

# ENST 150: Environmental Issues in Society

## Section 33005R, 4.0 units

**Teaching team:**

- Prof. Sean Fraga (he/him), [sfraga@usc.edu](mailto:sfraga@usc.edu). Office hours: Tu./Th., 2 – 3pm, CAS 112.
- Dr. Marci Vogel (she/her), [marcivog@usc.edu](mailto:marcivog@usc.edu). Office hours: by appointment.
- Mahmoud Hosny Roshdy (he/him), [roshdy@usc.edu](mailto:roshdy@usc.edu). Ofc hrs: Th., 3:30 – 5:30pm, THH 266.

**Lectures:** Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:30 – 1:50pm, in SLH 100.

**Discussion sections:**

Day	Time	Location	Instructor	Section
Wednesday	4:00 – 4:50pm	DMC 200	Mahmoud Hosny Roshdy	33011R
Wednesday	5:00 – 5:50pm	THH 113	Mahmoud Hosny Roshdy	33012R
Thursday	4:00 – 4:50pm	WPH 201	Dr. Marci Vogel	33013R
Thursday	5:00 – 5:50pm	DMC 105	Dr. Marci Vogel	33014R

Why does the environment matter to human society? What makes something "natural," and when does it become "unnatural"? What does it mean to live in the Anthropocene? This course invites you on an interdisciplinary exploration of the social, cultural, political, and ethical aspects of key contemporary environmental debates, challenges, and questions.

Our course starts by examining the different ways human societies have historically perceived, imagined, and used the more-than-human world. We then consider nine significant environmental issues—power generation, plants, animals, heat and drought, oceans, cities, waste, climate feelings, and sustainable futures. In each case, we explore how humans both shape their environment and are shaped by it.

There are four major assignments. A independent research essay (6–8 pages) asks you to critique this class by proposing a lecture topic that isn't on the syllabus. What major topic, question, or perspective is missing? How would including it enhance our course? A midterm exam (March 13) and final exam (May 14) assess your comprehension of course material. Finally, you'll use group presentations in discussion sections to collaboratively explore connections to issues and topics beyond our course.

This syllabus contains course policies, all major assignments and deadlines, and our reading schedule. Please read it all and check here first when you have questions. **You are responsible for meeting the obligations and deadlines detailed below.**

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

Students will...

- learn to ask meaningful questions about the relationship between humans and nature

- demonstrate the ability to find, evaluate, interpret, and apply diverse forms of credible evidence, including quantitative and qualitative data
- collaborate with colleagues to identify, understand, and propose solutions to complex environmental problems
- gain practice at communicating their ideas verbally and in writing
- approach environmental issues through multiple different disciplinary frameworks

## COURSE EXPECTATIONS

- **Engagement:** We have a lot to cover! Every class matters. Attendance is required. We expect you to attend all lectures and discussion section meetings, and to complete the reading and written assignments on schedule. If something prevents you from attending a class, please let your T.A. know as soon as you can, **and we'll figure out a plan together.**
- **Participation:** We expect you to meaningfully contribute to our discussions. Each of us has something to offer: Come prepared to talk in class by asking a question, offering an informed opinion, or forging a connection between course topics. At the same time, each of us has something to learn: Come ready to listen, to invite your colleagues into conversation, and to respectfully disagree.
- **Originality:** We're excited to know what *you* think about what you read and research. To that end, we expect you to produce your own work and to appropriately cite work by other writers, consistent with the rules outlined in [The USC Student Handbook](#). **Note:** text generated partly or entirely by AI (such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, or Copilot) **doesn't meet our standards for originality.**
- **Timeliness:** **We expect you to meet your deadlines.** That said, in most cases, quality is more important to us than punctuality. If you think you won't be able to meet a deadline, **email your T.A. with a new proposed deadline and your plans for staying on track.**
- **Presence:** We'll use computers selectively. Sometimes we'll work together in Google Docs, and sometimes we'll focus on live discussion. When you're in class, please minimize computer distractions by muting, hiding, or logging out of email, messaging, and social media.
- **Self-advocacy:** What do we need to know to help you succeed in this course?

## TEXTS AND MATERIALS

Please purchase or rent the following required textbook:

- McKinney et al., *Environmental Science: Systems and Solutions* (Sixth Edition, 2019). ISBN: 978-1284091700.

All other course texts and materials are available through our Brightspace course site.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

- **A research essay — notes for a lecture (6–8 pages).**  
**Critique this class.** What environmental issue in society would you add to this class and why? Identify your issue and undertake research to explain why it matters, then assemble notes your instructor could use to write a new lecture for our course. What historical or contemporary case study best illustrates the central questions and debates associated with

your issue? You'll draw on at least **six sources** to make your argument and create these lecture notes. More details on this assignment will be provided in week 3.

