

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Environmental Studies
ENST 500 - Spring 2025

Instructor: Dr. Shannon Gibson
Professor (Teaching)
Environmental Studies Program
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Class Details:
Day/time: Thursday 3:30 - 6:20
Classroom: TBD
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Overview

This graduate-level course will take an interdisciplinary approach to surveying various social science contributions to the field of environmental studies. Many scholars have attempted to define the “canon” of environmental studies over the past few decades and those reading lists are often criticized due to their lack of author diversity or focus on the ways in which social, cultural, economic and political factors intersect with environmental realities and outcomes. This course hopes to bridge that gap and pursue historical and contemporary readings from the early 1900s to today that provide intersectional, gendered, Indigenous, justice-oriented, youth and non-academic voices to the discourse. This semester we will also incorporate a work of climate fiction - “The Ministry for the Future” – as a way to synthesize all of these interdisciplinary approaches via a singular narrative.

Learning Objectives

1. To discuss and debate what interdisciplinary approaches means, how we conduct and implement it and if/why we need it in environmental studies.
2. To conduct original research that assists students in determining their own epistemological, ontological and methodological preferences in an area of their choosing.
3. To compare, contrast and debate a variety of environmental discourses, including eco-centric, anthropocentric, gendered, Indigenous, intersectional and justice-based writings in environmental studies.
4. To deeply consider the divide between theory and practice and how they might be bridged through academic dialogue and interdisciplinary research.
5. To create a graduate-level academic atmosphere where students will take part in developing and leading reading and documentary discussions.

Meet Your Professor:

I have been teaching at USC since 2011 and hold bachelor's degrees in Political Science and Public Relations, and an MA and PhD in International Studies. Compared to other faculty in the ENST department, I come from more of a social science background. In fact, I haven't taken an environmental science class since I enrolled in "Oceanography" my sophomore year at the University of Florida (which was 2 decades ago, and truth be told, I took it because it was supposed to be an "easy science class" and I'm pretty sure I got a A-.)

So why tell you all this? Because it's important to know where my strengths lie...which is dissecting the political, social, cultural and economic aspects of managing our global environmental commons. In fact, I will lecture, perhaps more than you like, about my experiences attending multiple United Nations climate change negotiations and dozens of climate activist protests and mobilization meetings. It's also important to acknowledge my weaknesses, which is that most of you probably have a stronger natural science background than I do. So this class won't dig too deep into the science-based aspects of environmental policy, unless you take it there...in which case I will rely on you all to assess those issues.

Class Meeting Structure

This course will run in seminar format for approximately 2 hours and 50 minutes, including a 15 minute break. While some weeks may vary, in general, each class will include instructor lectures, student-led reflection of the readings, group discussion and/or active learning exercises, such as guided case studies, role playing exercises, documentary viewing, etc.

Required Textbooks

- "Environment and Society: A Reader" by Scholttmann et al. (2017). *New York University Press*. [[Amazon \\$30-45](#)]
- "The Ministry for the Future" by Kim Stanley Robinson. (2020). *Orbit Press*. [[Amazon \\$10-15](#)]

Readings are required to be completed prior to the day they are listed. As a 500-level course, you can expect on average 100-150 pages of reading per week. While this may seem daunting, I have worked hard to choose texts that are engaging and hopefully interesting to your intellectual and personal interests. I'll also note that I found it very helpful to annotate readings while I was in graduate school. Learning to be an engaged and efficient reader is a very useful skill, so I have provided some resources in Brightspace to help you if this is new to you. Any other readings required for class have hyperlinks listed below or will be posted to Blackboard.

