

# Nature and Popular Culture

## Department of Environmental Studies

State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry

EST 245 • Fall 2009 • Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30–1:50 PM • 146 Baker Hall

<http://www.esf.edu/es/meisner/est245.htm>

Course LISTSERV Address: [npc@listserv.syr.edu](mailto:npc@listserv.syr.edu)

### Prof. Mark Meisner

**Office:** 108–B Marshall Hall • **Phone:** (315) 470–6908 • **Email:** [mmeisner@esf.edu](mailto:mmeisner@esf.edu)

**Mark's Office hours:** Tuesdays & Thursdays 10:30 AM – 12:00 noon or by appointment

**Teaching Assistants:** **Bruno Takahashi:** [btakahas@syr.edu](mailto:btakahas@syr.edu) and **Sean Vormwald:** [spvormwa@syr.edu](mailto:spvormwa@syr.edu)

## ABOUT THE COURSE

The environmental crisis is not simply about scientific, economic, regulatory, technical or personal choices. It is also a crisis of culture and meaning. What does our society value? How does it see? What does Nature mean to us? Permeating this crisis are the arguably dominant ideologies of 20th century Western thought, namely anthropocentrism and consumerism. Both have encouraged environmental degradation in numerous ways, not the least of which by legitimating the instrumental value of Nature as simply a resource for human use.

These ideologies are most often seen expressed through the artifacts and texts of popular culture. By focusing on the expression of these ideologies in everyday life, this course provides an atypical yet familiar way for students to engage with the deeper issues raised by environmental degradation. This course is intended to provide an important interdisciplinary and holistic perspective on the meanings of nature expressed in North American popular culture and on the relation between everyday lived experience and environmental affairs. A range of popular culture phenomena will be explored, including advertising, nature shows, tourism, parks, zoos, fashion, feature films, and lawns. This course has no prerequisites and is intended to be the recommended lower division humanities course for Environmental Studies. It is also a college-wide humanities or elective course.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this course are to encourage students...

- to understand and explain how popular culture helps construct our ideas of Nature.
- to understand and explain how uses of Nature in popular culture impact non-human beings.
- to understand and explain the significance of images of Nature for environmental affairs.
- to better understand the cultural and social dimensions of the environmental crisis.
- to demonstrate basic media literacy skills.
- to apply basic techniques in cultural studies.
- to apply critical reading, thinking, and writing skills.

## COURSE MATERIALS

**Required Texts** (available at Follet's Orange Bookstore in Marshall Square)

Price, Jennifer (1999) *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*. New York: Basic.  
Ryan, J. C., & Durning, A. T. (1997). *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*. Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch.

Schor, Juliet B. and Taylor, Betsy (eds.) (2002) *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the Twenty-first Century*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Singer, Andy (2001) *CARtoons*. Prague: Car Busters.

Wilson, Alexander (1991) *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Toronto: Between The Lines.

**Additional readings are indicated in the class schedule and will be made available separately.**

## EVALUATION

There are six components to evaluation in this course. They are described briefly below. More details will be provided later. Please see the attached "Guidelines for Assignment Preparation & Submission". Please also see the attached "Course Policies" on deadlines and penalties.

### **Participation 10% (throughout)**

Participation is a vital part of this course. Your participation grade is calculated by multiplying your rate of attendance by your level of participation when you are in class. Therefore, you should attend **all** classes and try to participate in discussions and other class activities. The quality of your participation is as important as the quantity. In addition, you may use the class LISTSERV list to continue the discussion outside of class time. Students who have a difficult time talking in class should use the LISTSERV if they want to get boost their participation grade.

### **Identity Paper 10% (due September 17)**

In this assignment you will be asked to write about some aspect of popular culture that helped shape your identity in relation to Nature.

### **Mid-Term Exam 20% (October 8)**

Knowledge of required course materials is essential to write this exam. The mid-term exam will draw from both the readings and the classes and will cover everything up to this point in the course.

### **Consumption Study 15% (due October 27)**

This assignment will require you to document and reflect on some aspect of your consumption over the course of two weeks.

### **Hunting Expedition 15% (due November 19)**

In this assignment you will be expected to go out and find unusual and interesting uses of nature in popular culture (trophies), to document them, and to write analyses of why they are interesting and significant.

### **Final Exam 30% (exam period)**

Knowledge of required course materials is essential to write this exam. The final exam will draw from both the readings and the classes and will emphasize the material from the second half of the course. However, you should be familiar with material from the whole course as it will still be relevant.

