

Environmental Thought and Ethics

Department of Environmental Studies
State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry
EST 640 • Winter 2009 • Tuesdays 9:30 AM -12:20 PM • 105 Marshall Hall

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Office hours: Mondays 10:30 am -12 noon, Tuesdays 1:00 - 2:00 PM, or by appointment

ABOUT THE COURSE

This course serves as an introduction to some of the philosophical, religious, cultural and historical dimensions of environmental affairs. This area of study is known as environmental thought and it is defined (by me at least) as the critical interdisciplinary study of the ecological implications of human ideas and cultures.

Environmental thought includes considerations of environmental ethics - how we should act in relation to the world. But environmental thought is more than simply environmental ethics for it also involves the thoughtful examination of how ecologically-significant cultural assumptions, attitudes, values, ways of seeing, ways of being, ideologies, representations, and institutionalized practices have contributed to human meanings and relationships with other-than-human-Nature. As the basis for culture and meaning-making, language gets special attention.

This course relies on readings for the bulk of its content. Readings are used as a basis for in-depth class discussions of key concepts, issues, themes and cases. The course combines philosophical and historical analysis of key cultural facets of environmental degradation, including western language systems, religious traditions, ancient Greek philosophy, the scientific revolution, the history of ecology, and contemporary environmental philosophies. Key concepts to be considered include anthropocentrism, resourcism, human-nature dualism, hierarchy of being, ethics, ontology, values, ideology, mechanism, organicism, morality, biocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, ecofeminism, atomism, reductionism, objectification, animal rights, intrinsic value, and utilitarianism.

This course provides an opportunity to reflect on our most fundamental assumptions about the place of humanity in a world threatened by human actions. At the same time, we will consider what motivates our actions or inaction and what are appropriate ways to act in the world, hence the singling out of ethics in the course title. It is hoped that students will engage with the course content as both scholars and members of communities who must make real choices in the world.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this course students should be able to:

1. Explain the relevance of cultural and historical perspectives of Nature to environmental affairs.
2. Characterize contemporary Western thinking in relation to other-than-human-Nature.
3. Explain the significant moments in the history of Western civilization that have most influenced contemporary perspectives of Nature.
4. Distinguish between different ethical and ontological positions vis-à-vis other-than-human-Nature.
5. Articulate and explain the significance of their own ways of seeing and valuing Nature.
6. Effectively deploy critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

COURSE MATERIALS

The following books should be available at Follet's Orange Bookstore in Marshall Square:

- Abram, D. (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World*. New York: Pantheon. (referred to as Abram in the course outline below)
- Curry, P. (2006). *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press. (referred to as Curry in the course outline below)
- Evernden, N. (1993). *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (2nd ed.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press. (referred to as Evernden in the course outline below)
- Livingston, J. A. (1994). *Rogue Primate: An Exploration of Human Domestication*. Toronto: KeyPorter Books. (referred to as Livingston in the course outline below)
- Weston, A. (2008). *A Rulebook for Arguments* (4th ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. (referred to as Weston in the course outline below)
- Worster, D. (1994). *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press. (referred to as Worster in the course outline below)

Other readings will be assigned as well.

For a cornucopia of additional materials, you are encouraged to consult the web site, newsletters and online bibliography of the International Society for Environmental Ethics: <http://www.cep.unt.edu/ISEE.html>

EVALUATION

There are four components through which you will be evaluated in this course. They are described briefly below. More details will be provided later. Please see the attached "Guidelines for Assignment Preparation & Submission."

Participation **20%** **(throughout the term)**

You are expected to read all course readings, attend all classes and participate in all discussions and other class activities. Be prepared to talk about the readings, raise questions, and consider the comments of your classmates. The quality of your participation is as important as the quantity.

Nature Perspectives Paper **15%** **(due February 3)**

In this 2000 word paper you will outline your own way of seeing and valuing Nature, explain why you have these views and values and make the case for them.

Book Summary and Analysis **20%** **(due March 31)**

You will read, briefly summarize, and then analyze a book from outside the course readings that is relevant to environmental thought. Each student will chose a different book in consultation with me. This will take the form of a 2000 word paper accompanied by a 1 page overview to be distributed to the class as part of a presentation and discussion in class.

Presentation **10%** **(April 14, 21, 28)**

You will make a presentation to the class and lead a discussion on the topic of your chosen book.

Final Exam (take home) **35%** **(May 8)**

The final exam will require you to demonstrate that you have met the course objectives.

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	≥0
Letter Grade	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	F
Grade Point (final)	4.00	3.70	3.30	3.00	2.70	2.30	2.00	1.70	0.00

COURSE POLICIES

Please see the attached "Course Policies" document.

CLASS FORMAT

This is a graduate seminar class. The format will be a mix of things with an emphasis on discussion.

COURSE OUTLINE

Readings are listed below each class. You are required to read the readings **before** coming to class on that day. Class discussions will build on the readings.

January 13 - Assumptions about Nature

No readings

January 20 - Ethics and Values

Curry Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5

January 27 - Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

Curry Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12

February 3 - The Roots of Ecology

Worster Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5

February 10 - Darwin's Legacy

Worster Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12

February 17 - Economic Ecology

Worster Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17

February 24 - The Paradox of Environmentalism

Evernden Chapters 1, 2, and 3

March 3 - Believing in Nature

Evernden Chapters 4, 5, and 6

March 17 - Phenomenology and Language

Abram Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4

March 24 - Coming to our Senses

Abram Chapters 5, 6, 7, and Coda

March 31 - The Human Condition

Livingston Pages 1-98

April 7 - An Ontology of Domestication

Livingston Pages 99-197

April 14 - Student Topics

April 21 - Student Topics

April 28 - Student Topics