.g., videos, etc.) will also be uploaded to the LEARN site. The following required text is available directly through the publisher (Wiley Press), online (e.g., through Amazon*), or through the UW book store. You are free to obtain either a hardcopy or a digital e-book. The publishers link is: shorturl.at/nwBGY

Robbins, P. 2020. Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction (Third Edition). Wiley: Hoboken, New Jersey.

Readings from past SERS courses are also a valuable resource – please revisit and use them as appropriate.

*There are plenty of good reasons to avoid ordering through Amazon and you are free to explore other opportunities. Local book stores can order texts as well but just make sure you get the latest edition.

Course requirements and evaluation:

Critical Reflections (3 @ 15% = 45%): Three critical reflections (of a possible 4) are required. Your reflections should be submitted to LEARN (see schedule for due date). Marks will be assigned to reflect (a) completion of the reflection; (b) evidence of engagement with core ideas in readings and lectures (i.e., what are they, why are they important, what's missing); and c) your ability to take a position on the focal issues. Each reflection will be centred on a different issue (e.g., a guest lecture, a recent event, a policy process). Each reflection should be approximately 1250-1500 words. We will maintain reasonable expectations about the quality and clarity of writing, although the primary interest is in the application of ideas. Please see the rubric for more details.

Communicating Political Ecology (25%): You will produce and record a 4-5 minute podcast OR a 1-2 minute high quality video. The purpose of the podcast/video is three-fold: i) to develop your communication skills; ii) reflect your understanding of political ecological ideas; and iii) to serve as a tool to address a key issue of interest through the lens of critical political ecology. Please see the guidelines and rubric for more details.

Synthesis Paper (30%): Regardless of our intellectual footing (e.g., ecology, policy, restoration, etc.) or applied aspirations (e.g., resource manager, researcher, outreach, education, etc.), we need to position ourselves in relation to issues that are of primary concern to us. In this final assignment you will critically reflect on an issue of your choice (N.B.: you are welcome to use your podcast/video as a base for this assignment) with regard to scale (spatial, temporal) and issues of identity (i.e., your positionality, worldviews and values, knowledge perspectives). Please see the guidelines and rubric for more details.

Week	Themes	Readings/Resources	Deliverables
1	Introduction, overview and course structure	Introduction videos (Armitage, Muhl); Course syllabus overview video; Latour 2020	
2	Political ecology as an approach to sustainability	Robbins, Chapters 1 & 2; Nagendara (2018)	
3	Tools for critical thinking and understanding in sustainability	Robbins, Chapters 3 & 4	CR1 – Sept 25th (12 pm) (Submit to Dropbox on LEARN)
4	Challenges in ecology	Robbins, Chapter 5 Guest lecture: Dr. Nasreen Peer, Stellenbosch University	
5	Challenges in social construction and explanation	Robbins, Chapter 6 & 7	CR2 – Oct 9 (12 pm) (Submit to Dropbox on LEARN)
6	Reading week		
7	Degradation and marginalization	Robbins, Chapter 8; McCarthy 2020 Guest lecture: Dr. Prateep Nayak, University of Waterloo	CR3 – Oct 23 (12 pm) (Submit to Dropbox on LEARN)
8	Conservation and control	Robbins, Chapter 9 Guest lecture: Dr. Hilary Thorpe (Parks Canada) and Cindy Boyko (Haida Nation, Archipelago Management Board)	
9	Environmental conflict	Robbins, Chapter 10; Smith (2019) Guest lecture: Skye Augustine, Simon Fraser University	Podcast/video – Nov 6th (12 pm) (Submit to Dropbox on LEARN)

10	Environmental subjects and identities	Robbins, Chapter 11; Khan 2020 Guest lecture: Lowine Hill, University of Waterloo	
11	Political objects and actors	Robbins, Chapter 12 Guest lecture: Dr. Philile Mbatha, University of Cape Town	CR4 – Nov 20th (12 pm) (Submit to Dropbox on LEARN)
12	Looking ahead: political ecology and sustainability	Robbins, Chapter 13; Tallis et al. (2018)	
13			Synthesis Paper – Dec 11 th (12 pm) (Submit to Dropbox on LEARN)

Supplementary Readings (incomplete)

- Brisbois, M.C. and R.C. de Loë. 2015. Power in collaborative approaches to governance for water: A systematic review. *Society and Natural Resources* 29(7):775-790.
- Khan, T. 2020. Research by the developed on the developing – View from the “researched”. *The Sociological Review*.
- Latour, B. 2020. What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model? This article appeared in AOC on 29th March 2020:
<https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/03/29/imaginerles-gestes-barrieres-contre-le-retour-a-la-production-davant-crise>
- McCarthy. 2020. Think Land Policy Is Unrelated to Racial Injustice? Think Again. *Land Lines*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Cambridge, MA.
- Nagendra, H. 2018. The global south is rich in sustainability lessons. *Nature*. 557: 485-488.
- Vaidyanathan, G. 2018. Imagining a climate-change future, without the dystopia. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 115(51): 12832-12835.
- Smith, A. 2019. When public lands become tribal lands again. *High Country News*. Paonia, Colorado
- Tallis et al. 2018. An attainable global vision for conservation and human well-being. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* doi:10.1002/fee.1965