**Grading in this course is done using percentages with accompanying letters.**

**Letter grades are assigned according to the following scale.**

Percentage	≥90	≥85	≥80	≥75	≥70	≥65	≥60	≥55	≥50	≥0
Letter Grade	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D	F
Grade Point	4.00	3.70	3.30	3.00	2.70	2.30	2.00	1.70	1.00	0.00

## COURSE LISTSERV

To facilitate distribution of supplemental course materials and discussion outside of class, we are using a LISTSERV mailing list. **You will be subscribed to the list using your SU email address** by the end of the day on the first day of class. You will receive a notice to that effect from the LISTSERV software. **Please read the instructions in that notice carefully.** To send a message to the list (everyone in the class) send it to [npc@listserv.syr.edu](mailto:npc@listserv.syr.edu) .

**NOTE:** To successfully send to the list, you will need to send from **your SU email address (e.g. msmeisne@syr.edu)** so please make sure that is working properly.

## CLASS FORMAT

Each class will have a slightly different format. Some days I will do more talking than others. Interaction, questions, and comments are an important part of the process. Supplementary materials and in-class exercises will pop-up from time to time. Try to be prepared to discuss the readings. In particular the "jam sessions" will be a chance for more in-depth discussion of the issues raised in the course.

## COURSE POLICIES

Please see the attached course policies.

Please also see the *ESF Student Handbook*, the *ESF Judicial Handbook* and *Academic Integrity @ ESF*, all available on the ESF web site: <http://www.esf.edu/students/handbook/>

## COURSE OUTLINE

Required readings are listed below each class. The amount of reading varies from week to week, but the average over the 15 week semester is 65 pages per week. Be sure to have your readings for that day completed **before** coming to class. **The class lectures do not usually go over material in the readings. Instead, the lectures build on ideas from the readings and illustrate the ideas and concepts with examples.** The readings and the lecture are two separate opportunities for learning; they are not interchangeable. In order to best prepare for the mid-term and exam, you are advised to take notes about the key arguments and ideas from each reading as you complete them.

### Part A – Theory

#### September 1 – Course Introductions

- No readings

#### September 3 – Green Cultural Studies

- *Culture of Nature* "Introduction" (7 pages)
- *Flight Maps* "Introduction" (7 pages)
- *Sustainable Planet* "Introduction" by Bill McKibben (12 pages)

#### September 8 – Popular Culture Matters

- *Flight Maps* Ch.1 "Missed Connections: The Passenger Pigeon Extinction" (56 pages)

#### September 10 – Anthropocentrism

- Fox, W. (1995) "Anthropocentrism." (1 page)
- Livingston, John (1985). "Moral Concern and the Ecosphere." *Alternatives*, 12(2), 3-9. (6 pages)

#### September 15 – Consumerism

- Gardner, G., Assadourian, E., & Sarin, R. (2004). "The State of Consumption Today." In L. Starke (Ed.), *State of the World 2004: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. (21 pages)
- Stuff "Prologue," "Coffee," "Newspaper," and "Computer"(26 pages)

#### September 17 – Jam Session # 1

- No new readings, but be up to date with all previous readings.

### Part B – Nature at Home

#### September 22 – Fashion

- *Flight Maps* Ch.2 "When Women Were Women, Men Were Men, and Birds Were Hats" (55 pages)
- *Sustainable Planet* "Cleaning the Closet" by Juliet Schor (15 pages)
- Stuff "T-Shirt," and "Shoes" (13 pages)

**September 24 – Lawns & Gardens**

- *Culture of Nature* Ch.3 "Nature at Home" (28 pages)
- *Sustainable Planet* "Another Way of Being Human" by Peter Forbes (10 pages)

**September 29 – Food**

- Heinz, B., & Lee, R. (1998). Getting Down to the Meat: The Symbolic Construction of Meat Consumption. *Communication Studies*, 49, 86–99. (13 pages)
- Stuff "Hamburger," "French Fries," and "Cola" (24 pages)

**October 1 – More Food**

- *Sustainable Planet* "Be a Local Hero" by Mark Ritchie (17 pages)
- Deumling, D., Wackernagel, M., & Monfreda, C. (2003). "Eating up the Earth: How Sustainable Food Systems Shrink Our Ecological Footprint" (Agricultural Footprint Brief). Oakland: Redefining Progress. (12 pages)

**October 6 – Jam Session #2 / Review**

- No new readings, but be up to date with all previous readings.

