NRSM 570: Graduate Seminar in Political Ecology
T/Thu 9:30-10:50, NAC 202

Instructor information
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Office hours: by appointment on T/TH 1-3 pm

Course description:
Political ecology is a field of study for understanding social and environmental change, problems and solutions. The introduction to a recently edited volume on political ecology (Perreault et al., 2015, 7-8) states that political ecology is distinguished from other “social-environmental” approaches by three key commitments. The first is to a theoretical commitment to critical social theory and a post-positivist understanding of nature and the production of knowledge about it, which views these as inseparable from social relations of power. The second is to a methodological commitment to in-depth understandings entailing both constructivist and material dimensions of reality, and as such, to using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods in place-based, historically situated analyses (i.e., to reveal “chains of explanation” involving “bottoms up” considerations of broader, non-place based social and environmental forces). And third, to a political commitment to social justice and structural political transformation (i.e., change of economic, political and institutional systems) to better support historically marginalized peoples and places.

While seeking to understand (let alone change!) the many forces operating in and on a social-ecological system is a daunting task, it is particularly challenging to do so through being attuned to the intersecting ways power and politics operate and influence material and ideational dimensions of nature/ecology/natural resources. It can be particularly difficult for those new to social science theory, especially to political economy of development/agrarian change and Marxian theory that are foundational to political ecology. This task is further confounded by the dynamic and increasingly far reaching net of topics political ecologists are addressing over the years. For example, while early political ecologists tended to work in the “developing” world documenting the struggles, interests and plights of marginalized populations and places (typically against predatory colonial and independent states and elites) over the years they have applied their approach across industrialized countries in the north and to new and different sets of actors, structures and policies influencing the politics of socio-environmental change around the world. These include the neoliberalizations of global corporate capitalist economies, and their socio-ecological impacts on land and natural resources, food and agricultural systems, conservation, and views of nature itself, and these further affect efforts to foster progressive collective action including those spearheaded by local and community-based coalitions. Of key importance today are considerations how political ecologists approach “adaptation” to climate change in different places, and how they interpret and plan movement politics regarding “the people” given the rise of what has been called “authoritarian populism” – ascendency of far right politics among working people? These question demand we turn our critical eyes back to some of the foundational understandings and appeals of the field itself.

Please recognize that NRSM 570 has not been organized to provide a comprehensive survey of social theories in environmental and natural resource social science, rather it focuses on those associated within the field of political ecology. Furthermore, it is not/cannot provide comprehensive coverage even of the field of political ecology itself given its literal explosion over the past decade. In this class, you will learn the origins of the field, central approaches in the political ecology “tool box,” and examples of how political ecologists approach what at least your instructor views as crucial topics and challenges of our day. A major objective of this class is for you to become sufficiently familiar with the field and its tools for you to effectively use them to critically examine social and environmental subjects, transitions and practical challenges – and especially those related to your own graduate thesis or dissertation.

Learning Outcomes
Students who successfully complete this course will:
- Understand significant moments in the history, evolution, and contemporary concerns of political ecology
- Gain insight into how social-ecological systems and their transitions, challenges, problems and potential solutions are explained within the political ecology approach
- Understand major concepts and tools used by political ecologist in both international and U.S. contexts
- Build your own critical analytic skills through in-depth application of the political ecology framework to a particular topic, ideally one related to your own thesis or dissertation research
- Develop and refine critical reading and thinking skills, including writing skills.

Prerequisites:
Only registered graduate students are permitted to enroll in this seminar. No exceptions. Background in environmental/natural resource social science is very helpful; if lacking, students are expected to take initiative to ask the instructor for further clarification in class and do independent background reading.
Seminar Format and Focus
NRSM 570 is a graduate seminar, which means that students are responsible for contributing to the content of the course through engaged participation, discussion, independent research and (final)project presentations; indeed the success of the course depends on a collective dialogue about the meaning and implications of the readings. Engaged participation refers to being thoughtful and well prepared to raise questions and interact with the class to further your own intellectual development and that of the group; it does not refer to the number of comments you make in class or your level of expertise. In class discussions, please participate by following the thread or theme of the discussion before moving to raise a new topic, and focus on queuing up (seeking to be next in line to speak). Civility and respect for different understanding of the concepts, views and ideas are mandatory.

Students are expected to carefully and thoroughly read all assigned readings prior to class and come to class prepared to discuss, examine, analyze, and critique each reading. The course is reading intensive, especially in the beginning. To assist, during the first few weeks the instructor will provide short lectures to build a common theoretical foundation among seminar participants. However, thereafter classes will be more student-led and discussion-oriented, facilitated by each of you preparing and sharing a reading response (see below).