- **A midterm exam and a final exam.**

Both exams will consist of multiple-choice and short essay questions. These are individual exams. The exam grades are **not** curved. The final exam is cumulative.

- **A group presentation in discussion section.**

You'll work with colleagues to prepare a ten-minute presentation for your discussion section on an environmental issue that we haven't discussed in our lectures. **You must chose a different issue from your research essay.** Your T.A.s will provide a list of possible topics.

- **Discussion section assignments.**

Your T.A.s will introduce and explain these assignments.

### IMPORTANT DATES

- **Week 9:** Our midterm examination will take place in class on **Thursday, March 13.**
- **Week 11:** A detailed outline or polished draft of your final research essay is due by **11:59pm on Friday, March 28.** Submit via Brightspace. You'll also swap drafts with a colleague in your discussion section, read each other's drafts, and meet to discuss.
- **Week 13:** Your research essay is due by **11:59pm on Friday, April 11.** Submit via Brightspace.
- **Weeks 15 and 16:** Present your group's research in your discussion section.
- **Examination period:** The final exam is on **Wednesday, May 14, from 2pm to 4pm.**

**All deadlines are firm deadlines.** That said, in most cases, quality is more important to us than punctuality. If you think you won't be able to meet a deadline, please contact your T.A. as far in advance of the deadline as you can, **and we'll figure out a plan together.**

### COURSE GRADING AND ASSESSMENT

#### Grade break-down

Research paper (8-10 pages)	20%
Midterm exam	20%
Final exam	20%
Group presentation in discussion section	20%
Discussion section assignments	20%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Note:** If you are taking this course **Pass/No Pass**, you are unlikely to pass the course if you do not participate in discussion section.

#### Grading Scale

	A	100-93	A-	92-90		
B+	89-87	B	86-83	B-	82-80	
C+	79-77	C	76-73	C-	72-70	
D+	69-67	D	66-63	D-	62-60	F 59 and below

## ACADEMIC RESOURCES

**We want you to succeed—and so does U.S.C.** These offices and programs are here to support your personal and academic development, at no cost to you or your family.

- **U.S.C. Libraries** offers research guides ([libguides.usc.edu](http://libguides.usc.edu)) that explain how to access and use the library's resources. Librarian **Robert Labaree** is available for further research assistance, including free one-on-one consultations ([labaree@usc.edu](mailto:labaree@usc.edu)).
- **The Kortschak Center For Learning And Creativity** offers free workshops on academic strategies and free one-on-one consultation sessions so that you can get the most out of your courses and your time here. [kortschakcenter.usc.edu/programs-services](http://kortschakcenter.usc.edu/programs-services)
- **The Writing Center** offers free workshops and free one-on-one writing feedback sessions with experienced fellow writers who can support you at any stage of the writing process: generating ideas, crafting an argument, or revising drafts. [dornsife.usc.edu/writingcenter](http://dornsife.usc.edu/writingcenter)
- **U.S.C. Student Health** is here to support your physical and mental well-being. [studenthealth.usc.edu](http://studenthealth.usc.edu) and [studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)
- As **your professor**, I am always happy to talk at office hours, by appointment, or over email. [sfraga@usc.edu](mailto:sfraga@usc.edu)

### Statement For Students With Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability (including Online/ Remote Class Accommodation Requests) is required to register with the Office of Student and Accessibility Services (OSAS) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from OSAS. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. OSAS is located in GFS 120 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website for OSAS (<https://osas.usc.edu>) and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX), [osasfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto:osasfrontdesk@usc.edu).

### Statement On Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

### Emergency Preparedness / Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Brightspace, teleconferencing, and other technologies. See the university's site on Campus Safety and Emergency Preparedness: <http://safety.usc.edu/>

### What Questions Do You Have?

Please email me ([sfraga@usc.edu](mailto:sfraga@usc.edu)) with any questions about our course or its policies.

## ADVICE FROM PREVIOUS STUDENTS

At the end of each course, I ask: What advice would you offer to future students in this course? Students anonymously offer tips, hints, and suggestions. A selection of this advice from previous students appears below.

"Make a document where you write down ~5 bullet points about each lecture, as this is very useful both for making connections, as well as planning writing assignments. It's not that much work to do, but it really adds up over time."

"Start early. Make sure you have some ideas or plans for your assignments when coming to class. This will make it possible for you to get feedback throughout the writing process."

"Come to class with the readings done and understood to really give you the most beneficial class experience."

"Pace yourself throughout the term! Writing a bit here and there will let you make good progress on an assignment."

"Start your research as early as possible!"

"Start earlier than you think you'll need to on the research project."

"If you're a serial procrastinator (like me) refusing to take the 'start the research project early' advice, at least start it the weekend before the deadline. I promise you can't get it done in one night."