**October 8 – Mid-Term Exam****Part C – The Commercial Imperative****October 13 – The Genesis of Consumerism**

- Tucker, R. (2002). "Environmentally Damaging Consumption: The Impact of American Markets on Tropical Ecosystems in the Twentieth Century." In T. Princen, M. Maniates, & K. Conca (Eds.), *Confronting Consumption* (pp. 177-195). Cambridge: MIT Press. (18 pages)
- Kaplan, Jeffrey, (2008) "The Gospel of Consumption", *Orion*, May/June (8 pages).

**October 15 – Advertising & Society**

- Boihem, H. (1996) Transcript from the film *The Ad and the Ego*. (10 pages)
- Berger, A. (2000). "Advertising in American Society," in *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. (19 pages)

**October 20 – Advertising Nature**

- *Flight Maps* Ch.4 "Looking for Nature at the Mall" (40 pages)
- *Flight Maps* Ch.5 "Roadrunners Can't Read", partial, pp. 235–244 (10 pages)

**October 22 – Advertising Green Politics**

- *Culture of Nature* Ch.2 "Nature Education and Promotion," partial, pp. 71–87 (17 pages)
- TerraChoice (2007). "The Six Sins of Greenwashing: A Study of Environmental Claims in North American Consumer Markets." Toronto: TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. (15 pages)
- TerraChoice (2009). "The Seven Sins of Greenwashing: Environmental Claims in Consumer Markets." Toronto: TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. (26 pages)

**Part D – Nature out There****October 27 – Travel & Tourism**

- *Culture of Nature* Ch.1 "The View from the Road", partial, pp.19–28 and pp.39–51 (23 pages)

**October 29 – Cars**

- *Culture of Nature* Ch.1 "The View from the Road", partial, pp.28–39 (12 pages)
- *CARtoons* (Read whole book; about 25 pages of text plus cartoons!)

**November 3 – More Cars**

- *Sustainable Planet* "Sprawl" by Hank Dittmar (20 pages)
- Stuff "Bike (and Car)" (10 pages)

**November 5 – Jam Session #3**

- No new readings, but be up to date with all previous readings.

## **Part E – Nature on Show**

### **November 10 – Looking at Animals**

- Lerner, J. E., & Kalof, L. (1999). "The Animal Text: Message and Meaning in Television Advertisements." *Sociological Quarterly*, 40(4), 565–586. (22 pages)

### **November 12 – Zoos & Marine Parks**

- *Culture of Nature* Ch.7 "From Reserve to Microenvironment", partial, pp.246–255 (10 pages)
- DeLuca, K. M., & Slawter-Volkening, L. (2009). "Memories of the Tropics in Industrial Jungles: Constructing Nature, Contesting Nature." *Environmental Communication*, 3(1), 1-24. (24 pages)
- Black, B. (1999). "From Nature's Nation to Shamu on a Stick." *American Quarterly* 51(1) 212–220. (8 pages)
- Jaehne, D. (2000). "Review of *Spectacular Nature*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* August. 368–370. (3 pages)

### **November 17 – Nature on Film and TV**

- *Culture of Nature* Ch.4 "Looking at the Non-Human" (40 pages)

### **November 19 – More Nature on Film and TV**

- *Flight Maps* Ch.5 "Roadrunners Can't Read" (50 pages)

### **November 24 – NO CLASS, BUT THERE IS A READING...**

- Stevenson, G., & Keehn, B. (2006). *I Will If You Will, Towards Sustainable Consumption*, Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, UK. (78 pages)

### **December 1 – Jam Session #4**

- No new readings, but be up to date with all previous readings.

## **Part F – Culture of the Future**

### **December 3 – Technology and the Future**

- *Culture of Nature* Ch.5 "Technological Utopias", partial, pp. 176–190 (15 pages)
- *Culture of Nature* Ch.8 "On the Frontiers of Capital" (36 pages)

### **December 8 – Culture Jamming**

- Bordwell, M. (2002). "Jamming Culture: Adbusters' Hip Media Campaign against Consumerism." In T. Princen, M. Maniates, & K. Conca (Eds.), *Confronting Consumption* (pp. 237-253). Cambridge: MIT Press. (16 pages)
- *Sustainable Planet* "How Do We Get from Here to There" by Betsy Taylor (20 pages)
- Stuff, "Conclusion," and "Appendix" (10 pages)

### **December 10 – Beyond Consumerism**

- *Sustainable Planet* "The Extravagant Gesture" by William McDonough and Michael Braungart (20 pages)
- *Sustainable Planet* "What's Money Got to Do with It?" by Vicki Robin (15 pages)
- *Sustainable Planet* "Toward Property as Share" by Prasannan Parthasarathi (15 pages)
- *Sustainable Planet* "Five Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Economy" by Herman E. Daly (13 pages)