

STSS-2300
Fall 2006
TF 10:00-11:50 AM CII 4034

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OH: TF 1-2 pm or by appt

ENVIRONMENT & SOCIETY

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

—Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

Course Objectives

It is foolhardy to discuss either “society” or “the environment” in isolation from the other. Organized collectives of human beings have been integral parts of ecosystems in a growing number of places on the planet for at least one million years. Paleolithic hunters and gatherers came to our area about 12,000 years ago as the ice sheet of the last ice age receded. They immediately began adjusting their natural environment to fit their short-term needs by slaughtering, to the best of our knowledge, all the ancient elephants, driving them to extinction. This drastic ecological change made possible the foresting of Rensselaer County (clear-cut in the nineteenth century and since grown back). Thus, the issue that confronts us is not whether human society ought to affect the biosphere of which it is part; it has always done so, and could not do otherwise. The questions that confront us are to what extent, with what means, and for what ends should people interact with and shape the natural world. You, students in a technological university, have the special opportunity and responsibility to wrestle with and work to resolve these questions.

We explore the theory and practice of environment and society in three parts: 1) the material; 2) the ideal; and 3) the practical. By the end of the course you should be prepared for more specialized study of environment and society (in, for example, a 400-level environmental STS course); should have polished your analytical skills, skills in the use of evidence, and research skills; should be more accomplished public speakers and writers of policy papers; and should, finally, be more critical, informed, and independent-thinking democratic citizens.

Course Requirements

Course components include readings, lectures, discussions, examinations, and environmental indicator reports and presentations. The structure of the course makes class attendance and vigorous participation in discussions mandatory. If you miss a class for an acceptable reason, you may make up the class time by completing extra reading and writing a brief essay about it, in addition to the assignment for the missed class. We will negotiate the extra reading. You may miss no more than four out of our twenty-seven classes. Come to class having read and thus prepared to discuss the material assigned for that day. Bring the day's book with you to class. You take two exams: a midterm, and a cumulative final. The tests are structured around the reading, lectures and discussions.

The centerpiece of the course is a new regional environmental indicator pilot project. We are very fortunate to have a group of indicators experts willing and able to work with us on the project. Prof. Melissa Everett will act as our contact person for the expert team. You select one or more indicators to research, develop a work plan with teammates and an expert, fulfill the plan, and collectively prepare oral presentations and research papers due at the end of the semester. We're likely too to develop a web page to disseminate our work.

Institute regulations governing academic dishonesty—review your *Rensselaer Handbook*—are in effect. You are strongly encouraged to visit me during office hours to review notes, clear up misunderstandings, continue class discussions, or receive advice on your project.

Course Evaluation

There are 1000 points possible in this course. The indicators project (presentation and written report), two exams, and class participation, are each worth 200 points or 20% of your grade. Excellent class participation requires having read the material assigned for that day, actively engaging in class discussion, and being sensitive to and respectful of the opinions of others. Grades for the oral presentations are based on content and organization, delivery (communication skills), visual aids, and ability to handle questions. Project papers are evaluated on style (grammar, syntax, diction, and flair) as well as content. They should be thorough, comprehensive, critical, and well-written. Presentation teams are evaluated jointly, but individual members who do not do their share will fail the exercise. Tardy project reports or a rescheduled presentation are simply not possible. Examinations are evaluated on the basis of the quality and comprehensiveness of their responses to test questions. A= 1000-900; B= 899-800; C= 799-700; D= 699-

Required Texts

The following book is available for purchase at the BookStore in the Union. Photocopied material (journal articles, newspaper articles, etc.) will be periodically handed out in class. We will also subscribe (at a discount rate) to the daily edition (M-F) of *The New York Times*. It is available for daily pick up at Father's in the Union. I will send you considerable reading via email (usually

shorter, journalistic pieces). It will be marked as "assigned" or "optional" for a particular class.

Michael Mayerfeld Bell, *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004). [MB]

Course Schedule and Assignments

Note: If class meets on a religious holiday or some other special day for you, let me know and I will make arrangements. Major due dates are included below. There may be other, interim deadlines for indicator project updates announced in class.

