

Philosophy of Environmental Conservation (PHIL 3024)

Professor: Karen Kovaka

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Course Description

Environmental conservation is an urgent, practical, and global concern. It also raises rich philosophical questions. This course unites these two aspects of environmental conservation by having you participate in local conservation projects while at the same time exploring the philosophical questions these projects raise. The central philosophical questions we will consider are:

1. What should the targets of environmental conservation be? Wilderness? Biodiversity? Native species?
2. How much active intervention in nature is acceptable? Is it best to leave nature alone whenever we can?
3. How should decisions about conservation be made? Whose interests and opinions matter? How do we balance the interests of different groups?

We will spend the semester discussing classic and contemporary works of environmental philosophy that address these questions. We will also see how different ways of answering these questions are playing out in conservation efforts in the New River Valley. The goals are for you to use philosophy to deepen your understanding of environmental conservation, and for you to let your experiences of conservation projects inform your thinking about wilderness, biodiversity, intervention in nature, indigeneity, and democratic decision-making.

Assessment

Your grade in this course is determined by 5 factors:

1. Active participation during class time

2. Participation in a major conservation project over the entire semester
3. Contributions to a number of minor conservation projects throughout the semester
4. Several brief reflection papers throughout the semester
5. One final reflection paper at the end of the semester

In order to get an **A** or **A-**, you must (i) be active and engaged during class, (ii) demonstrate satisfactory participation in your major conservation project, (iii) contribute to or attend 6 minor conservation projects or events, (iv) write a 500-700 word reflection paper on each of the 6 minor projects or events, and (v) write a 1000 to 2000 word end-of-term reflection paper. The difference between A and A- grades will be determined by the quality of your in-class participation and reflection papers.

In order to get an **B** or **B+**, you must (i) be active and engaged during class, (ii) demonstrate satisfactory participation in your major conservation project, (iii) contribute to or attend 3 minor conservation projects or events, (iv) write a 500-700 word reflection paper on each of the 6 minor projects or events, and (v) write a 1000 to 2000 word end-of-term reflection paper. The difference between B and B+ grades will be determined by the quality of your in-class participation and reflection papers.

Grades of **B-** and below are reserved for students who do not meet the above standards for a B grade. For example, your grade will be below a B if you rarely attend class, if you do not contribute to at least 3 minor conservation projects, if you do not demonstrate satisfactory participation in a major conservation project, or if you do not submit the required reflection papers.

That said, I know that life can get in the way of school, and I am happy to be flexible about course requirements. I ask that you communicate with me early and often about any circumstances that are making it difficult for you to participate fully in the course so that we can work together on a solution.

Class Participation

The success of the course depends on active engagement and input from everyone, so I expect every student to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Environments where discussions are dominated by a few loud voices, or where many people are physically in the room but mentally disengaged, are bad for learning. We all have to do our part to make class time a valuable, exciting experience for ourselves and our fellow students.

Major Conservation Project

We have two community partners this semester: The [POWHR Coalition](#) and the [New River Valley Watershed Roundtable](#). You have the option of choosing which group you would like to work with for your major conservation project. Both projects require you to attend events outside of class and to work with your fellow students. If you choose to work with POWHR, you will be developing the beginning of an ecosystem restoration plan for an area affected by the Mountain Valley Pipeline. If you choose to work with the Watershed Roundtable, you will be collecting

oral histories that document the environmental experiences and values of residents of the New River Valley.

Minor Conservation Projects

There is an incredible amount of environmental conservation going on in the New River Valley! Contributing to minor conservation projects throughout the semester will give you a taste of the many different initiatives happening around us. Your GTA (Brandon) and I have assembled a list of different projects and events that you can contribute to. These range from going on birding hikes and working on trail maintenance crews to writing and submitting a Letter to the Editor of a newspaper and attending meetings of Virginia Tech's Climate Action Committee. I will require you to contribute to at least one project in each of the these three categories: service, advocacy, and education. But exactly which projects you contribute to is up to you. A full calendar of projects and events is available on Canvas, and we will keep it updated throughout the semester.

Reflection Papers

For each minor conservation project you contribute to, you will write a 500-700 word reflection paper describing what you did, how you felt about the experience, and any philosophical questions you think the project raises or touches on. These papers are due in Canvas no later than 1 week after the event or activity.

At the end of the semester you will write a comprehensive reflection on your experiences in the course. This paper can be anywhere from 1000 to 2000 words long, and it is due in Canvas on May 8 by midnight, and it takes the place of a traditional final exam.

Fine Print

- **Attendance:** I fully expect you to come to every single class session except when illness or other personal circumstances prevent you. I will keep track of attendance each week and forgive up to 3 absences with no questions asked. After three absences, I will deduct one percentage point from your final grade for each additional absence. If your circumstances require you to miss more than three classes, you and I need to speak in person about alternative ways for you to participate in the course.
- **Accessibility:** We all learn differently, and I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. Please come talk to me if some aspect of the course isn't working for you: we can collaborate on alternatives that suit your needs, interests, and learning style. If you have a disability (or think you might), it's also a good idea to contact [Services for Students with Disabilities](#).
- **Technology:** Phones, tablets, and laptops often distract us during class. I want to free you from these distractions as much as possible. For that reason, I will provide notes after every class. You will find them on the course Canvas site. This means you don't have to type or write notes yourselves, and it gives you the option of participating in class without any

tech at all. If you do use a laptop or tablet, please do not check your email, message people, or use the Internet for anything that isn't course-related.

