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The Earth from space – The only home we have

Environmental Politics

Political Science 217 – Fall 2021

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:00 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.

Course Content and Goals

You are living at a critical moment in the Earth's history.

In the centuries since the Industrial Revolution, our human species has acquired unprecedented population size, food abundance, scientific knowledge, and material wealth. We have created a global industrial civilization, powered largely by burning fossil fuels. We are now the most powerful animal species in Earth's 4.5 billion year history. Yet our very source of power—fossil fuels—produces devastating waste products, carbon dioxide in particular, heating the Earth to catastrophic levels, through basic principles of physics known as *global warming* and the *greenhouse effect*. In addition, our physical power has allowed us to over-exploit other resources, especially forests, to build vast cities supported by history's most expansive agricultural, transportation, and industrial systems. As a result of all this, *global warming* and *ecological exploitation* have disrupted habitats around the world, causing a level of extinctions not seen for *65 million years*—since the end of the dinosaurs. Many of Earth's most majestic animals—whales, elephants, polar bears, giraffes, gorillas, orangutans, tigers, and more—may soon disappear forever.

However, since the mid-20th century, political resistance to environmental destruction has manifested in national and international movements of *environmentally conscious* citizens, who demand protection for the natural world, its wild places, primary ecosystems,

and vulnerable animal populations—including people. In a civilization characterized by extremes of wealth and poverty, however, some populations are more vulnerable than others. Against this backdrop ecological political parties, especially Green parties, have gained increased power since 1979. International treaties have established strict environmental rules. National governments are increasingly obliged to accelerate their transition to renewable, non-fossil energy sources.

As you explore the political science subfield called *Environmental Politics*, you will learn how the people of the world, through public and private efforts, are confronting the severe ecological crises which threaten our planet. You will master current social science knowledge about the politics of the environment. You will understand ecological arguments, and will use factual evidence to inform your own future life choices, as you expand your capacity for ecological citizenship. Other course details are below.



Many of the world's great species, like these orangutans, face extinction at human hands.

Grades, Attendance Policy, and Exams

There will be no mid-term, and no final exam, in this class. Every student will be assigned to a five-person reading group. Please be prepared to participate fully in both small reading group and large class discussions, and please watch all assigned videos.

Note: *Attendance and assigned readings are mandatory.* Your final grade will be based on the professor's assessment of your attendance, participation, and effort (40%) and your written assignments (60%). Please respect the following classroom policies:

- You should arrive on time; late entry disrupts the class, and requires that announcements (including assignments, events, and so on) be repeated.
- You should be attentive when other students or the professor are speaking.
- On Zoom: Cameras should almost always be turned on. Microphones should almost always be muted.

Short Assignments: Two Brief Reports

You will write **(1) two-page news brief (Oct. 19)** summarizing accounts from multiple news sources, depicting one or more instances of environmental protest in the U.S. And, you will write **(1) two-page scholarly brief (Nov. 9)** on assigned topics in environmental politics, using multiple scholarly sources. Specific topics and instructions will be distributed at least one week prior to each deadline.

Long Assignment: Research

As an individual project, you will conduct research on a topic in environmental politics, and present your findings on **Dec. 7 or 9**, in one of three optional formats **equivalent to a 10-page** term paper. A **two-paragraph proposal** is due on **Oct. 7**, indicating your *topic* and *modality*.

- 1) Policy briefing with detailed sources.
- 2) Newspaper opinion piece using background sources.
- 3) Formal presentation of research findings (e.g. PowerPoint).

Required Books

Collapse: How Societies Decide to Fail or Succeed. Jared Diamond. 2011.

Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life. Edward O. Wilson. 2016.

The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism, Policy, 3rd Edition. Neil Carter. 2019.

The Age of Sustainable Development. Jeffrey D. Sachs. 2015.

The Sea is Rising and So Are We: A Climate Justice Handbook. Cynthia Kaufman. 2021.

No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference. Greta Thunberg. 2021.

CLASS SCHEDULE WITH READING ASSIGNMENTS

UNIT I. HUMAN IMPACTS ON OUR ENVIRONMENT

Aug. 31 Course overview and reading group assignments

Sep. 2 Lessons of Past Societies

Read: Diamond, *Collapse*, Prologue, Chaps. 1-5.