Course Assignments

**** Assignments are subject to change depending on number of students enrolled****

Participation (10%)

Participation in this course as a graduate-level one is incredibly crucial. First, the class is centered around topics on which you all have an opinion and they are honestly some of the most pressing, unsolved wicked problems of our lifetimes. In order to really get at the crux of why these issues are so persistent, it requires meaningful engagement with the materials and with each other as class colleagues. Second, we are a small class, so if you are not involved or engaged it will be readily apparent. Put simply, attendance does not equal participation and you should not take this portion of the grade as a given. Also, you do not start with a 100, instead you earn points by being an engaged participant through these three routes:

1. **Engaged attendance:** This means you are on-time, present and immersed in our course activities. While I strongly encourage you to bring laptops to class, you should refrain from using them for personal reasons not related to our course tasks.
2. **Verbal participation in class:** This includes answering questions that I pose, posing your own value-added questions and quality interaction during in-class discussions.
3. **Participation in In-Class Activities:** This includes active learning exercises, such as small group assignments, worksheets, case studies, and polls during class.

Rapporteur Role (10%)

Each student will sign up for two weeks where they are responsible for acting as a rapporteur or lecture facilitator. In these weeks you will email me by 5 pm on the Tuesday before class the following items in relation to the assigned readings for our Thursday lecture:

- **Two discussion questions** (they need to be set up as questions designed to incite discussion, not just yes/no questions)
- **Two quotes** you found most interesting from the readings with a few sentences on why you thought it was important
- **One reference** to a contemporary issue or outside resource that you think relates to the week's readings (this can be YouTube video, editorial, news article, case study, etc.)

Rubric and additional instructions provided on Blackboard.

Student Presentation (15%)

Each student will sign up for one week where they will make a 20-30 minute presentation on a unique case study that relates to the week's readings. While I have provided suggested topics in the syllabus, I am open to you going in a different direction. I strongly encourage you to make an office hour appointment with me at least 1-2 weeks in advance to discuss your approach.

Rubric and additional instructions provided on Blackboard.

Weekly Reflection Assignments (25%)

Instead of a final exam, we will have near weekly reflection assignments (1-3 pages depending). Instructions and grading criteria will be given out each week in-class.

Midterm Research Assessment (10%)

On March 23, each student will present their thesis, approach and preliminary research for their final interdisciplinary research paper (description below) to the class. This will be similar to an informal research presentation so that you can get constructive feedback and bounce ideas off your fellow student colleagues.

Rubric and additional instructions provided on Blackboard.

Interdisciplinary Research Paper (30%)

The largest assignment this semester will be a 15-20 page research paper that applies an interdisciplinary approach to an environmental issue of your choosing. I am incredibly open to how you wish to pursue this project, but I do ask that you engage at least one theoretical perspective that is different from your major or new to you from this class. The idea is to take a new perspective on an older, or even newer, issue to provide a novel contribution to our field. There will be a few different scaffolding assignments (i.e., submitting a topic, outline, etc.) due at various times throughout the semester to assist you in working through your paper. I also ask that you each schedule at least one office hour appointment with me to discuss your project and progress throughout the semester.

Rubric, assignment timeline and additional instructions provided on Blackboard.

Course Policies:

Grading - Please consult carefully, this scale may be different than what you've had in other classes.

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
100-94	93-90	89-87	86-84	83-80	79-77	76-74	73-70	69-67	66-64	63-50	< 50

- **Office Hours:** All office hours are by appointment only. You can make an appointment via the Google Calendar linked in my email signature and in Brightspace. Please be sure to include why you'd like to meet and do me the courtesy of emailing me as soon as possible if you must cancel.