Aug 29 **Introduction: A Brief History of Environmental Indicator Projects**

Sep 1 **The Environmental Predicament**

MB, chap. 1: pp. 1-16

Sep 5 **Environmental Justice and the Rights of Nature**

MB, chap. 1: pp. 16-26

PART ONE THE MATERIAL

Sep 8 **The Material Basis of the Human Condition**

MB, chap. 2: pp. 28-39

Project Preferences Due

Sep 12 **Goods, Sentiments, and the Treadmill of Consumption**

MB, chap 2: pp. 39-50

Project Teams Assigned

Sep 15 **The Treadmill of Production**

MB, chap. 3: pp. 51-66

Sep 19 **Technology as a Social Structure**

MB, chap. 3: pp. 67-77

Project Plans Due

Sep 22 **Malthus and Inequality**

MB, chap. 4: pp. 78-91

Sep 26 **Malthus, Technology and Demography**

MB, chap 4: pp. 91-104

Sep 29 **Living Downstream**

MB, chap. 5: pp. 105-113

Oct 3 **No Safe Place**

MB, chap. 5: pp. 113-124

PART TWO THE IDEAL

Oct 6 **Midterm**

Oct 13 **The Ideology of Environmental Domination**

MB, chap 6: pp. 127-135

Oct 17 **Individualism, Gender, and Environmental Domination**

MB, chap. 6: pp. 136-146

Oct 20 **Project Day**

Oct 24 **The Ideology of Environmental Concern**

MB, chap 7: pp. 147-159

Oct 27 **Theories of Environmental Concern**

MB, chap. 7: pp. 160-172

Oct 31 **The Human Nature of Nature**

MB, chap. 8: pp. 173-187

Nov 3 **Nature and Environment as Social Constructions**

MB, chap 8: pp. 187-196

Nov 7 **The Rationality and Culture of Risk**

MB, chap. 9: pp. 197-208

Nov 10 **Disasters, Risk Society, and Democracy**

MB, chap. 9: pp. 208-220

PART THREE

THE PRACTICAL

Nov 14 **Building Sustainable Societies**

MB, chap. 10: pp. 223-232

Nov 17 **Reorganizing Communities**

MB, chap 10: pp. 232-250

Nov 21 **Project Presentations**

Nov 28 **Project Presentations**

Dec 1 **Project Presentations**

Dec 5 **Project Presentations**

Project Reports Due

Dec 8 **In-class Cumulative Final**

PROJECT GUIDELINES

A really exciting component of this course is our regional environmental pilot project. Students submit project preferences on September 8, become part of teams that are assigned on September 12, and submit work plans on September 19. Each team prepares a written/web-based research paper and gives an oral presentation on their project. Teams devise a division of labor so those individual team members each have specific tasks to perform by various interim deadlines. At the same time, team members work collectively and are jointly responsible for the overall project. To ensure productive cooperation, teams choose a facilitator who is responsible for organizing regular team meetings, maintaining team communication, and coordinating team efforts. The guidelines below must be closely followed throughout preparation and presentation of your project.

Class Presentation

Keep the following in mind:

- Your presentation should last no more than three-quarters of the total time available. The remaining quarter (or more) should be reserved for discussion.
- Plan to get your main message across in the first five minutes or so. Use the rest of the time to present details of argument, evidence, and other material that you deem important or interesting. End with a short, snappy conclusion that drives home your main message.
- Use visual aids when possible. They assist memory and comprehension (both your own and that of your audience). Don't overcrowd your visuals. Can they be read from the back of the room? Tiny print is a common problem that's easily avoidable.
- Check ahead of time to make sure the room has the proper AV equipment and that it works (a team once found itself without a functioning overhead projector).
- Practice—at least by yourselves; better yet, in front of friends or a camcorder. Take special care to hone your timing and delivery. It's always clear which teams or individuals have practiced and which have not. You don't want to merely read your notes. Familiarize yourself with them so that you only need to refer to them every now and then. Avoid a monotonic delivery.
- Arrive ahead of time. Relax. Enjoy yourselves.

Paper Format

There will be precise directions for preparation of your indicator reports. You will turn in one hard copy and a copy on CD-ROM. The following elements are suggestive of the final format:

- Title page (complete with authors' names, an abstract of 150 or so words, and other pertinent information).
 - Table of contents (include page numbers for headings and subheadings).
 - Body of paper, with clear headings and subheadings.
 - Visual aids (graphs, tables, etc.).
 - Citations (style is up to you but be consistent).
 - Bibliography or References list.
 - Appendices (if appropriate).

Coordinate the several sections of the report into a seamless web: standardize the approach within them, and make transitions between them. It should not read or look like a patchwork quilt. Each of you is collectively responsible for the team paper. Thus, do not wait until the last minute to stitch it all together. If you take editing responsibilities seriously, it shows.