Sep. 7 Devouring the Earth

Read: Diamond, *Collapse*, Chaps. 6-11.

Read: Broswimmer, "The Planet as Sacrifice Zone."

Video: [Anthropocene: The Human Epoch \(2019, 87m\)](#)

Sep. 9 The Rise and Fall of the Modern World

Read: Diamond, *Collapse*, Chaps. 12-16.

UNIT II. THREATS TO THE NATURAL WORLD: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Sep. 14 Humanity Needs a Biosphere

Read: Wilson, *Half-Earth*, Prologue-Chap. 7.

Video: [The Last Extinction \(2020, 18m\)](#)

Sep. 16 Webs of Life

Read: Wilson, *Half-Earth*, Chaps. 8-14.

Sep. 21 Threading the Bottleneck

Read: Wilson, *Half-Earth*, Chaps. 15-21

Video: [Race to Save the Reef \(2018, 25m\)](#)



Industrial production, especially when driven by capitalist competition, has intensified human impacts.

UNIT III. POLITICAL RESPONSES TO ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Sep. 23 Environmental Philosophy

Read: Carter, *The Politics of the Environment*, Chaps. 1-2.

Sep. 28 Ecologism and the Greens

Read: Carter, Chaps. 3-4.

Sep. 30 Environmental Movements

Read: Carter, Chaps. 5-6.

Video: [Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai \(2008, 81m\)](#)

Oct. 5 Environmental Policy

Read: Carter, Chaps. 7-8.

Oct. 7 Global Environmental Politics and Policy

Read: Carter, Chaps. 9-10.

DUE: Project Description and Proposal

Oct. 12 NO CLASS – Indigenous Peoples’ Day

Oct. 14 Greening Government

Read: Carter, Chaps. 11-12, Conclusion.

Video: [Happening: A Clean Energy Revolution \(2017, 72m\)](#)

DUE: Project Source List

UNIT IV. BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Oct. 19 Sustainability and Inequality

Read: Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development*, Chaps. 1-2.

DUE: News Brief — “Environmental Protest in the News”



Youth contingent at People's Climate March, among 400,000 protesters in New York City, September 21, 2014.

Oct. 21 "Economic Development"

Read: Sachs, Chaps. 3-4.

Oct. 26 Poverty and the Limits to Growth

Read: Sachs, Chaps. 5-6.

Video: [The End of Poverty? \(2010, 105m\)](#)

Oct. 28 Social Inclusion

Read: Sachs, Chaps. 7-8.

Nov. 2 Health and Food

Read: Sachs, Chaps. 9-10.

Nov. 4 Cities in the Age of Climate Change

Read: Sachs, Chaps. 11-12.

Nov. 9 Sustainable Development

Read: Sachs, Chaps. 13-14.

Video: [El Cacao: The Challenge of Fair Trade \(2015, 20m\)](#)

DUE: Research Brief — "The Current State of the Environment"

Write a two-page research report—using *scholarly sources*—about current conditions and challenges facing the natural world.



Is the world prepared for rising seas?

UNIT V. THE CRISIS OF GLOBAL WARMING

Nov. 11 Another World is Possible

Read: Kaufman, *The Sea Is Rising and So Are We*, Chaps. 1-4.

Nov. 16 Strategies for Fighting Climate Change

Read: Kaufman, Chaps. 5-8.

Nov. 18 Discussion: What is to be done?

Read: Albrecht, "Solastalgia and the Creation of New Ways of Living."

Read: Rensenbrink, "Politics Gets Interesting."

Video: [Sinking Cities: New York \(2018, 55m\)](#)

DUE: Project Updates

Nov. 23 NO CLASS - Thanksgiving

Nov. 25 NO CLASS - Thanksgiving

Nov. 30 "Our House Is on Fire"

Read: Thunberg, *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, pp. 1-75.

Dec. 2 "The People are the Hope"

Read: Thunberg, pp. 76-149.

Video: [Living in the Future's Past \(2018, 84m\)](#)

Dec. 7 Long Research Assignments

DUE: Newspaper Opinion Essays

Dec. 9 Long Research Assignments

DUE: Policy Briefings, Presentations