- **Recordings and materials:** My recordings, Google slides, and class exercises are my intellectual property. It is a violation of University policy to share, repost or sell these materials.
- **Grading:** I am always happy to discuss with you how you can improve your work, but I will not “regrade work” or consider grade revisions that have nothing to do with your actual submitted work (i.e., your need for a grade to maintain a scholarship, your GPA needs and grad applications, and things of that nature.) If you do have a grade objection, that should be emailed to me with a written explanation of what you feel was graded incorrectly accompanied by supporting information (i.e., referencing the textbook or slides), within 72 hours. All assignments will have either a rubric or comments accompanying them, so I repeat, I will not simply “regrade” something because you don’t understand why you got a particular grade.
- **Extra Credit:** In order to maintain fairness to all, I will never offer individual extra credit. Please do not ask. If I find that grades are lower than usual following the midterm, I may elect to offer extra credit to the whole class, but this is never guaranteed.
- **Deadlines:** Deadlines are an important part of life and we should make every effort to meet them. Late work will be deducted ½ a letter grade at the due time and then per 12 hours late. That being said, I realize there is a lot going on in the world, so if something legitimate comes up, please reach out to me as early as possible to discuss options. Please note, if I feel like my lenience is being taken advantage of, I may have to reconsider some of the flexibility being offered.
- **Statement for Students with Disabilities:**
 - You are required to set up DSP arrangements with me for each assignment they are needed at least 1 week prior. Do not count on me remembering, always double check with me please.
 - Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in GFS 120 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website for **DSP (<https://dsp.usc.edu/>)** and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) **dspfrontdesk@usc.edu**.
- **Statement on Academic Integrity:** Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally

unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

- **Diversity and Inclusivity:** It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well-served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that the students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender identity, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. Please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally, or for other students or student groups.
- **Trust, Respect, and Comfort in Class:** At times we may discuss sensitive, challenging, and overtly political topics in this class. It is imperative that there be an atmosphere of trust and safety in the classroom. I will do my best to foster an environment in which each class member is able to hear and respect each other. It is critical that each class member show respect for all worldviews expressed in class. It is expected that some of the material in this course may evoke strong emotions, please be respectful of others' emotions and be mindful of your own. Please let me know if something said or done in the classroom, by either myself or other students, is particularly troubling or causes discomfort or offense. While our intention may not be to cause discomfort or offense, the impact of what happens throughout the course is not to be ignored and is something that I consider to be very important and deserving of attention.
- **Mental Health and Other Concerns:** This is a trying time in the world. Before I copy and paste the university's boilerplate language on this topic, let me say that I am here for you if you are struggling. I am by no means a therapist and may often have to refer you to outside services, however I am always here with no judgment, an open mind and two ears to listen if you are having a hard time managing your course work or other academic issues for whatever reason. I will do my absolute best to help you work through whatever you are confronting, but please know that the earlier you come to me, the better. Once we reach grading periods or pass withdrawal dates, I am often limited by university policies on what I can and can't do to assist you. Below are some resources at USC that you might find helpful:
 - Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>
 - Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to genderbased harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>
 - Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX compliance – (213) 740-5086 Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

- Bias Assessment Response and Support SOWK 637 – Wellness, Recovery, and Integrated Care 23 Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.
<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>
- Student Support & Advocacy – (213) 821-4710 Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa>
- Diversity at USC – <https://diversity.usc.edu/> Tabs for Events, Programs and Training, Task Force (including representatives for each school), Chronology, Participate, Resources for Students

Reading and Course Schedule

Week 1 (Jan. 16) - Why an “interdisciplinary” approach to environmental studies?	
<p>Readings:</p> <p>[Online] “Minding the Gap: Working Across Disciplines in Environmental Studies”, Rachel Carson Center Report (2014)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> “The Discipline of Interdiscipline” by A. Ivakhiv, pgs. 11-14 <input type="checkbox"/> “Less is More” by J. Meyer, pgs. 15-18 <input type="checkbox"/> Reconciling Theory & Practice: Transdisciplinary Insights from an Indigenous Case Study” by A. Kruetz, pgs. 27-30 <p>[Online] <i>Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies: A Primer</i>, Gunilla Oberg (2011)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ch. 3 “Questioning to learn and learning to question” pgs. 24-29 <input type="checkbox"/> Ch. 4 “Why do you conduct interdisciplinary work?” pgs. 30-47 	<p>In-Class:</p> <p>Icebreaker and group discussion on interests, epistemology, etc.</p> <p>Homework:</p> <p>1-page reflection on epistemology and methodology (see slide deck)</p>

