

# Philosophy of Environmental Conservation (PHIL 3024)

Professor: Karen Kovaka

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Class Hours: Tues/Thurs 9:30-10:45am  
Class Room: N/A, online

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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 investigate 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?

## Course Structure

This is an online course with a live (synchronous) class meeting once per week, on Thursday afternoons from 9:30-10:45 am. You will have asynchronous content to work through on your own prior to our Thursday meeting. Together, the asynchronous and synchronous content form 5 layers. Engaging with each layer makes up your coursework for the week.

- Layer 1: Reading the texts.
- Layer 2: Reviewing my detailed notes on the texts.
- Layer 3: Watching a recorded lecture about the texts.
- Layer 4: Actively participating in our Zoom discussion each Thursday.
- Layer 5: Keeping an intellectual journal about what you are learning.

You will complete Layers 1-3 before our Thursday meetings. You have until Friday afternoon each week to complete Layer 5.

## Evaluation

1. Final Report: 40% (split into 5 assignments, 5-10% each)
2. Midterm exam: 20%
3. Final exam: 20%
4. Journal: 20%

## Homework

You will write an 8-10 page report on a local environmental issue over the course of the semester. If you aren't used to this style of writing, don't worry—I will walk you through the process. You will write the report in 5 stages: first you'll identify a topic, then submit an outline and research plan, rough draft, and final draft, as well as a peer review of someone else's rough draft. I will walk you through each stage before it is due so that you know exactly what to expect. Submit these through our Canvas site. The due dates and grade percentages for these different stages are below:

- Paper Topic (5%): 3/16
- Outline and Research Plan (10%): 3/30
- Rough Draft (10%): 4/15
- Peer Review (5%): 4/22
- Final Draft (10%): 5/4

## Exams

Both the mid-term and final exams will be short answer, take-home style in format. The mid-term will be assigned on 2/26 and due on 3/5. The final exam will be available on or before the last day of classes (12/5) and due on 5/12.

## Journal

Every Friday by 5pm, you will complete and submit a journal entry via our Canvas site. By the end of the semester, you'll have a record of which ideas you found interesting, challenging, tedious, or incomprehensible, as well as a sense of how your own views about environmental conservation have developed over time. I will provide open-ended prompts to guide you, and I'm looking for about one page per week. You are, of course, welcome to add as much additional content as you like. I will grade the journal entries based on completion.

## Fine Print

- **Attendance:** I expect you to come to every single live class session except when illness or other personal circumstances prevent you. You should be prepared to contribute to the discussion by sharing your own thoughts, answering my questions, and responding to your classmates' observations. I will keep track of attendance each week and forgive 2 absences with no questions asked. After 2 absences, I will deduct points from your final grade for each additional absence. If your circumstances require you to miss more than 2 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:** Our phones, tablets, and laptops are crucial tools for online learning, yet they can also distract us during a live class. I want to free you from these distractions as much as possible. For that reason, I am providing notes on all the texts I ask you to read, which means you do not have to take notes during our live sessions. In return, I ask that during our 75 minutes of live time each week, you 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 texts I assign are available on our Canvas site.

# Reading Schedule

## 1 Introduction

Date	Content
Week 1 1/19 & 1/21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Conservation and Crisis</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Emma Marris, <i>How to Stop Freaking Out and Tackle Climate Change</i>, (<i>New York Times</i>, Jan 10, 2020)</li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Robin Wall Kimmerer, <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>, pp. 310-340</li> </ul>
Week 2 1/26 & 1/28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Conservation in the New River Valley</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> TBD</li> </ul>

## 2 Wilderness

Date	Content
Week 3 2/2 & 2/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: The Wilderness Ideal</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> John Muir, "The Alaska Trip"</li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Henry David Thoreau, <i>Walden</i>, selections</li> <li>• <b>Spring Break Day Fri 2/5, no Journal Entry</b></li> </ul>
Week 4 2/9 & 2/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Critiques of the Wilderness Ideal</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Mark Woods, <i>Rethinking Wilderness</i>, selections</li> </ul>
Week 5 2/16 & 2/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Experiences of Wilderness</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Blair Braverman, <i>Welcome to the Goddamn Icecube</i>, pp. 111-122, 157-176, 180-184</li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Edward Abbey, <i>Desert Solitaire</i>, chapter 3</li> </ul>
Week 6 2/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Skills Building</b></li> <li>• <b>No reading</b></li> <li>• <b>Live Zoom workshop Tues 2/23 (meeting link and login on Canvas)</b></li> <li>• <b>Spring Break Day Thurs 2/25</b></li> </ul>

### 3 Biodiversity and Native & Invasive species

Date	Content
Week 7 3/2 & 3/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Biodiversity</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Sahotra Sarkar "Biodiversity and Systematic Conservation Planning for the 21st Century"</li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Carlos Santana, "Biodiversity Eliminativism"</li> <li>• Midterm Exam due 3/5, no Journal Entry</li> </ul>
Week 8 3/9 & 3/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: In Praise of Invasives</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Fred Pearce, <i>The New Wild</i>, ch 6-8</li> </ul>
Week 9 3/16 & 3/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Against Invasives</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Tim Blackburn, Céline Bellard, and Anthony Ricciardi, "Alien Versus Native Species as Drivers of recent Extinctions"</li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> David Frank, "Disagreement or Denialism?"</li> <li>• Spring Break Day Wed 3/17</li> </ul>

### 4 Interventions

Week 10 3/23 & 3/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Rewilding, Assisted Migration, Novel Ecosystems</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Emma Marris, <i>Rambunctious Garden</i>, ch 4-5; 7-8</li> </ul>
Week 11 3/30 & 4/1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Designer Ecosystems and Geoengineering</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Christopher Preston (ed), <i>Climate Justice and Geoengineering</i>, selections</li> </ul>
Week 12 4/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Skills Building</b></li> <li>• Spring Break Day Tues, 4/6</li> <li>• No reading</li> <li>• Optional: Live Zoom workshop Thurs 4/8</li> </ul>

### 5 Human Dimensions of Conservation

Date	Content
Week 13 4/13 & 4/15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Indigenous Peoples</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Robin Wall Kimmerer, <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>, pp. 205-215</li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Kyle Whyte, "Way Beyond the Lifeboat"</li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Jeremy Waldron, "Superseding Historical Injustice"</li> </ul>
Week 14 4/20 & 4/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Public Participation in Conservation</b></li> <li>• <b>Read:</b> Aya Kimura and Abby Kinchy, <i>Science by the People</i>, ch 1-3</li> </ul>
Week 15 4/27 & 4/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Topic: Climate Grief</b></li> <li>• Glenn Albrecht, <i>Earth Emotions</i>, selections</li> <li>• Robert Mcfarlane, <i>Underland</i>, selections</li> </ul>
Week 16 5/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No reading</li> <li>• Optional: Live Zoom session</li> </ul>