Early on you are expected to identify a topic for your final paper. A midterm assignment has been designed to assist you with galvanizing information learned up to that point in the class, and how to use it to raise questions to guide your research on that topic (more on the mid-term assignment below). The final section of the course is devoted to student presentations and discussions. Students will have a ½ class period to present on the topic of your choice (the same topic for your final paper). The presentation provides you the opportunity to organize and discuss your independent research and ideally benefit from suggestions and feedback from the class and instructor before completing the final paper.

Readings
All readings except those from the two books we will read (see below) are available from UM Moodle ([Moodle Login Page] -- login with your username/password and go to NRSM 570). These include articles published in journals as well as book chapters.

We will be reading the following two books which I have ordered copies at the UM Book store (but feel free to buy from elsewhere – used copies may be available and less expensive).


Other Resources on Political Ecology
- One of the best resources is [POLLEN Political Ecology Network](#) - you can sign up here for following the network on Twitter or via Email. They have a particularly good newsletter which lists recent publications and books
- University of Kentucky Political ecology Working Group
- The Center for Political Ecology
- Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers (CAPE-AAG)
- [Journal of Political Ecology: Case Studies in History and Society (JPE)](#)

Assignments, Evaluation and Due Dates

- Class participation 10% throughout the semester
- Reading response 20% as scheduled (email to class)
- Project abstract and bibliography 5% 2/27 (email to Jill)
- Mid-term assignment 20% 3/12 (word doc, email to Jill)
- Project presentation 10% as scheduled
- Final paper 35% 5/6 (word doc, email to Jill)

Total 100%

Identifying and Committing to Your Project Topic
It is very important that you identify as early as possible (and stay committed!) to a specific topic (or question) for you to address in your midterm and final paper. The midterm is designed as a first step to thinking about how to address your topic through a political ecology approach. The topic/question should be relatively specific and well-defined, and related to environmental change, conservation, or natural resource management internationally or in the U.S. The topic may address a theoretical or methodological issue or a topic applied to a particular case study. You are encouraged to select a topic that relates to your thesis/professional paper. You must, however, examine the topic through the lens of political ecology (even if that is not the theoretical focus for your thesis work). All papers must involve a rigorous engagement with political ecology. Please remember that your work for this class must be new and original (i.e. you cannot turn in a chapter you have already written for your thesis or a paper written for another course but you can revise and rethink the topic in light of political ecology).
Class Participation (10%)
Regular attendance and engaged participation is expected. As noted above, “engaged participation” refers to your role in the seminar as coming to class having read the material, and prepared to discuss, ask questions and share your observations and comments; and in a civil and respectful manner.

Preparing and Sharing a Reading Response (20%)
Beginning the third week of class, each student will be responsible for preparing and sharing with the class one reading response for readings assigned to a particular class period (response should build on but not focus on readings titled “background”). These should be emailed to the instructor and all class members the night before class (or at the latest, one hour before class). The purpose of preparing reading responses is for each student to participate in illuminating key concepts and analyses in assigned readings, and facilitate class interaction suitable to a graduate seminar. The reading response should follow this format (1-2 pages, single spaced): 1) complete citation for each reading, 2) a summary of the major points of each reading including identification of key theories and terms referred to in the reading (see “background” readings for assistance); 3) an analysis of the paper’s insights into and contributions to theoretical, methodological or political debates; and 4) raise at least three further questions. Questions can address tensions or contradictions in the readings and applications, raise alternative interpretations or indicate gaps/missing pieces in the arguments.

Project Topic/Abstract (5%)
Identify the topic that you will use for your midterm and final project. Include a preliminary title, a 1-2 paragraph description of the major topic or question you will examine, a few lines on why this topic is important, and at least 5 references relevant to the topic (you don’t have to have read already). Please do not change topics after the abstract has been submitted.

Mid-term Assignment (20%)
The mid-term assignment is available on the last page of this syllabus. The purpose of the mid-term is to give you the opportunity to think and begin to apply the political ecology approach to your final project topic. It asks you to select five concepts from the political ecology “tool box” and use them to develop questions and lines of inquiry related to your chosen topic but not to provide answers in the mid-term; the latter will come in your final paper. The mid-term will also enable the instructor to assess individual student learning and address areas requiring further clarity up to this point in the semester.

