

[SUSTAIN 140] Environmental Humanities: Finding Our Place on a Changing Planet

Course description:

Imagine you woke up tomorrow in a perfectly sustainable society. What would this look like, and what would it have taken to get here? Would our work be complete – or is there a chance we could have missed the point? What does sustainability even mean?

Expansive thinking and deep questioning are hallmarks of the Environmental Humanities – an interdisciplinary field that brings together the sciences and humanities to probe at the cultural, ethical, and philosophical roots of environmental challenges. Led by a teaching team of scholars, artists, scientists, and strategists, this new course, one of the first to be offered by the Doerr School of Sustainability, acknowledges the need to draw on multiple areas of study and diverse points of view in order to understand our assumptions about our place in the world.

We begin with a reckoning of where we stand today: a rapidly-degrading planet, unraveling ecosystems, emerging crises in global health and security, already-marginalized communities disproportionately at risk, grim outlooks for future generations. Through the lenses of ecology, history, philosophy, anthropology, economics, psychology, literature, and Indigenous ways of knowing, we'll then consider how we got here – in order to both comprehend our current reality and envision a path forward.

In addition to developing skills in ethical and philosophical inquiry, we will dive into intuitive and relational ways of knowing – listening, feeling, and creatively moving through some of today's most challenging questions. Cultural works – including books, films, poetry, prose, and art – will guide our conversations about environmental ethics, meaning, and solutions. Final projects will apply learnings to action – providing the opportunity to step outside of the classroom and involve external audiences in meaningful environmental contemplation or impact.

This course will push you to think critically about narratives of human progress, explore contrasting cultural paradigms around human-nature relationships, and leverage humility and curiosity to make sense of the ways culture and environmental change are entwined. Utilizing different styles of thinking and areas of scholarship, we will challenge one another's ideas about environmental solutions, possible futures, and what stories of purpose guide our pursuits.

How can we understand our place on a changing planet – and imagine a better future?

Schedule:

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:30-2:50pm

Teaching team:

- [Erika Veidis](#), *Center for Innovation in Global Health*
- [Kathy Burke](#), *Woods Institute for the Environment*
- [Giulio De Leo](#), *Hopkins Marine Station, Woods Institute for the Environment*
- [Kelly McManus Chauvin](#), *Biology, Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve*
- [Tadashi Fukami](#), *Biology*
- [Sara Michas-Martin](#), *English, Creative Writing*

Course learning goals:

Through active engagement and completion of course activities, you will:

- Articulate how cultural paradigms – including Indigenous ways of knowing – inform humanity’s shifting relationships with nature and underpin norms and institutions
- Develop interpretations of writing, poetry, film, or other expressive works as values-driven responses to global environmental change and strategies for coping
- Understand how historically-marginalized perspectives and power differences have influenced narratives of progress and models of human-nature relationships
- Reconcile intellectual, action-oriented, and emotionally-based ways of engaging topics in sustainability
- Articulate and evaluate competing ethical perspectives on environmental problems and actions

Course structure:

The course will be organized in five sections to address the following questions:

- I. *Where are we? (in terms of the environmental crisis and intersecting social & health challenges)*
- II. *How did we get here?*
- III. *How do we understand our place in the world?*
- IV. *Where do we go from here?*
- V. *How do we make sense of it all?*

Assignments:

- *Small projects:* Over the course of the quarter, you will be asked to submit several short response papers, reflections, and creative pieces of work. These small biweekly assignments will ask you to reflect on course materials, engage with philosophical and other texts, interpret creative works, pursue challenging conversations, perform acts of stewardship, and explore contemplative practices with nature.
- *Essays:* You will be required to submit two 4-5 page essays. The first will ask you to reflect on a specific philosophical or ethical challenge related to environmental issues, leveraging course materials and citations of additional literature. The second will ask you to choose a quote from the course materials as a prompt for a creative writing piece. This open-ended essay can showcase your personal experiences, fictional ideations, or academic inquiries.
- *Final project:* You will be required to execute a final project that engages an external audience in environmental inquiry or action. Projects are open-ended; possible formats could include: an

original art piece performed or displayed in a public setting; a community event that engages the audience in a discussion related to environmental ethics; a communications and outreach campaign that issues a call-to-action inspired by course readings or discussions. Final projects must leverage learnings from the course and demonstrate meaningful community engagement. Projects will be evaluated on their reach, originality, and creativity. You may work in groups (depending on class size), and a small amount of funding will be available to support project execution. You will be asked to submit a short summary of the project.

