

**RMES 501 – History and Philosophy of Environmental Thought
(aka Perspectives on Resources and the Environment)**

Fall, 2010

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This course will examine how attitudes towards human nature and non-human nature have changed over the period from Mesolithic times until the present in Western society. By reading and discussing historical arguments and contemporary documents we will attempt to uncover the underlying assumptions about the world that were characteristic of different periods in the history of Western culture. The underlying question is whether contemporary concerns about sustainability require fundamental changes in the way we conceive of ourselves or our environment.

Organization: Lecture Period: Tues, 9:00-11:00a, AERL, Room 120
Seminar Period: Thur, 9:00-11:00a, AERL, Room 419

The course will be divided into eleven sessions, starting on Sept 7. There will be no classes on the week of Sept 13 as I will be away. In the week of Oct 11, I will be away but the course will be led by Leila Harris, who will present a lecture on Islamic environmentalism. Leila will also lead the course in the final week.

Following a general introduction and lecture in the first week, succeeding weeks will be divided into two parts: a two hour lecture on Tuesdays, and two 60 minute seminar periods on Thursdays. Each student will take part in one of the two seminar periods. (See attached schedule for dates and topics.) The seminar period will begin with a presentation by one or more students, which will be followed by general discussion.

In each week, there will be a lecture and a set of required readings associated with that week's topic. The discussion of each topic will occur in the seminar periods two days after the lecture.

Description and Rationale:

This is a course about ideas and their effects. It is based upon the belief that if we are to solve environmental problems we must understand their roots - that is, we must understand the attitudes, behaviours and ways of thinking, which have given rise to these problems. To do this we must re-examine the ideas we have come to accept as conventional wisdom.

Over the past four decades, a great variety of organizations and individuals have examined the nature and magnitude of current environmental problems. The conclusions of these studies have differed on many particulars. But there has been broad agreement, even among representatives of usually conflicting positions, that environmental problems

are now global as well as local, that they are serious and getting worse, and that they cannot be solved without major changes in attitudes, behaviours and ways of thinking. More recently, the ambit of concern has been broadened to encompass social and economic factors under the same umbrella; this is the basic premise of the sustainability argument.

Some analysts have concluded that the necessary changes can be made through reforms without radically altering the fundamentals of modern ideology - the now predominant assumptions about the external world and how it works, and about human nature and social relationships. Others disagree. They hold that there is something *basically* wrong with how we have been treating the environment and each other, and that we must challenge the current conventional wisdom about the world and our place in it. Within this group there are differences of opinion about what is basically wrong and what challenges should be mounted, but such analysts share the view that the problems are fundamental.

This is not a merely academic debate. Virtually all choices about environmental goals, strategies and tactics turn, at least to some degree, on views about whether reforms or more radical changes to basic ideology are needed.

RMES 501 is devoted to examining this problem. It focuses on the rise of the ideas that underlie modern environmental attitudes and behaviour, what they replaced, and what effects they had. The set of beliefs upon which the course is based can be put in the form of six statements. Together they provide the rationale for the course.

- Powerful, but largely concealed and unexamined assumptions about human nature and 'external' nature guide the formation of world views, ideologies and beliefs.
- The basic assumptions involved here are not static; indeed they have changed significantly over time, usually through slow and subtle evolution but sometimes dramatically and radically.
- The development of modern science and technology, economics and industrialism, even education and institutions, has been guided by a more-or-less consistent set of assumptions which are qualitatively different from pre-modern ideas.
- A variety of philosophical, social, spiritual and political criticisms of the assumptions underlying modern industrial society have been made and continue to be repeated by thoughtful observers.
- In recent years, many thinkers have begun to argue that current environmental and sustainability problems pose a significant challenge to the attitudes, beliefs, values and practices characteristic of modern industrial society.
- It is therefore useful to examine these assumptions and the critiques made of them, in order (i) to determine to what extent current sustainability problems are rooted in the basic assumptions of industrial society, and (ii) to develop appropriate analyses, critiques and proposed solutions that do not simply treat the symptoms and thus perpetuate the diseases of modern society.

Readings:

All required readings are in book of readings available at the UBC Bookstore. For each week after the first, there are also suggested additional readings. These are listed in the book of readings. For each week, the book of readings will also contain discussion topics, in the form of several related questions. These questions will form the basis of the debates in the discussion period.