Week 2 (Jan. 23) - Ideas of Nature	
<p>Readings:</p> <p>[E&S Reader] “Part 1: Ideas of Nature”, <i>excerpts from</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The End of Nature, Bill McKibben <input type="checkbox"/> The World Without Us, Alan Weisman 	<p>In-Class:</p> <p>“Voices from the Valley”: What is the environment and what do people do there?</p>

<input type="checkbox"/> Reinventing Eden, Carolyn Merchant <input type="checkbox"/> The Etiquette of Freedom, Gary Snyder <input type="checkbox"/> The Land Ethic, Aldo Leopold	<p>Homework:</p> <p>Outdoor nature walk and 2-page writing reflection</p>
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<p>Week 3 (Jan. 30) - Early Environmentalism</p>	
<p>Readings:</p> <p>[E&S Reader] “Part 2: Environmentalism”, <i>excerpts from:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Hetch Hetchy Valley, John Muir <input type="checkbox"/> Silent Spring, Rachel Carson <p>[E&S Reader] “Part 3: Values & Justice”, <i>excerpts from:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Walking, Henry David Thoreau <input type="checkbox"/> Naturalness as a Source of Value, Robert Goodin <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation, John Passmore <p>[Online] The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement, Arne Naess</p>	<p>In-Class: TBD</p> <p>Homework: 1-page idea pitch for your final paper topic.</p>

<p>Week 4 (Feb.6): New Environmental Social Movements</p>	
<p>Readings:</p> <p>[E&S Reader] “Part 2: Environmentalism”, <i>excerpts from:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Environmentalism and Social Justice, Robert D. Bullard <input type="checkbox"/> Where we Live, Work and Play, Robert Gottlieb <input type="checkbox"/> The Death of Environmentalism, Nordhaus & Shellenberger <input type="checkbox"/> The Paradox of Global Environmentalism, Ramachandra Guha <p>[E&S Reader] “Part 3: Values & Justice”, <i>excerpts from:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sustainability, Alan Holland <input type="checkbox"/> Theorizing Environmental Justice, David Scholsberg 	<p>In-Class:</p> <p>Discussion of Boomerang Theory of Social Movement Activism</p> <p>Class investigation of MDG to SDG transition</p> <p>Homework: 1-2 page reflection on the SDG framework</p>

Week 5 (Feb. 13) : From Theory to (Radical) Action

[[Online](#)] On Civil Disobedience, Thoreau

[[Online](#)] “Down the River with Henry Thoreau” by E. Abbey (1980) pgs. 273 - 307

[[Online](#)] “Rereading: Robert Macfarlane on The Monkey Wrench Gang” *The Guardian*, Sept. 2009.

[[Online](#)] “From throwing soup to suing governments, there’s strategy to climate activism’s seeming chaos – here’s where it’s headed next” by Shannon Gibson in *The Conversation*, February 2, 2024.

[[Online](#)] “How this climate activist justifies political violence.” by D. Marchese in *New York Times*. Jan. 16 2024.

In-Class:

Watch portion of documentary “Wrenched” followed by guided discussion / debate

Homework:

2-page reflection on a recent act of environmental civil disobedience

Week 6 (Feb. 20): Population and Consumption

[E&S Reader] “Part 3: Population & Consumption”, *excerpts from*:

- Principle of Population, Thomas Malthus
- How do we know we have environmental problems?, Taylor & Buttel
- The IPAT equation and its Variants, Marian Chertow
- Earth’s Carrying Capacity, Daily & Ehrlich
- The NEXT Industrial Revolution, McDonough & Braungart
- Consumptive Resistance, Michael Maniates
- Overpopulation vs. Biodiversity, Leon Kolankiewicz

In-Class:

TBD

Homework:

TBD

Week 7 (Feb. 27) : Environment and the Economy

[E&S Reader] “Part 4: Public Goods & Collective Action”, *excerpts from*:

- Tragedy of the Commons, Garrett Hardin
- Revisiting the Commons, Ostrom et al.
- Averting the Tragedy of the Commons, Mark Van Vugt
- Climate, Collective Action & Individual Ethical Obligations, Marion Hourdequin
- About Free-Market Environmentalism, Jonathan Adler