Grading:

- Small projects: 30%
- Essays: 30%
- Final project: 20%
- Participation: 20% (*to be evaluated based on engagement in discussions*)

Lectures & course materials:

Course materials include books, poems, prose, popular media articles, films, musical pieces, and podcasts – expressive works reflecting academic themes discussed in lectures.

I. *Where are we?*

- **Sep 27: Introduction**

Instructor lead: Erika Veidis

Overview of today's environmental challenges, ethical frameworks for environmental action, and unresolved questions to be explored throughout the course.

Course materials:

- [IPCC Sixth Assessment Report](#)
- "[Three Degrees of Global Warming is Quite Plausible and Truly Disastrous](#)," *Economist*
- [The Overstory](#), Richard Powers (course-long reading)

II. *How did we get here?*

- **Sep 29: Historical overview**

Instructor lead: Giulio De Leo, Kathy Burke

Discuss environmental crisis and its impacts – as well as intersections of major environmental and social challenges.

Course materials:

- Excerpt from [Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril](#), ed. Kathleen Dean Moore, Michael P. Nelson
- "[Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change](#)," Nathaniel Rich, *NY Times*

- **Oct 4: Philosophy & ethics**

Instructor lead: Kelly McManus Chauvin

Discuss foundational concepts in environmental philosophy and ethical frameworks – and how these are reflected in select expressive works.

Course materials:

- [“Environmental Ethics,”](#) Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- [“The Land Ethic,”](#) Aldo Leopold
- [“Deep Ecology, New Conservation, and the Anthropocene Worldview,”](#) George Sessions
- Excerpt from *The Earth Around Us*, Stephen Jay Gould: [“The Golden Rule: A Proper Scale for Our Environmental Crisis”](#)
- [“Environmental Ethics: The State of the Question,”](#) Marion Hourdequin, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*
- Excerpt on [prairie dogs](#) from *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, Terry Tempest Williams

- **Oct 6: Cultural & personal relationships**

Instructor lead: Sara Michas-Martin

Explore cultural & personal relationships to nature and the environment through varied art forms – laying groundwork for thinking about sustainability and different points of view on environmental topics.

**Class will take place at Goldsworthy’s “Stone River” on campus, beginning at Richard Serra’s “Sequence.”*

Course materials:

- [“Is All Writing Environmental Writing,”](#) Camille Dungy, *The Georgia Review*
- [“The New You,”](#) Anthony Doerr, *Orion Magazine*
- [“surely i am able to write poems,”](#) Lucille Clifton
- [“A Small Needful Fact,”](#) Ross Gay
- [“Follow Them,”](#) Matthew Rohrer

- **Oct 11: Anthropology**

Instructor lead: Erika Veidis

Discuss cultural paradigms through an anthropological lens – and how these are reflected in select expressive works – with a key central question: how has history been written by the “victors”?

Course materials:

- Excerpt from [Ishmael](#), Daniel Quinn

- Excerpt from [The Wayfinders](#), Wade Davis
- Excerpt on Windigo mythology from [Braiding Sweetgrass](#), Robin Wall Kimmerer

- **Oct 13: Psychology & sociology**

Instructor lead: Erika Veidis

Discuss psychology and sociology of environmental inaction – featuring guest speaker Steve Luby.

