GEOG 520
Political Ecology
Fall 2016

Instructor: Trevor Birkenholtz
Office: 255 Computing Applications Building
Office Phone: (217) 244 – 5901
Email: trevbirk@illinois.edu
Office Hours: W 2-3 pm or by appointment

Class Time: Thursday: 2:00 – 4:50
Location: 137D Davenport Hall
CRN: 49790

Required Materials


Additional readings will be made available on Compass and/or I will provide them directly via email.

Course Description & Organization

This course examines the relationship between people and nature through the broadly defined lens of Political Ecology. Political Ecology is a multi-disciplinary approach, spanning Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, STS, Women and Gender Studies, and Political Science (among other cognate fields), to the study of access to and control over resources. The field involves an analysis of the social institutions and environmental conditions through which access to resources is mediated. As an evolving field, it frames resource systems within complex networks of processes – political institutions, political economy, globalization, gender/race relations, socially produced discourses/knowledges, and nonhuman agents – to understand the ways that these multiple processes mediate the interaction of humans with the nonhuman world.

Historically the discipline has been advanced and deployed in the Global South to understand development processes and livelihood systems. More recently however, the approach is being employed by researchers in the Global North to address questions of conservation, environmental degradation, urbanization, political ecologies of the body, environmental justice and governance. Therefore, it is a very dynamic field.

This course explores the fields’ origins and will apply its analytical tools to a collection of case studies drawn from both the Global North and South.
Course Requirements
Course assessment will be based on:
1. 25% Weekly Preparation
2. 25% Classroom Participation
3. 50% Final Project

1. Weekly Preparation (25%):
A) Engage with Readings – We can’t have a productive conversation unless we all read the assigned readings carefully.

B) Response Papers -- Each week students will write a brief (1 page) response to the assigned readings. These papers need to be written with care but the judicious use of bullet points is fine too. Response papers:
   i) Can be critical, descriptive, or a combination of the two; but
   ii) Need to raise 1 or 2 carefully reasoned questions for class discussion

These short response papers, and more importantly the 1 or 2 questions raised from the reading, will form part of the basis for group discussion for the week’s meeting. I will assemble these questions before each class and provide them in handout form in class.

   The response papers, with embedded questions, are due by 12 pm (noon) to me via email on Thursdays.

2. Classroom Participation (25%):
This follows from being prepared (above). Come to class prepared to think and to discuss. In addition to daily in-class discussions, each student (working in pairs) will be required to lead some class discussions as well.

   A) Discussion Leadership – Each student pair will lead group discussion twice during the course of the semester. This will require first, providing a brief (5-15 minute) summary of or introduction to the week’s readings. Second, the discussion leader(s) will draw on the questions from the response papers to help lead the class discussion. I will provide the discussion leaders with these discussion questions by 1 pm (provided that I receive them on time!!).

3. Final Project (50%):
   A) The final project will consist of a 12-20-page paper and an in-class presentation that engages with the theoretical and empirical questions brought up during the course of the semester. The final project may be a new research paper, a research proposal, a grant proposal or a dissertation chapter. There is flexibility on the form of the project, but it should be something that not only engages with the course material but also furthers your graduate goals.

   The project will be completed in phases. I will hand out a project timeline by mid-semester. The project deadline is noon (via email), Friday, December 9.
**Topic and Reading Schedule:**

**Week 1: Introduction & what is Political Ecology?, August 25**

1. Robbins Intro & Ch. 1: Political vs apolitical ecologies

**Week 2: Political Ecology’s History and its Toolbox, September 1**

1. Robbins, Part I (remainder): Chapters 2 – 4

**Week 3: Concepts and Methods, September 8**

1. Robbins, Part II: Ch. 5 – 7

**Week 4: Degradation and Marginalization, September 15**

1. Robbins, Chapter 8

**Week 5: Conservation and Control, September 22**

1. Robbins, Chapter 9
Week 6: Envltl. Conflict and Payments for Ecosystem Services, September 29

1. Robbins, Chapter 10

Week 7: Green Governmentality & Neoliberalism I, October 6

1. Robbins, Chapter 11
2. West, Paige – Chapters 1 – 4

Week 8: Green Governmentality & Neoliberalism II, October 13

1. West, Paige – Chapters 5-8

Week 9 Neoliberalism and Accumulation by Dispossession, October 20


Week 10: Assembling Political Ecologies, October 27

1. Robbins, Chapter 12
Week 11: The PE of Infrastructure I, November 3

1. Robbins, Chapter 13

Week 12: The PE of Infrastructure II, November 10


Week 13: Student Presentations, November 17

Student Presentations

Week 14: Thanksgiving Break, November 24

Thanksgiving Break: No Classes

Week 15: Student Presentations, December 1

Presentations and last day of classes for GEOG 520

Final papers due at 12 pm (noon) Friday, December 9 via Compass upload