

NRSM 570: Political Ecology

Fall 2023

T, Th 11-12:20

Native American Center 202

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Land Acknowledgment. *The University of Montana acknowledges that we are in the aboriginal territories of the Salish and Kalispel people. Today, we honor the path they have always shown us in caring for this place for the generations to come. In this course, we will discuss the ways in which histories of colonization in and beyond the United States have impacted land and the ways that different people and animals live on and with it. We will consider ways we can learn from indigenous knowledge of and relations with land as we strive to build a more just and flourishing world.*

Course Description

Political ecology is a field of study for understanding social and environmental change, both 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 to reveal connected social-ecological dynamics and bottoms up considerations of broader, systemic 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. In other words, political ecology employs critical theory and careful analysis to understand the complex politics of the environment, with the ultimate goal of enacting not just more efficient management, but also more equitable relations.

This is not a comprehensive survey of environmental and natural resource social science, nor of the vast and growing field of political ecology. It will, however, enable you to become familiar with the field and its tools so that you can effectively use them to critically examine social and environmental subjects, including, in the midterm assignment and final paper, those related to your own graduate work. We will review the origins of political ecology, some central concepts and approaches, and some examples of how political ecologists approach both classic issues and hot topics. The syllabus and instruction are informed by my own experience, interests, and commitments, which include feminist ethnography, political geography, data, and agrarian change in Southeast Asia.

The broad goal of this course is to engage graduate students in the foundations and practice political ecology. Specifically, students will:

- Understand the origins, development, and contemporary debates in the field of political ecology.
- Understand and apply analytical tools from political ecology to contemporary socio-environmental challenges.
- Become better readers, writer, thinkers in and beyond graduate school.

Expectations

This is a graduate seminar, which means it is a small, challenging course. Students are responsible for contributing to the content of each class and to the spirit of the endeavor. Reading is very important (There is a lot of it!) Thinking is essential. (Don't plagiarize!) The course will involve almost no lecture, though I will explain key concepts and foundational theories. These can be intimidating, especially if you are encountering them for the first time. Ask questions to me, grapple with the texts, and talk (and listen!) to one another. Show respect. Be open to other views. Talk to me if something is inhibiting your full participation. Engaged and collective dialogue makes our class more than a stack of (great) books.

Assignments

Attendance, participation and in-class/pre-class assignments (20%). Come to class on time, be prepared to discuss the assigned readings, and participate fully in class activities. If you must miss class, please email me at least 24 hours in advance.

Leading a class discussion (10%). Lead one class discussion during the semester. Prepare a 2-3 page reading response that includes the complete citation for each reading, a summary of the major points of each reading, a synthetic analysis of what the readings together contribute to the topic area, and three questions for discussion in class. Analysis and questions might address tensions or contradictions, ask about applications, raise alternative interpretations, or relate these readings to others in the course. Email this to me and the class at least 24 hours before we meet. In class, you will provide a brief introduction to the materials and be prepared to keep the discussion moving.

Abstract and Literature Review (10%). Choose a topic, question or case study to address in your midterm and final paper. Write 2-3 paragraphs explaining your focus, what you find interesting and important about it, what you think political ecology might help you understand, and how this analysis contributes to your graduate and/or professional goals.

Midterm Writing Assignment (20%). The midterm is a writing assignment designed as a first step to help you think about how to address your topic through a political ecology approach. I will provide detailed instructions on how to complete the midterm at least four weeks before it is due.

Presentation of Final Paper (10%). Presentations offer students the opportunity to engage the class in their topic prior to finalizing their paper. You will have 10 minutes to present your work—no more. Presentations will be followed by 5-minutes of seminar-like critical questions and discussion with myself and the class. Presentations will be evaluated based on your ability

to effectively convey key details of the topic, aspects of political ecology involved, application of theory, original analysis, and conclusions.

Final Paper (30%). The goal of the final paper (and assignments leading up to it) is for you to use and apply political ecology concepts and approaches. 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, etc., or if no empirical data is available, through some other type of analysis and argument. Whatever format, the paper should clearly demonstrate a political ecological approach to your topic.

