Political Ecology

This course introduces students to the vibrant sub-field of political ecology with emphasis on the social and ecological theories that inform past and present research. Students will quickly discover that political ecology is not a theory but a panoply of approaches to conducting human-environmental research. This course thus examines the theoretical perspectives that inform this body of research. These include political economy (Blaikie; Watts), social constructivism and critical realism (Neumann; Robbins), non-equilibrium ecology (Zimmerer), and assorted postmodernist theories (Castree; Braun). This attention to the theoretical orientations of specific authors should sharpen our own social and ecological perspectives in doing political ecological research. Indeed, one of the goals of this class is for students to research and evaluate a particular social or ecological theory or theories that will be useful to their own research. Class discussions and writing projects will repeatedly excavate and explicate the theoretical underpinnings of political ecological research.

A second goal is to acknowledge if not to embrace the diversity of political ecological topics as well as perspectives. Although initially focused on land degradation in the global South, today political ecology includes research in urban areas of the global North and South, environmental politics, environmental history, feminist development studies, science studies, and environmental knowledge and policy. Among its many conceptual and methodological strengths, political ecology is often praised for its potential to integrate multiple social and biophysical processes in explaining environmental change.

A third goal is to assess the epistemological and methodological challenges involved in integrating the natural and social sciences in political ecological research. A fourth and final objective will be to reflect on the political significance of doing political ecology. Paul Robbins has written in his masterful book *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, that there is no such thing as an “apolitical ecology.” That is, politics and power relations are implicit in all human-environmental research and writing. It is not that political ecology is more political than other types of environmental research, it is simply more explicit about how power relations shape environmental change and management. Through course readings, discussions, and writing assignments, students will explore these theoretical, methodological, and political dimensions of political ecology.

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**Office Hours:** Tuesday: 3-5:00  
Course Requirements
Grades will be based on weekly 2-page written commentaries on assigned readings (60%) and a 15-20 page research paper (40%).

   a) Commentaries should focus on conceptual, theoretical, or methodological aspects of the readings scheduled for that week. They are due on Tuesday (no later than 5:00) on the Compass website in that week’s Discussion folder. These commentaries will serve as a basis of discussion of our meetings.

   b) Term papers can take a variety of forms: a chapter in a M.A. thesis, a journal article, or a research paper. Whatever the project, its core should reflect an engagement with the theoretical dimensions of political ecology. Be sure to discuss your project with me early in the semester. Term papers are due in class on December 7.

Class Themes and Readings

Week 1 (Aug 24): Course introduction
Overview of course syllabus, student introductions, short lecture on political ecology approaches.

Week 2 (Aug 31): The roots of political ecology


Week 3 (Sept 7): Hazards, Adaptation, and Cultural Ecology


Also, read one of the following case studies:


**Week 4 (Sept 14): Critical Cultural Ecology**


**Further readings:**


**Week 5 (Sept 21): First Wave Political Ecology**


**Further readings:**


**Week 6 (Sept 28): Ecological Theory, Environmental Science, and Land Use/Land Cover Change**

Robbins, P. *Political Ecology*, Chap 5, pp. 87-106


**Further reading:**


**Week 7 (Oct 5): Post-structural critiques and extensions of early political ecology**


**Week 8 (Oct 12). The political ecology of scale**


Further Reading:


**Week 9 (Oct 19): Environmental discourses and narratives**


Further reading:


**Week 10 (Oct 26) Neoliberal nature and environmental governance**


**Further Reading:**


**Week 11. (Nov 2) Political ecology of natural resource management**

Robbins, P. *Political Ecology*, Chaps 9-10, pp. 172--201


**Further reading:**


**Week 12 (Nov 9) Political ecological methods**


**Further reading:**


**Week 13 (Nov 16) Revisiting Adaptation in the Environmental Change Literature**


Further reading:


**Week 14 (Nov 23) Thanksgiving Break**
Week 15 (Nov 30) Food Studies


Week 16 (Dec 7) Student Paper Presentations