

GEOGRAPHY 4335
Contemporary Environmental Issues
Syllabus

Instructor: Sig Langegger, PhD
Day/Room: Tuesday/2-216 and Thursday/L-329
Time: 2:00 – 3:50 pm

Office Hours: Monday 10:00 – 12:00 and Thursday 10:00 – 12:00
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DESCRIPTION

As populations increase, as nations industrialize, as economies modernize, the impacts of human activities on the natural environment become increasingly demonstrable. Water and air pollution threaten delicately balanced ecosystems. As Earth's atmosphere warms, storms become more severe, their damage more costly. Instead of focusing on the physical consequences of human behavior on the environment, this course explores the social upshots of polluted and dangerous environments on vulnerable populations. To do so, we will frame environmental issues in terms of environmental justice. In other words, we will unpack how human societies distribute the risks and benefits associated with the natural environment among their constitutive populations. We will consider topics such as the siting and politics of dumping, air quality and breathing unequally, uneven risk and the injustice of disaster, and food justice.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this course students will:

1. learn to think critically about environmental issues.
2. be able to identify where environmental issues intersect with other concerns, such as social issues, geographies of place, economic development, citizenship, public health efforts, and models of city planning.
3. be comfortable using philosophical and environmental terminology in written and oral communication
4. have gained insight into how pollution and land use is regulated and policed and how these formal efforts determine social and environmental (in)justices.
5. be able to critically think, write, and argue about environmental issues. That is, using appropriate evidence, you will be able support or challenge models and theories presented in this course.

STRUCTURE OF COURSE

This is a seminar, meaning that there will only be a smattering of lectures. The bulk of class time will be dedicated to discussion. All students are required to actively participate in these discussions. Students will not be required to memorize material; they will however be expected to comprehend and articulate ethical and philosophical concepts, synthesize these abstractions, and apply them to real world problems.

The first four weeks of the semester will be dedicated to constructing a conceptual apparatus that we will use to disentangle the complexities of contemporary environmental issues. This apparatus is comprised of three philosophical questions. First, will explore the fundamental questions of justice, ethics, and morality. Second, will consider perhaps the most fundamental philosophical question, namely reality. What is real? What is truth? What is significant? What is imaginary, false, or spurious? Finally we will delve into the question of power. Who decides? Who acts? And importantly, who is impacted by these decisions and actions?

After we carefully construct our conceptual optic, we use it throughout the semester to gain insight into seven environmental issues: industrial and household waste, air pollution, exposure to natural disaster, access to public space, food security, urbanization and land-use patterns, and finally environmentalism.

Each week this course will follow a similar structure. Tuesdays we will discuss, deconstruct, and analyze the assigned reading. Thursdays will be dedicated to deepening our understanding of the issues raised in the previous class.

TEXTBOOK

Gordon Walker (2012) *Environmental Justice: Concepts, Evidence and Politics* Routledge, New York

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Discussion Questions (12)	24%
Response Papers (11)	33%
Term Paper	43%

Each Tuesday I will lead our discussion of the topics raised in the primary reading with student questions. As such, each Tuesday students are required to submit two discussion questions. These questions must relate directly to each week's primary reading. They can be questions about the meaning of complex terms the author uses, the geographical contexts, the social contexts, the political contexts, the overarching thrust of the argument, the generalizability of issues raised, etc.

Each Thursday students must submit a 250 – 500 word response paper. In this short paper students must use the framework developed in the previous classes to analyze the environmental issue raised in the assigned reading.

At the end of the semester, each student is required to submit a 2500 – 3000 word term paper. The topic of the paper is at the student's discretion. However the paper must effectively use the framework developed throughout the semester to report and analyze a current environmental issue.

GRADING POLICY

All written assignments will be graded using a rubric.

I do not grade on a curve. Furthermore, I insist that grades are *earned*; they are not *given*. The grade each student's earns on each assignment and her/his final grade will reflect individual performance.

All grades are final, unless students can prove finding a gross grading error. No extra credit will be offered.

GENERAL POLICIES

Academic Honesty.

Plagiarism is the use of another person's words or ideas without crediting that person. Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated and may lead to failure on an assignment, in the class, and dismissal from the University.

Students are responsible for being attentive to or observant of University of Colorado Denver and International College Beijing policies about academic honesty as stated in the University's Student Code of Conduct.

Attendance.