Final papers should be ~10 pages double-spaced (not including references), 11- or 12-point font, and properly referenced (any social science style e.g., APA or Chicago is acceptable as long as you follow it consistently). You must use in-text citations (last name of the author and the year, include page number if using a direct quotation) as well as place your references list 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. Grammar and presentation will be assessed. The [UM Writing and Public Speaking Center](#) is a great resource. They have [workshops scheduled in October](#) on getting writing, literature reviews, and publishing.

Some helpful links:

Add/drop information: <https://www.umt.edu/registrar/calendar/autumn.php>

Student conduct code: <https://www.umt.edu/student-affairs/community-standards/default.php>

Accommodations for students: <https://www.umt.edu/disability/>

Additional Political Ecology Resources

- [POLLEN Political Ecology Network](https://politicalecologynetwork.org/) (<https://politicalecologynetwork.org/>). One of the best resources. Follow the network on Twitter or via Email; they have an informative newsletter. The call for papers for the June 2024 conference will drop in October, here: <https://pollen2024.brick.site>
- [University of Kentucky Political ecology Working Group](https://uky.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/pewg) (<https://uky.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/pewg>). This group hosts a conference and reading groups called “Dimensions of Political Ecology” or DOPE. This is a particularly good venue for graduate students to present political ecology research.
- [Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group \(CAPE\) of the American Association of Geographers \(AAG\)](https://capeaag.wordpress.com/) (<https://capeaag.wordpress.com/>)
- [Journal of Political Ecology \(JPE\) Case Studies in History and Society](https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/JPE) (<https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/JPE>). Open access political ecology journal.
- [Edge Effects](https://edgeeffects.net) <https://edgeeffects.net>. Environmental Humanities blog at University of Wisconsin Madison. Political Ecology adjacent.

Tentative Course Schedule

The course schedule will be updated on Moodle as the course progresses. Readings will be available on Moodle as PDFs at least 1 week prior to the class period for which they are assigned. This version was updated September 9, 2023.

1: Roots

August 29. Welcome.

Welcome to class! Today we will introduce ourselves and I will provide an overview of the course. We will talk about what we want our classroom to look like.

hooks, b. 1994. 'Engaged Pedagogy' in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*.

Skim to see where political ecology fits within conservation social sciences: [Roth Reading Web Page](#) (see Roth, p50-55, on political ecology).

August 31. Introduction to PE.

Today we get a sense of what the field of political ecology is and is not. We practice close, constructive, positive, generous, genealogical, methodological and ethical reading on a recent PE text.

Robbins P. 2012. Chapters 1 and 4 in *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*.

Nuts & Bolts: How to Read

- Read '[How I read](#)' and check out the [spreadsheet version](#). Use these skills on the text below. Annotate, and come prepared to discuss, the topic, approach, research questions, key concepts, methods, and significance.

Santos Rocha da Silva, M. and Correia, J. 2022. A political ecology of jurisdictional REDD+: investigating social-environmentalism, climate change mitigation, and environmental (in)justice in the Brazilian Amazon. *Journal of Political Ecology*.

September 5. Foundations and Evolution.

We survey key questions and concerns of PE, examining foundational texts and the evolution of the field. As you read Watts or Blaikie & Brookfield, think about what and who these authors are writing against, and what alternatives they advance.

Robbins P. 2012. Chapters 3 in *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*.

- Note: Chapter 3 covers a LOT of literature and concepts, many of which we cover in more depth in later weeks. For now, read to get a sense of the traditions in play. You may want to return to the appropriate section of this text in our later meetings.

Watts, M. 1983. On the poverty of theory: natural hazards research in context. in *Interpretations of Calamity: from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*.

- Read this if your birthday is January-June.

Blaikie, P. and Brookfield, H. 1985. Chapter 1 in *Land Degradation and Society*.

- Read this if your birthday is July-December.

Nuts & Bolts: Exploring the field.

- There are many political ecology review articles in the journal *Progress in Human Geography*. Skimming them can be overwhelming, but will give you a sense of the historical evolution,

contemporary concerns, and style of the field. Please spend 15 minutes with one or more of the following and be prepared to report back in class.

- Walker, P. (2005). Political ecology: Where is the ecology? *Progress in Human Geography*, 29, (1), 73-82.
- Walker, P. (2007). Political ecology: Where is the politics? *Progress in Human Geography*, 31, (3), 363-369.
- Sultana, F. 2021. Political Ecology I: From Margin to Center. *Progress in Human Geography*.
- Sultana, F. 2021. Political Ecology II: Conjunctures, crises, and critical publics. *Progress in Human Geography*.