Course materials:

- [“The Cognitive Biases Tricking Your Brain,”](#) Ben Yagoda, *The Atlantic*
- [“Cognitive Biases in Different Cultures,”](#) Maja Kochanowska
- Excerpt from [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#), Daniel Kahneman
- Excerpt on bystander effect from [The Overstory](#), Richard Powers

- **Oct 18: Entropy & sacred time**

Instructor lead: Erika Veidis

Discuss principle of entropy from physical sciences and how this connects with some Indigenous groups' concept of "sacred time" – and consider how this concept is reflected in select creative works.

Course materials:

- Excerpt from [The Ohlone Way](#), Malcolm Margolin
- [“Becoming: From Zygote to Tadpole, in Six Stunning Minutes,”](#) Jan van Ijken (film)
- Excerpt on yeast & champagne from [Breakfast of Champions](#), Kurt Vonnegut
- [“Ocean,”](#) John Butler (music)

III. *How do we understand our place in the world?*

- **Oct 20: Eco-poetics & the role of language**

Instructor lead: Sara Michas-Martin

Explore human-nature relationships through eco-poetics: “poetry that investigates — both thematically and formally — the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception.”

Course materials:

- [“Learning the Grammar of Animacy,”](#) Robin Wall Kimmerer
- [“Why Eco-poetry? There's no Planet B,”](#) John Shoptaw
- [“Eco-poetics-Minifesto,”](#) Brenda Hillman,
- Selections from [WHEREAS](#), Layli Longsoldier
- “Forrest Gander Reads Ada Limón,” [New Yorker Poetry Podcast with Kevin Young](#) (featuring. poems: [“Post-Fire Forest,”](#) Forrest Gander; [“Privacy,”](#) Ada Limón)

- [“Drought,”](#) Cintia Santana
 - [“Age of Plastic,”](#) Craig Santos Perez
 - [“The Fever,”](#) Kimiko Hahn
 - [“How Can Black People Write About Flowers at a Time Like This,”](#) Hanif Abdurraqib
 - [“Optimism,”](#) Jane Hirschfield
 - [“Remember,”](#) Joy Harjo
 - [“Magic and the Machine,”](#) David Abram, *Emergence Magazine*
- **Oct 25: Conservation vs. stewardship**
Instructor lead: Kelly McManus Chauvin
Discuss different concepts of humanity's role in regards to nature (eg. ecomodernism, Indigenous land management).

Course materials:

- [“An Ecomodernist Manifesto,”](#) Asafu-Adaye et al.
- [“The Catch-22 of Conservation: Indigenous Peoples, Biologists, and Cultural Change,”](#) Flora Lu
- [“Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,”](#) Wendell Berry (poem)
- Excerpt from [The Wayfinders](#), Wade Davis

- **Oct 27: The local context**
Instructor lead: Tadashi Fukami
Discuss local Indigenous and environmental history and traditional ecological knowledge.

Course materials:

- Excerpt from [The Ohlone Way](#), Malcolm Margolin
- [“No Word for Goodbye: Reclaiming Abalone’s Home on the California Coast,”](#) Jacquelyn Ross
- Remarks from Muwekma Ohlone Tribe in [“An Evening with Robin Wall Kimmerer”](#) (event recording)
**Opening begins at 36:56; Muwekma Ohlone Tribe at 40:20; and Robin Wall Kimmerer at 1:01:53, followed by panel discussion.*

- **Oct 29: Jasper Ridge field trip (Saturday)**
Instructor lead: Kelly McManus Chauvin
Discuss connectedness to place – with emphasis on emotional, philosophical, and cultural paradigms.

Course materials:

- [“Hearing the Anthropocene in Searsville Reservoir Sediment Cores”](#) (recording)

IV. *Where do we go from here?*

- **Nov 3: Possible futures**

Instructor lead: Kathy Burke

Discuss possible futures, highlighting science fiction – and the “challenge of imagination” – featuring guest speaker Kim Stanley Robinson.