This course is structured around class discussion. Therefore attendance and participation of each student is vital for all students' learning outcomes. Not only is attendance required, it contributes toward your final grade. For exceptions to this policy, please refer to the University's policies on excused absences, emergency absences, and religious observances.

Students with Disabilities.

If you require accommodations, please alert me of your needs on the first day of class so that I, working within University of Denver and International College Beijing policies, may adequately provide them.

Civility and Classroom Decorum.

Silence all cell phones, beepers, etc. during class.

Unless being used as a part of a class exercise or to take notes, please close laptop computers.

This course is based in large measure on critical thinking and class discussion. Disagreement is part and parcel of these processes. Colleagues can disagree *and* maintain respect for each other and one another's views. I insist that we strive to learn from the differences that manifest while debating the merit of theoretical and empirical evidence by maintaining an atmosphere of civility during discussions.

SCHEDULE

Justice and the Environment

February 26th: Introduction to course

February 28th: Urban gardening, social justice, and urban politics (Film: The Garden)

Understanding Environmental Justice

March 5th

- Primary reading *Environmental Justice* (Chapter 1)
- Due: Discussion questions 1

March 7th

- Special Topic: Philosophy – Justice
- Supplemental reading: *Atlantic Cities* Slum evictions move ahead in Nairobi
- Due: Response paper (1)

Globalizing and Framing Environmental Justice

March 12th

- Primary reading: *Environmental Justice* (Chapter 2)
- Due: Discussion questions 2

March 14th

- Special Topic: Philosophy – Reality
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* Bangladesh factory where dozens died was illegal
- Due: Response paper (2)

Making Claims: Justice, Evidence, and Process

March 19th

- Primary reading: *Environmental Justice* (Chapter 3)
- Due: Discussion questions 3

March 21st

- Special Topic: Philosophy – Power
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* China lets media report on air pollution crisis
- Due: Response paper (3)

Locating Waste: Siting and the Politics of Dumping

March 26th

- Primary reading: *Environmental Justice* (Chapter 4)
- Due: Discussion questions 4

March 28th

- Special Topic: High Tech Trash
- Supplemental Reading: *New York Times* Unwanted Toxic Gear Rising in Toxic Piles
- Due: Response paper (4)

Breathing Unequally: Air Quality and Inequality

April 2nd

- Primary reading: *Environmental Justice* (Chapter 5)
- Due: Discussion questions 5

***April 4th No Class – Tomb Sweeping day**

- Special Topic: The Politics of Pollution
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* As China's Environmental Woes Worsen, Infighting Emerges as Biggest Obstacle
- Due: Response paper (5)

Research Paper Work Sessions

***April 9th**

- **No Class**
- **See me for extended office hours**

***April 11th**

- **No Class**
- **See me for extended office hours**

Uneven Risk and the Injustice of Disaster

April 16th

- Primary reading: *Environmental Justice* (Chapter 6)
- Due: Discussion questions 6

April 18th

- Special Topic: Hurricane Sandy
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* After Hurricane Sandy helping hands also expose a New York divide
- Due: Response paper (6)

Public Space: The New Urban Green

April 23rd: Chapter seven

- Primary reading: *Environmental Justice* (Chapter 7)
- Due: Discussion questions 7

April 25th

- Special Topic: The Neoliberal City
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* In New York, neglected trees prove deadly
- Due: Response paper (7)

Public Space: Making a Stand

Sunday, April 28th

- Primary reading: *The Nation* (Richard Sennett) A new way of thinking about space
- Due: Discussion questions 8

May 2nd

- Special Topic: Permitting Protest
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* Protests over chemical plant force Chinese officials to back down
- Due: Response paper (8)

Food Justice

May 7th

- Primary reading: Gotlieb & Joshi *Food Justice* (Introduction)
- Due: Discussion questions 9

May 9th

- Special Topic: Urban Farming
- Supplemental reading: *The Nation* To eat and live in a New Orleans food desert
- Due: Response paper (9)

Land Use, Urbanization, and the Environment

May 14th

- Reading: Bruegman – The Causes of Sprawl
- Due: Discussion questions 10

May 16th

- Special Topic: Deforestation
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* Swallowing Rainforest, Cities Surge in Amazon
- Due: Response paper (10)

Environmentalism

May 21st

- Primary reading: *Colorado Powder Keg* (Chapter 5)
- Due: Discussion questions 11

May 23rd

- Special Topic: Climate change
- Supplemental reading: *New York Times* Is this the end?
- Due: Response paper (11)