Project Presentation (10%)
Each student is required to make a class presentation on your final paper (the topic outlined in your project abstract and explored in the mid-term). Presentations offer students the opportunity to engage the class in their topic prior to writing/finalizing their final paper. Students can provide the class with a brief reading or background information prior to the presentation. During the third week of class, students will sign up for presentation dates. There will be a projector and laptop during presentations for students who wish to use this technology. If you plan to use power point, please bring your presentation on a flash drive. Presentations will be followed by seminar-like critical discussion. Presentations will be evaluated based on your ability to effectively convey key aspects of the topic and political ecology concepts involved, application of theory, original analysis, and conclusions.

Final Paper (35%)
The objective is for you to use and apply political ecology concepts and approach; it is fine to build off your mid-term as in providing a much more detailed literature review and analysis. If you are new to your graduate program, my suggestion is to treat the final paper as a critical literature review on a particular topic. If you are further along in your project (e.g., you have data or have extensively reviewed the project/topic), you can offer specific findings or conclusions from a political ecological perspective. If you are trying to make a compelling case for a particular interpretation or analysis, you’ll need to provide evidence or illustration with data, history, examples, facts and figures, quotations or if no empirical data is available, through some other type of analysis and argument. Whatever format, the paper should demonstrate a political ecological approach to your topic.

Final papers should be 10-15 pages (including references), typed in double-spaced, 11-12 point font, and properly referenced (any social science style e.g., APA or ASA is acceptable as long as you follow it consistently). These formats will have you cite your sources in text (last name of the author and the year is fine, include page number if using a direct quotation) as well as in the bibliography at the end. Papers will be evaluated on their depth of understanding and application of political ecology approach and concepts, compelling analysis and insightfulness of applying political ecology to the topic, and overall quality of organization and writing.
In class discussions, please participate by following the thread or theme of the discussion before moving to raise a new topic, and queuing up (seeking to be next in line to speak).

**Course Schedule**

1/14  **Course Introduction**  
Overview of course syllabus, student introductions, and background.

1/16  **Origins and Concerns of Political Ecology**  

*Foundational Texts:*  

1/21  **Key Theories and Concepts in Political Ecology**  

*Other recommended readings*  
- To see where political ecology fits within conservation social sciences review the following:
  
  Download: [Roth Reading Web Page](#) (see Roth, p50-55, on political ecology).

1/23  **Power, Politics and Social Change**  

1/28  **Colonialism and Struggles Over Material Resources and Meanings**  
1/30 Case Study on Kenya: In-class video “The Vision of Matthai Wangari”

2/4 The Power of Discourse


2/6 Fruitful Frictions: Politics, Science, Knowledge and Ecology


2/11 Socio-Ecological Transformations in the U.S. West


Other recommended readings


2/13 Property as Social Process and Relationships


2/18 Gender and Feminist Political Ecology


- Watch “Gender in Coffee,” a documentary (1 hour) https://www.genderincoffeedoc.com/watch-1
Other recommended readings:


2/20 Livelihoods


2/25 Markets, Commodities and Neoliberalization of Nature


2/27 Environmental Governance from Above
(DUE Project abstract and bibliography; email to Jill/WORD DOC)


3/3 Environmental Governance from Below:
Politics of Collaborative/Participatory Conservation in the US West

3/5 Institutions for Natural Resource Management & Governance I

Other recommended readings

3/10 Institutions for Natural Resource Management & Governance II

3/12 The Good, the Bad and Ugly of Community-Based Conservation (CBC)
DUE: Mid-Term Assignment (WORD DOC email to Jill)
• (Background) Dressler, W; Buscher, B; Schoon, M; Brockington, D; Hayes, T; Kull, C.A.; McCarthy, J.; and Shrestha, K. 2010. From hope to crisis and back again? A critical history of the global CBNRM narrative. Environmental Conservation 37: 5-15.


Other recommended readings


3/24 Climate Change and Adaptations I

3/26 Climate Change and Adaptations II

3/31 Climate Change and Adaptations III

Other recommended readings:
4/2  **Socio-Ecological Politics and Practices in the New Authoritarian Era**


4/7  **Towards Transformational Change**

- Scones, I. Care or control? 2018. Four challenges for transformations to sustainability. Downloaded from [https://steps-centre.org/blog/care-or-control-four-challenges-for-transformations-to-sustainability/](https://steps-centre.org/blog/care-or-control-four-challenges-for-transformations-to-sustainability/)


**Other recommended readings:**


**Student Presentations**

4/9  Student Presentations
4/14  Student Presentations
4/16  Student Presentations
4/21  Student Presentations
4/23  Student Presentations
4/28  Student Presentations
4/30  Student Presentations

**Final Papers due before or on Wednesday, May 6.** Please email final papers to jill.belsky@umontana.edu. Please keep as a word doc so I can use track changes/provide comments on the paper.

Your final paper with comments and final grade will be emailed to you ~ May 13.

Have a great summer.