Many books could be recommended as overall supplements to the book of readings. Six that are particularly useful are:

- Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984);
 Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991);
 Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 1992);
 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1957); and
 Derek Wall, *Green History: A Reader in Environmental Literature, Philosophy and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1994).
 John S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth – Environmental Discourses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Assignments:

Students are required to submit a course journal, present a short paper in the seminar discussions, and submit a term paper. All assignments are to be submitted electronically, unless special arrangements are made otherwise (e.g. for the final paper). All students are also expected to participate actively in class discussions. We will divide into two or three seminar group on Sept 7.

Course journal assignment: Maintain a course journal with weekly entries for the first three topic-areas of the course (topics 1-3 in the course outline; unless you will be doing a short paper and presentation on any of these three topics, in which case you will skip the journal for that week and do one on topic 4). The course journal entry for a given week should summarize and evaluate one of the required readings for that week, and briefly address one of the questions and issues raised in the discussion questions for that week that are included in the book of readings. At the top of each journal entry, please put the weekly topic, your name, a full reference for the reading being discussed, and the question you have chosen to address. A separate title page is not necessary.

You should begin each entry with a short summary of the main arguments in the material being reviewed *as they bear on the discussion question you have chosen to discuss*, and follow this with an evaluation of those arguments. You should provide your views on the significance, strengths and weaknesses of the ideas and arguments involved with regard to the discussion question. Please submit these journal entries electronically.

Be concise. The weekly entries should rarely be more than one typed page long. The art of this assignment has to do with writing clearly and concisely about complex issues. The journal entries should be emailed in before the discussion period addressing that topic. That will be difficult for the first one, so it is due Sept 11. The others are due on the Wed of the week the topic is being discussed (so the second entry is due on Sept 15). They will be returned as soon as possible. Late submissions are subject to a penalty.

The top two marks assigned to your three journal entries will be counted. However, even if you are happy with the marks you get on the first two, you are required to submit a third entry.

Short paper and presentation: Each student will give a short presentation on one of the topics from week 2 to week 10. In support of that presentation, you will prepare a short (2-3 page) paper to circulate to your fellow students before your presentation. The paper, and the presentation, should address one or both of the discussion questions included in the list of readings for each week. Please use the paper to present your response to the question you have chosen, making whatever use of the required readings, or any other material that you feel is appropriate. The difference between this short paper and the journal entries is that this paper presents your own arguments, which you will also be giving in your presentation. Therefore, do not use the paper or presentation simply to summarize the readings. Students will choose their presentation/paper topic on Sept 9. The paper is to be emailed to the other members of the relevant seminar group *by 5:00p on the Tues before the seminar period in question*, and then presented in that seminar period. The presentation should take no more than 10 minutes and should summarize the main arguments made in the paper. This presentation, and the short paper on which it is based, will serve as the starting point for the subsequent discussion in the seminar period. All students are expected to have read each short paper from their discussion group, and come prepared to discuss it.

Term paper assignment: Prepare a short summary essay (maximum 10 double-spaced pages).

The paper should take your proposed thesis topic and respond to second of the session 11 discussion problems, with regard to that topic: Can current environmental problems be solved through more intelligent application of the conventional modern ideas about humans, the environment and proper relations between them, or are fundamental changes to prevailing basic assumptions and attitudes required?

The paper should **not** be a summary of the course materials. Nor is it a paper that simply describes the topic-area you have chosen for your thesis. It is your attempt to answer the basic question underlying the course—how big a change is required in society to address sustainability concerns—with regard to the subject-area you have chosen for your own thesis. It is thus an attempt to apply the kinds of thinking we have explored in the course to your own research area. (If you have not yet chosen a specific topic-area for your thesis, please pick a topic that is related to your research interests.)

Where appropriate, the paper should refer to the course materials. Feel free also to draw from other material. Please submit the paper electronically. It is due by 4:30p on Friday, Dec 3.

Tutorial participation: Each student is expected to read all the required readings for each week, and the relevant short paper, before the seminar period, and to participate actively in all seminar discussions.

Evaluation:

Course Journals	30% (15% each; top two)
Short paper and presentation	30%

Term paper

40%

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