Course policies and important information: Please note the following: 1) All assignments must be completed to receive a mark for the course; 2) Requests for extensions of any assignment must be done so in writing in advance of the assignment due date; 3) In the event of an illness, a supporting medical certificate completed by a physician must be provided; and 4) Extensions may be granted for significant emergencies at the discretion of the Instructor.

Academic integrity

In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. The University's guiding principles on academic integrity can be found here:

<http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity>. ENV students are strongly encouraged to review the material provided by the university's Academic Integrity office specifically for students:

<http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/Students/index.html>

Students are also expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offenses, and to take responsibility for their actions. Students who are unsure whether an action constitutes an offense, or who need help in learning how to avoid offenses (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about "rules" for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. Students may also complete the following tutorial: <https://uwaterloo.ca/library/get-assignment-and-research-help/academic-integrity/academic-integrity-tutorial>

When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. Within ENV, those committing academic offences (e.g. cheating, plagiarism) will be placed on disciplinary probation and will be subject to penalties which may include a grade of 0 on affected course elements, 0 on the course, suspension, and expulsion. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline: <https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-71>. Students who believe that they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve; refer to Policy #70, Student Grievance: <https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-70>

Intellectual property

Students should be aware that this course contains the intellectual property of their instructor(s), TA, and/or the University of Waterloo. Intellectual property includes items such as: Lecture content, spoken and written (and any audio/video recording thereof); Lecture handouts, presentations, and other materials prepared for the course (e.g., PowerPoint slides); Questions or solution sets from various types of assessments (e.g., assignments, quizzes, tests, final exams); and work protected by copyright (e.g., any work authored by the instructor or TA or used by the instructor or TA with permission of the copyright owner).

Course materials and the intellectual property contained therein, are used to enhance a student's educational experience. However, sharing this intellectual property without the intellectual property owner's permission is a violation of intellectual property rights. For this reason, it is necessary to ask the instructor(s), TA and/or the University of Waterloo for permission before uploading and sharing the intellectual property of others online (e.g., to an online repository). Permission from an instructor, TA or the University is also necessary before sharing the intellectual property of others from completed courses with students taking the same/similar courses in subsequent terms/years. In many cases, instructors might be happy to allow distribution of certain materials. However, doing so without expressed permission is considered a violation of intellectual property rights.

Please alert the instructor if you become aware of intellectual property belonging to others (past or present) circulating, either through the student body or online. The intellectual property rights owner deserves to know (and may have already given their consent).

Students with disabilities:

AccessAbility Services, located in Needles Hall, Room 1401, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term.

Mental health and wellbeing

The University of Waterloo, the Faculty of Environment and our Departments/Schools consider students' wellbeing to be extremely important. We recognize that throughout the term students may face health challenges - physical and / or emotional. Please note that help is available. Mental health is a serious issue for everyone and can affect your ability to do your best work. Counselling Services <http://www.uwaterloo.ca/counselling-services> is an inclusive, non-judgmental, and confidential space for anyone to seek support. They offer confidential counselling for a variety of areas including anxiety, stress management, depression, grief, substance use, sexuality, relationship issues, and much more. Additional information is posted on the LEARN site (under 'course syllabus and administration')

Religious Observances

Students need to inform the instructor at the beginning of term if special accommodation needs to be made for religious observances that are not otherwise accounted for in the scheduling of classes and assignments.

Unclaimed assignments

Unclaimed assignments will be retained until one month after term grades become official in Quest. After that time, they will be destroyed in compliance with UW's confidential shredding procedures.

Communications with instructor(s)

All communication with students must be through either the student's University of Waterloo email account or via Learn. If a student emails the instructor or TA from a personal account they will be requested to resend the email using their personal University of Waterloo email account.

Co-op interviews and class attendance

Co-op students are encouraged to try and choose interview time slots that result in the least amount of disruption to class schedules. When this is challenging, or not possible, a student may miss a portion of a class meeting for an interview. Instructors are asked for leniency in these situations; but, a co-op interview does not relieve the student of any requirements associated with that class meeting.

When a co-op interview conflicts with an in-class evaluation mechanism (e.g., test, quiz, presentation, critique), class attendance takes precedence and the onus is on the student to reschedule the interview. CECA provides an interview conflict procedure to manage these situations. Students will be required to provide copies of their interview schedules (they may be printed from WaterlooWorks) should there be a need to verify class absence due to co-op interviews.