September 7. Denaturalizing Nature.

One of the key moves of PE has been to trouble the supposed binary between humans and the environment, or nature and culture. Today we read William Cronon, an environmental historian with enduring influence on PE, as well as two contributions that use historical and discursive analysis to disrupt assumptions about environment and society, with implications for how we know and manage landscapes. We also read Christian Lund's 'Of What is this a case,' in order to explore theory, and how it is made.

Cronon, W. (1996). The trouble with wilderness: or, getting back to the wrong nature. *Environmental History*, 1(1), 7-28.

Fairhead J and Leach M. (1995) False Forest History, Complicit Social Analysis: Rethinking some West-African Environmental Narratives. *World Development* 23: 1023-1035.

Willems-Braun B. (1997) Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post)colonial British Columbia. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87: 3-31.

Choose 1 of these 2 to focus on, skim the other

Nuts & Bolts: What is theory? Why bother?

- Read Lund, C. 2014. Of What is this a case?: Analytical Movements in Qualitative Social Science Research. *Human Organization*.

September 12. Political Economy.

Marxian analysis, and a critical attention to markets and capitalism, has been a backbone of PE since its inception. Today we have a crash course in Marxian political economy, led by myself and Nancy Fraser, an eminent Marxian political economist who has recently turned her attention to the climate crisis. We read Bakker, West, and Levien to understand how political economy ideas have been applied in political ecology.

Watch this for a 10-minute introduction to Marx's life and ideas. I will provide a short introduction to key ideas on political economy in class.

Fraser, N. 2021. Climates of Capital: For a trans-environmental eco-socialism. *New Left Review*.

- Do not worry about the details in section 2. Focus on how Fraser constructs her argument.

Bakker, K. 2015. Neoliberalization of nature. in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*.

West, P. 2006. The Practices of Conservation-as-Development in *Conservation is our Government Now: the politics of ecology in Papua New Guinea*.

Optional: Levien, M. 2015. *From primitive accumulation to regimes of dispossession. Six theses on India's land question.* *Economic & Political Weekly* 1(22): 146-157.

September 14. Power & Knowledge.

Poststructuralist approaches, influenced by Foucault's theories of power, have also had enduring influence in PE. After a short introduction, we will explore the application of these ideas in Fletcher's analysis of biodiversity conservation and German's account of land governance before turning to a recent review, and recent application, of theories of power.

[Watch this](#) for a 10-minute introduction to Foucault's life and ideas. I will provide a short introduction to key ideas from Foucault in class.

Fletcher, R. 2010. Neoliberal environmentality: Towards a poststructuralist political ecology of the conservation debate. *Conservation & Society* 8(3): 171-181.

German, L. 2022. Introduction in *Power / Knowledge / Land: Contested Ontologies of Land and Its Governance in Africa*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Svarstad, H. Benjaminsen, T.A., Overå, R. 2018. Power theories in political ecology. *Journal of Political Ecology*.

Optional: Neimark B et al. 2019. Speaking Power to "Post-Truth": Critical Political Ecology and the New Authoritarianism. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*: 1-11.

September 19. Livelihoods & Communities.

Close and critical attention to livelihoods and communities lies at the core of PE. We briefly discuss this vast body of work, before turning to some of the methods and mechanics of doing political ecology.

Carr, E.R. 2015. Political Ecology and Livelihoods. In: Perreault et al, 2015. Chap 25, 332- 342.

Li, Tania Muray. 2002. Engaging simplifications: community-based resource management, market processes and state agendas in upland Southeast Asia. *World Development* 30: 265-283.

Nuts & Bolts: Doing PE

These readings enable to us assess who makes political ecology, what they think and care about, and how these communities are centered and bounded institutionally and geographically. Please read one of the following, and be prepared to share in class:

1. Doolittle A. 2015. The best of many worlds: methodological pluralism in political ecology. In: Bryant RL (ed) *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*.
2. Leipold,S. et al. 2019. Discourse analysis of environmental policy revisited: traditions, trends, perspectives. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 21(5): 445- 463.
3. Wesner et al. 2019. Left Coast Political Ecology: a manifesto. *Journal of Political Ecology*
4. Desvallées et al. 2022. Epistemic communities in political ecology: critical deconstruction or radical advocacy. *Journal of Political Ecology*.