Course materials:

- [Excerpt](#) from *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh (p. 1-54)
- Excerpt from [The Ministry for the Future](#), Kim Stanley Robinson
- Excerpt from [Journey to Earthland](#), Paul Raskin

- **Nov 8: New paradigms**

Instructor lead: Kelly McManus Chauvin

Discuss how philosophical and ethical perspectives (eg. decolonialism, posthumanism) influence cultural norms and institutions – and how this informs possible solutions.

Course materials:

- [“New Zealand Gives Mount Taranaki Same Legal Rights as a Person,”](#) *The Guardian*
- [“It’s Wrongheaded to Protect Nature with Human-Style Rights,”](#) Anna Grear, *Aeon*
- Excerpt on gift economy from [Braiding Sweetgrass](#), Robin Wall Kimmerer
- [“Does Capitalism Need to be Reimagined?”](#) Rebecca Henderson, *Harvard Magazine*

- **Nov 10: Ecologically-engaged art**

Instructor lead: Sara Michas-Martin

Discuss creative expression as a means of processing climate change and explore different forms of art and impact: film, dance, fiction, painting, photography.

Course materials:

- [“The Ecology of Perception,”](#) David Abram (interview)
- [“We Aren’t the Only Species,”](#) Craig Santos Perez
- [“Nothing Wants to Suffer,”](#) Danusha Laméris
- [“The Peace of Wild Things,”](#) Wendell Berry
- [“Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude,”](#) Ross Gay (performance)

- **Nov 15: Environmental stewardship**

Instructor lead: Erika Veidis

Discuss opportunities for environmental stewardship that also draw in cultural and

contemplative practices (eg. biocultural stewardship, concept of indigeneity).

Course materials:

- [“Ritual + Sustainability Science? A Portal into the Science of Aloha,”](#) Kealiikanakaolehaililani et al., *Sustainability*
- [“Why Lost Ice Means Lost Hope for an Inuit Village,”](#) *NY Times*
- [“Rethinking ‘Native’ in the Anthropocene,”](#) Avery Hill and Elizabeth Hadly, *Frontiers in Earth Science*
- [“Do Stones Feel?”](#) Mary Oliver

- **Nov 17: Kinship & connectedness**

Instructor lead: Erika Veidis

Discuss models of relating to the more-than-human world and creative attempts to describe these connections.

Course materials:

- [Albatross](#), Chris Jordan (film)
- Excerpt from [interview](#) with *Albatross* director, Chris Jordan (video)
- [“Creaturely Migrations on a Breathing Planet,”](#) David Abram, *Emergence Magazine*
- [“Swan,”](#) Mary Oliver (poem)

- **Nov 29: Consensus building**

Instructor lead: Giulio De Leo

Discuss building partnerships for environmental action in the context of conflicting ethical and philosophical frameworks.

Course materials:

- [“Timber Wars,”](#) *NPR* (podcast) (episodes 1, 4, 7)

V. *How do we make sense of it all?*

- **Dec 1: Listening**

Instructor lead: Kathy Burke

Explore practices of listening to the world around us, as informed by ecology, music, art, and Indigenous ways of knowing.

Course materials:

- [“The Last Sound,”](#) *Invisibilia*, *NPR* (podcast)
- [“Living with the Unknown Soundtrack,”](#) Volker Bertelmann, *Emergence Magazine* (music)
- Excerpt on traditional Polynesian navigation, [The Wayfinders](#), Wade Davis

- [“Words of War: A Literary Lifeline for the Battlefield,”](#) Alissa Rubin, *NY Times*
- **Dec 6: "And the world was everything together"**
Instructor lead: Erika Veidis
Discuss concepts from spiritual traditions that may help contextualize environmental challenges.

Course materials:

- Excerpt from [Siddhartha](#), Hermann Hesse
 - Excerpt from [Tao Te Ching](#)
 - Excerpt from [Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet](#), Thich Nhat Hanh
 - [“Hozhó,”](#) Lyla Johnston (spoken word)
- **Dec 8: Student presentations**
Instructor lead: Erika Veidis
Students present on final projects and other takeaways from class.