- **Academic integrity:** I take academic integrity very seriously. It's important that all the assignments you complete are your own work and that you know how to credit and cite sources appropriately. If you have any questions about my expectations for a particular assignment, be sure to talk to me!

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states: "As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do." Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit: <https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>

- **Changes to the syllabus:** I may adjust the course readings and schedule as the semester goes along. It is your responsibility to pay attention to Canvas and your email so that you are aware of any changes.

Texts

There are no required books for this course. All of the readings will be available on our Canvas site.

Reading Schedule

1 Introduction

Date	Content
Tues. 1/21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Conservation During Crisis • Reading: <i>How to Stop Freaking Out and Tackle Climate Change</i>, Emma Marris (<i>New York Times</i>, Jan 10)
Thurs. 1/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: The Sacred and the Superfund • Reading: <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>, Robin Wall Kimmerer, pp. 310-340

2 Environmental Conservation in the New River Valley

Date	Content
Tues. 1/28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Class Visit from the POWHR Coalition • Reading: No Reading
Thurs. 1/30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Class Visit from the POWHR Coalition • Reading: No Reading
Tues. 2/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Experiences of Nature I • Reading: "The Alaska Trip," John Muir • Reading: <i>Walden</i>, Henry David Thoreau, selections
Thurs. 2/6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Experiences of Nature II • Reading: <i>Welcome to the Goddamn Icecube</i>, Blair Braverman, pp. 111-122; 157-176; 180-184 • Reading: <i>Black Faces, White Spaces</i>, Carolyn Finney, ch 4

3 Wilderness

Date	Content
Tues. 2/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: The Wilderness Ideal • Reading: <i>Rethinking Wilderness</i>, Mark Woods, introduction and ch 1
Thurs. 2/13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Critiques of the Wilderness Ideal I • Reading: <i>Rethinking Wilderness</i>, Mark Woods, ch 3
Tues. 2/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Critiques of the Wilderness Ideal II • Reading: <i>Rethinking Wilderness</i>, Mark Woods, ch 6
Thurs. 2/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Managing Public Lands • Reading: <i>Desert Solitaire</i>, Edward Abbey, ch 2

4 Biodiversity & Native and Invasive Species

Date	Content
Tues. 2/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: What Is Biodiversity? • Reading: "Biodiversity and Systematic Conservation Planning for the 21st Century," Sahotra Sarkar
Thurs. 2/27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Biodiversity as Conservation Priority • Reading: "Biodiversity Eliminativism," Carlos Santana
Tues. 3/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: In Defense of Invasive Species • Reading: <i>The New Wild</i>, Fred Pearce, ch. 6-8
Thurs. 3/5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Against Invasive Species • Reading: "Non-native Species DO Threaten the Natural Environment!" Daniel Simberloff

5 Interventions

Date	Content
Tues. 3/17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Rewilding and Assisted Migration • Reading: <i>Rambunctious Garden</i>, Emma Marris, ch 4-5
Thurs. 3/19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Novel and Designer Ecosystems • Reading: <i>Rambunctious Garden</i>, Emma Marris, ch 7-8
Tues. 3/24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Active and Passive Restoration • Reading: "Restoration and Repair of Earth's Damaged Ecosystems," Holly Jones, et al.
Thurs. 3/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Geoengineering • Reading: "Ethics and Geoengineering," Christopher Preston
Tues. 3/31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Doing versus Allowing • Reading: <i>Doing and Allowing Harm</i>, Fiona Woollard, ch 1-2

6 Indigenous Peoples

Date	Content
Thurs. 4/2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Indigenous Environmental Philosophy • Reading: <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>, Robin Wall Kimmerer, pp. 205-215 • Reading: <i>Indigenous Research and Professional Philosophy in the U.S.</i>, Kyle Whyte
Tues. 4/7	NO CLASS
Thurs. 4/9	NO CLASS
Tues. 4/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Reparations I • Reading: "Superseding Historical Injustice," Jeremy Waldron

Date	Content
Thurs. 4/16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Topic: Reparations II ● Reading: "Beyond Reparations: An American Indian Theory of Justice," William Bradford
Tues. 4/21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Topic: Indigenous Climate Justice ● Reading: "Way Beyond the Lifeboat: An Indigenous Allegory of Climate Justice," Kyle Whyte

7 Public Participation in Conservation

Date	Content
Thurs. 4/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Science by the People</i>, Aya Kimura and Abby Kinchy, ch 1
Tues. 4/28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Science by the People</i>, Aya Kimura and Abby Kinchy, ch 2
Thurs. 4/30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Science by the People</i>, Aya Kimura and Abby Kinchy, ch 3
Tues. 5/5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflection & Review ● No Reading