Please also spend at least 15 minutes reviewing material on one of the 'Additional Political Ecology Resources' websites.

September 21. Feminist Political Ecologies

Feminist work has a vibrant place in PE. Today we will assess some of the different strands of this work, from a focus on gendered access and division of labor to intersectionality. We examine one feminist methodological approach, photovoice, and get a glimpse of the emerging field of queer ecology.

Rocheleau D and Edmunds D. 1997. Women, men and trees: Gender, power and property in forest and agrarian landscapes. *World Development* 25(8): 1351-1371.

Elmhirst R. 2011. Introducing new feminist political ecologies. *Geoforum* 42: 129-132.

Mollett S and Faria C. 2013. Messing with gender in feminist political ecology. *Geoforum* 45: 116-125.

Johnson, A. 2011. [How to Queer Ecology: One Goose at a Time](#). *Orion Magazine*.

September 26. (Beyond) Property.

Theories of access and exclusion provide an alternative to dominant notions of liberal property as a bundle of severable rights, available to individuals and enforced by law. Today we consider these theories and their applications.

Ribot, J.C. and Peluso, N.L. 2003. A theory of access. *Rural Sociology* 68(2): 153-181.

Hall, D et al. 2011. Chapter 1 in *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*

Myers, R., Hansen, C.P. 2020. Revisiting A Theory of Access: a review. *Society & Natural Resources* 33(2): 146-166.

Nuts & Bolts: How to Write and How to Cite

- Read [how to write paragraphs](#)
- Review this [nice overview of citations](#)

Some other resources on Academic Writing:

- Belcher, W. *Writing your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*.
- Narayan, K. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography In the company of Chekov*.

Visit from the Writing Center

September 28. *Visit from Dr. Margiana Peterson-Rockney*

Readings TBA

October 3. The State & its Territory

How do governments control land and resources, and in doing so make up what we know as the state and its territory? That's a big question. We explore it with classic texts from James Scott and Nancy Peluso and Peter Vandergeest, before turning to empires and honeybees.

Scott, J.C. *Seeing like a State*. (read the first section in chapter 3 “authoritarian high modernism” p. 87-90)

Peluso NL and Vandergeest P. 2001. Genealogies of the Political Forest and Customary Rights in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 60(3): 761-812.

Kosek, J. 2010. Ecologies of Empire: On the new uses of the honeybee. *Cultural Anthropology*. 25(4): 650-678.

Meehan, K and Molden, O. 2015. Political Ecologies of the State. In Agnew et al. (eds) *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Geography*.

October 5. Violence

War and violence are extremes of environmental politics, and enduring topics of study for political ecology. We cross from Guatemala to South Africa to understand counterinsurgency and militarization in relation to conservation. We then return to Southeast Asia to understand how another idea popularized by James Scott – resistance – is developing along with hydropower.

Billon, P. 2001. The political ecology of war: natural resources and armed conflicts. *Political Geography*, 20, 561–584.

Ybarra, M. 2012. Taming the jungle, saving the Maya Forest: sedimented counterinsurgency practices in contemporary Guatemalan conservation. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(2), 479–502.

Lunstrum, E. 2014. Green Militarization: Anti-Poaching Efforts and the Spatial Contours of Kruger National Park. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 104(4), 816–832.

Topic and annotated bibliography due Sunday 11:59pm.

2: Branches & Buds

October 10. Indigenous Knowledge

Kimmerer, R.W.. 'The Gift of Strawberries' and 'Learning the Grammar of Animacy' in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Middleton, B.R.. Jahát Jatítotòdom*: toward an indigenous political ecology in *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*.

Instead of meeting during class time, please attend Robin Wall Kimmerer's Q&A (12-1) and/or her lecture at 7pm tonight! We will talk about these readings on Thursday

October 12. Carbon Sovereignty.

Curley, A. 2023. Introduction, Chapter 1, 2 in *Carbon Sovereignty: Coal, Development, and Energy Transition in the Navajo Nation*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

October 17. Carbon Sovereignty.

Curley, A. 2023. Chapter 3, 4, 5 and Conclusion in *Carbon Sovereignty: Coal, Development, and Energy Transition in the Navajo Nation*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Virtual visit from Dr. Andrew Curley

October 19. Decoloniality.

