“The real issues in sustainability aren’t technical,” an agronomist said to me a few years ago, “they’re social.” An over-statement perhaps—sustainability certainly also involves many real, and often difficult, technical issues. But this agronomist’s words are indicative of how researchers from across the disciplines are increasingly coming to value the importance of a sociological perspective in the study of the environment. This course presents a graduate-level introduction into that important perspective.

The organization of the course, rather immodestly, roughly follows the organization of a book of mine, *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, which we will also read in the second week of the semester. I hesitate to assign my own book, fearing it might discourage debate. But it does provide a general overview and synthesis of the field. Besides, you might as well know what I think about the various topics we will cover, and I don’t want to lecture.

The course is intended to be an occasion to read, to write, and to discuss—not a sit-back-and-take-notes-for-the-exam class. So please accept my invitation to engage in critical, cooperative interchange with each other (including me!). That’s what a course should be all about. Call it the “three r’s” of scholarship: reading, ‘riting, and responding.

To further that responding, we’ll have two kinds of sessions—*seminar sessions* and more informal *conversation labs*, one of each per week. The seminar sessions, running about 2 hours, are when we’ll discuss the bulk of the week’s readings. The conversation labs, running about an hour, will generally be focused on a single, short, provocative reading.

As for the ‘riting part, the main work of the seminar will be the preparation of 3 *critiques* (roughly 1000-1500 words) of the readings and one medium-length *policy review* or *social science essay* (roughly 2500-3000 words), with an eye toward creating something publishable.

**Books**


A Note on Student Evaluation
Your grade for this course will be based on the following: the three critiques (33%), the final paper (33%), and class participation (33%).

A Note on the Critiques
The point of the critiques is to give you a chance to develop your own views on the readings, to communicate those views to the class, and to demonstrate your command of what we’ve read thus far. The format is simple: Write a critical appraisal of some particular theme in the readings—and email the result to the class. The critiques will be discussed in class in small groups. The best critiques will be those that a), aptly capture the selected theme; and b) develop a coherent and distinctive argument about that theme. Give your critique a title and a reference section. Also, note that each critique should emphasize the course material of the preceding third of the course. You may rewrite your critiques as often as you like, should you be unsatisfied with your grade. The critiques are due, in turn, on September 29th, October 27th, and December 1st.

A Note on the Final Paper
The central written work of the course will be the preparation—and possible submission—of a 2500-3000 word (about 10 to 12 double-spaced pages) policy review or social science essay for the journal Society and Natural Resources. This is both easier and harder then it sounds. On the easy side is that you do not have to spend months interviewing and running regression analyses to write a publishable policy review or essay. The hard side of all this, though, is that such pieces generally require a far higher level of writing and theoretical reasoning then a piece that mainly reports research findings. Thus, the best papers will be those that exhibit good writing and that develop your own lines of reasoning, and not merely report on those of others. As to topic, I will welcome anything that would be of interest to environmental sociology and that fits with the description of policy reviews and essays that Society and Natural Resources invites, which is as follows:

“Policy Reviews and Essays: Policy Reviews examine current or proposed policies associated with natural resource management. These articles can raise questions of policy, propose alternative action, or critique current or proposed policy. An essay is a creative article discussing social science issues related to natural resources or the environment. Total length of these manuscripts should not exceed 12 double spaced, typed pages.”

Please note that the “first musings” on your policy review or essay is due October 13th, and a second musings with preliminary bibliography is due November 10th. We will be discussing
everyone’s first draft in class during the final two weeks of the course. Your completed first
draft is due via email to the entire class 48 hours before the session in which it is to be
discussed. The final draft is due December 19th by 5pm.

A Note on Discussion Format
The bulk of each class session will be devoted to an open discussion of the day’s reading. Each
discussion will be conducted as a kind of thematic “pot luck” in which each seminar participant
is expected to bring to the class a few thoughts on the significance of the readings, plus a
discussion question or two. We’ll begin the discussion on the day’s readings by “setting the
table” of our pot luck, going around the room and gathering everyone’s thoughts and
discussion questions in turn. Some classes, however, the readings may be a bit baffling,
requiring some translation of the day’s menu, as it were. If necessary, we will take some time
for that, before setting the table with everyone’s pot-luck items.

The daily pattern will thus normally be as follows:

• translating the menu, if necessary
• “setting the table”
• the “feast”—open discussion
• preview of readings for next time

A Note on Class Participation
Your grade for class participation will not be a measure of how loud you were, or of how often
you spoke. Rather, it will reflect the extent to which you were “there.” I will evaluate your
“thereness” based equally on 1) your engagement (including the quality of your listening) in
class discussions; 2) attendance; 3) your participation in “table setting”; 4) your engagement
with the written work of other seminar members during in-class small-group discussions of
critiques and during the whole-class discussion of policy reviews and essays during the final
two weeks of term. Grading in this area will be based on the initial assumption that everyone
will get full credit in all areas of participation, with deductions made for negligent or “unthere”
performance, if necessary.

A Note on Getting Ahold of the Books and Readings
All of the books for the course are available at the Rainbow Cooperative, 426 West Gilman
Street. The other readings will all be available at the course web site.
COURSE SCHEDULE

**Week One: Introduction**

9/4 Seminar
No reading.

9/7 Conversation Lab

**The Moral**

**Week Two: Envisioning Environmental Sociology**

9/11 Seminar

9/14 Conversation Lab
Stiles, Kaelyn and Michael Mayerfeld Bell. 2004. “About the Book—and Figure 1.1—and the Cover,” in *Instructor's Manual for An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, second edition, pp. 1-6.

**Week Three: The Realist-Constructionist Debate**

9/18 Seminar


9/21 Conversation Lab

*First critique due 10/1.*
The Material

**Week Four: The Treadmill of Consumption**

**9/25 Seminar**


**9/28 Conversation Lab**


*First critique due 9/28.*

**Week Five: The Treadmill of Production**

**10/2 Seminar**


**10/5 Conversation Lab**


*First musings on policy review due.*

**Week Six: Critiquing the Treadmill**

**10/9 Seminar**


10/12 Conversation Lab

Week Seven: The Great Population and Sustainability Debate: The Ghost of Malthus?
10/16 Seminar


10/19 Conversation Lab


Second critique due.

The Ideal

Week Eight: The Cultural Origins of Environmental Domination
10/23 Seminar

10/26 Conversation Lab

Week Nine: The Rise of Concern for the Environment
10/31 Seminar
11/2 Conversation Lab

Second musings on policy review due, with preliminary bibliography.

Week Ten: What Is Nature Anyway?
11/6 Seminar


11/9 Conversation Lab

The Practical

Week Eleven: Putting Things Back Together I: Actor Network Theory
11/13 Seminar

11/16 Conversation Lab

Week Twelve: Putting Things Back Together II: Complexity Theory
11/20 Seminar

Thanksgiving Break

Week Thirteen: A Just Environment
11/27 Seminar

11/30 Conversation Lab

Third critique due.
Weeks Fourteen and Fifteen  
12/7, 12/8, 12/14, 12/15

In-class discussion of policy reviews and essays. First draft of policy review or essay due via email to entire class 48 hours before the class in which it is to be discussed.

Final Due Date for All Work

December 19th, 5pm.