In-Class:

TBD

Homework:

TBD

<p>[Online] “Beyond the ‘Green Economy’: System change, not climate change?” by Nicola Bullard and Tadzio Mueller.</p>	
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Week 8 (March 6): Gender, Sexuality and the Environment

<p>[USC Library] “Gender and the Environment” by Susan Buckingham:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ch. 1 “Linking gender and the environment”, pgs. 1-18 <input type="checkbox"/> Ch. 2 “The gendering of science” pgs. 19-45 <input type="checkbox"/> Ch. 3 “Conceptualizing gender-environment relationships” pgs. 45-62 <input type="checkbox"/> Ch. 6 “The global scope”, pgs. 119-144 	<p>In-Class: Eco-feminism Case Study</p> <p>Homework: TBD</p>
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Week 9 (March 13): Indigenous Cosmology and Environmentalism

<p>[Online] Powless, B. “An Indigenous Movement to Confront Climate Change.” <i>Globalizations</i>. 9(3): 411-424</p> <p>[Online] Reitan, R. and S. Gibson. “Environmental Praxis, Climate Activism, and the UNFCCC: A Participatory Action Research Approach.” 2012. <i>Globalizations</i> 9(3). Pgs. 395-410.</p> <p>[Online] “Respect for Mother Earth: Original Instructions and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge” by Tom Goldtooth in <i>The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology</i> (2017) pgs. 460-470</p>	<p>In-Class: TBD</p> <p>Homework: None, work on your final paper.</p>
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Week 10 (March 16-23): SPRING BREAK NO CLASS

Week 11 (March 27): Anti-, De- and Post-colonial Perspectives on the Environment

<p>[USC Library] “Pollution is Colonialism” by Max Liborian pgs. 1-80</p> <p>[Brightspace] “Invoking the Ancestors” by Aileen Suzara, pgs. 64-76 in Deming & Savoy, <i>Colors of Nature</i>.</p> <p>[Online] “On the Way to Decolonization in a Settler Colony: Re-Introducing Black Feminist Identity Politics” (2018) K. Dobson. <i>AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples</i>. (14:3)</p>	<p>In-Class: Exploring decolonial ways of conducting research:</p> <p><i>Laboratory Life: Author Order (Episode 1)</i>. (2021). <i>Laboratory Life: How We Choose Our Values (Episode 2)</i>. (2021).</p>
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[Online] Carbon Colonialism: A postcolonial assessment of carbon offsetting” (2019) Eberle et al. *Postcolonial Perspectives*, pgs. 1-25.

“Dr. Max Liboiron is changing how science is done,” (2021).

Homework: 2-page reflection on how to decolonize one of your learning / research experiences at USC?

Week 12 (April 3): Final Presentation Prep Sessions

- Each student will present to the group their preliminary research hypothesis and progress and respond to peer questions in a constructive manner (additional details on deliverables to come)
- The remainder of class will be reserved for 1-on-1 meetings with me to further refine your paper

For the final three weeks of class, we will collectively explore the climate fiction book “The Ministry for the Future.” As part of this exploration, we will consider the narratives, ideologies, conflicts and solutions presented in the book, which cover governance, economics, collective action, technological innovation and more. In each week, students will co-facilitate this joint endeavor by creating their own mini-lectures, discussion questions and active learning exercises for us all to engage in. More details to come.

Week 13 (April 10): Exploring Possible Climate Futures via Interdisciplinarity

- Ministry, Chapters 1-39, pgs. TBD

Week 14 (April 17): Exploring Possible Climate Futures via Interdisciplinarity

- Ministry, Chapters 40-74, pgs. TBD

Week 15 (April 24): Exploring Possible Climate Futures via Interdisciplinarity

- Ministry, Chapters 75-106, pgs. TBD

Week 16 (May 1): Student Mock Conferences