"do not procrastinate the essays!"

"Seek out a project subject that you are passionate about"

"Choose a topic you can read about for hours (because you will be)."

"Think out of the box. It took me awhile to discover what I wanted to focus my research on, but when i found something i was REALLY interested in, it made the experience more FUN than WORK motivated."

**SEMESTER CALENDAR**

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Readings</i>
<b>Week 1: A Sense of Where (and When and Who) We Are</b>		
Tue, Jan 14	What are we doing here?	Read this syllabus and bring questions to our first class.
Thu, Jan 16	Who we are and where we're heading	McKinney, chapter 1. Optional: McKinney, chapters 3 and 5.
<b>Note:</b>	Discussion sections do not meet this week	
<b>Week 2: Living in the Anthropocene</b>		
Tue, Jan 21	Conservation, preservation, and the birth of modern environmentalism	McKinney, chapter 6.
Thu, Jan 23	What is the Anthropocene and when does it start?	Crutzen and Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'" and Steffen, "Commentary" [Both in single document on Brightspace]
<b>Week 3: Seeing Nature at U.S.C.</b>		
Tue, Jan 28	Environmental racism, sustainability, and environmental justice	McKinney, chapter 17.
Thu, Jan 30	Seeing nature at U.S.C.	Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA" [Brightspace]
<b>Week 4: Power</b>		
Tue, Feb 4	Fossil fuels	McKinney, chapter 7.
Thu, Feb 6	Renewable energy	McKinney, chapter 8.
<b>Week 5: Plants</b>		
Tue, Feb 11	Trees and deforestation	McKinney, chapter 12.
Thu, Feb 13	Agribusiness and food	McKinney, chapter 13.
<b>Week 6: Animals</b>		
Tue, Feb 18	Biodiversity	McKinney, chapter 4.
Thu, Feb 20	Endangered species	McKinney, chapter 11.

<b>Week 7: Heat, drought, and fire</b>		
Tue, Feb 25	Extreme temperatures	Mora et al., "Global risk of deadly heat" [Brightspace]
Thu, Feb 27	Drought and fire	McKinney, chapter 9.
<b>Week 8: Oceans</b>		
Tue, Mar 4	Sea-level rise	Hardy, Milligan, and Heynen, "Racial coastal formation: The environmental injustice of colorblind adaptation planning for sea-level rise" [Brightspace]
Thu, Mar 6	Ocean health	McKinney, chapter 15.
<b>Week 9: Midterm examination</b>		
Tue, Mar 11	Review for midterm examination.	None.
Thu, Mar 13	Midterm examination.	None.
<b>Week 10: Spring recess — No class</b>		
<b>Week 11: Cities</b>		
Tue, Mar 25	Population and overpopulation (Guest lecture by Mahmoud Hosny Roshdy)	McKinney, chapter 2.
Thu, Mar 27	Urbanization	Cohen and Guo, <i>The Sustainable City</i> , chapter 2. [Brightspace]  Wolch, Byrne, and Newell, "Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities 'just green enough'" [Brightspace]
Fri, Mar 28	A detailed outline or polished draft of your final research essay is due by <b>11:59pm on Friday, March 28</b> . Submit via Brightspace. You'll also swap drafts with a colleague in your discussion section, read each other's drafts, and meet to discuss.	
<b>Week 12: Waste</b>		
Tue, Apr 1	Trash and recycling	McKinney, chapter 18.
Thu, Apr 3	Pollution	McKinney, chapter 14. Optional: McKinney, chapter 16.

<b>Week 13: Climate Feelings</b>		
Tue, Apr 8	Climate anxiety	None.
Thu, Apr 10	Climate optimism (Guest lecture by Dr. Marci Vogel)	Solnit, "Dare we hope? Here's my cautious case for climate optimism" [Brightspace]
Fri, Apr 11	<b>Due:</b> Your research essay is due by <b>11:59pm on Friday, April 5</b> . Submit via Brightspace.	
<b>Week 14: Sustainable Futures, Part I</b>		
Tue, Apr 15	Choosing sustainability	Complete Student Sustainability Training in TrojanLearn
Thu, Apr 17	Degrowth, rewilding, and #LandBack	Cohen and Guo, <i>The Sustainable City</i> , chapter 3. [Brightspace]
<b>Week 15: Sustainable Futures, Part II</b>		
Tue, Apr 22	A.I. and the climate crisis	None.
Thu, Apr 24	Space and the climate crisis	None.
<b>Week 16: The Future</b>		
Tue, Apr 29	Student choice	TBA.
Thu, May 1	Review for final exam.	None.

**Examination period:** Our final examination will take place on **Wednesday, May 14, from 2pm to 4pm.**