Watch [Franz Fanon](#).

Loftus A. 2018. Political ecology I: Where is political ecology? *Progress in Human Geography*. 43(1): 172-182.

Van Sant et al. 2021. Political Ecologies of Race: Settler Colonialism and Environmental Racism in the United States and Canada. *Antipode*. 53(3): 629-642.

Sultana, F. 2022. The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality. *Political Geography*. 99: 102638.

October 24. Agrarian Change

Patel, R. 2013. The Long Green Revolution. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40: 1-63.

Edelman, M and Wolford, W. 2017. Critical Agrarian Studies in Theory and Practice. *Antipode*. 49(4): 959-976.

Choose one:

- McCutcheon, P. 2019. Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms and Black Agrarian Geographies. *Antipode* 51(1): 207-224
- Jacobo Grajales, 2021. Losing land in times of peace: post-war agrarian capitalism in Colombia and Côte d'Ivoire. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 48(5):1054-1074.

October 26. Urban Political Ecology

Robins, P. 2007. *Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (selections)

Swyngedouw, E. 2015. Urbanization and environmental futures. Politicizing urban political ecologies. In: Perreault T, Bridge G and McCarthy J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*.

Randle, S. 2022. Holding water for the city: Emergent geographies of storage and the urbanization of nature. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*. 5(4): 2283-2306.

October 31. Science and Technologies Studies.

Goldman, M. and Turner, M. 2011. Introduction: Knowing Nature in *Knowing Nature: Conversations at the Intersection of Political Ecology and Science Studies*.

Lave, R. 2011. Circulating Knowledge, Constructing Expertise in *Knowing Nature: Conversations at the Intersection of Political Ecology and Science Studies*.

Gugganig, M et al. 2023. Contested agri-food futures: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Agriculture and Human Values* 40: 787-798.

November 2.

Instead of meeting during class time, please attend at least one event from the Stolen Waters Summit and write a short (2-3 paragraph) reflection on the event on our Moodle forum, connecting what you learned to themes of the course.

Midterm assignment due Sunday 11:59pm.

November 7. Wilted.

Guthman, J. 2019. Introduction-Chapter 5 in *Wilted: Pathogens, Chemicals, and the Fragile Future of the Strawberry Industry*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

November 9. Wilted.

Guthman, J. 2019. Chapter 6 – conclusion in *Wilted: Pathogens, Chemicals, and the Fragile Future of the Strawberry Industry*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Virtual visit from Dr. Julie Guthman

November 14. Energy.

Huber, M. Energy and Social Power in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*

Knuth, S et al. 2022. New political ecologies of renewable energy. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*. 5(3): 997-1013.

Bouzarovski, S. 2022. Just Transitions: A Political Ecology Critique. *Antipode*. 54(4): 1003-1020.

November 16. Data.

Goldstein, J and Nost, E. 2022. *The Nature of Data: Infrastructures, Environments, Politics*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. (selections)

Faxon et al. 2022. Territorializing Spatial Data. *Political Geography*. 98:102651.

November 21. *Student Presentations (6)*

November 23. No Class – Thanksgiving break

November 28. Rosewood & Global Ethnography.

Zhu, A.L. Introduction – chapter 4 in *Rosewood: Endangered Species Conservation and the Rise of Global China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Student presentations (3)

November 30. Rosewood & Global Ethnography.

Zhu, A.L. Chapter 5 – conclusion in *Rosewood: Endangered Species Conservation and the Rise of Global China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Virtual visit from Dr. Annah Zhu

December 5. Bringing it Home.

Martin et al. 2019. Revisiting and revitalizing political ecology in the American West. *Geoforum*. 107: 227-230.

Epstein et al. 2022. With, Not for, Money: Ranch Management Trajectories of the Super-Rich in Greater Yellowstone. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*. 112(2): 432-448.

Spend 20 minutes exploring <https://www.lifeintheland.org>

Student presentations (3)

December 7. Changing the World.

Pulido, L. 2008. FAQs: Frequently (Un)Asked Questions about Being a Scholar Activist in *Engaging Contradictions*.

Kallis, G. et al. 2020. Chapter 3: Making changes on the ground in *The case for degrowth*.

Student presentations (3)

Final papers due December 14 at 11:59pm.