

Environmental Philosophy (PHIL 3024)

Professor: Karen Kovaka

Winter/Spring 2019

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Course Description

This course has two goals. First, to introduce you to two central ideas in environmental philosophy. Second, to give you opportunities to engage with local environmental issues. We will accomplish the first goal by reading and discussing several books. The two central ideas we will learn about are:

1. The *wilderness ideal*, which says that the preservation of wilderness should be a top environmental priority.
2. The *precautionary principle*, which says that if an activity has the potential to harm human health or the environment, we should take precautions, even if we aren't sure the harm will actually come about.

Should we accept these ideas? Improve them? Replace them with alternatives? We will spend the semester trying to decide.

We will accomplish the second goal by going on two field trips that will let you get better acquainted with the New River Valley. We will also, as a class, research and write a report on the state of the environment in the New River Valley. This report will be the first of its kind. Once we have written it, we will make it available to the public so that other people can learn from it.

Evaluation

1. Reflection essays: 30%
2. Field trips: 20%
3. Contribution to a Report on Environmental Issues in the NRV: 45%
4. Assign-your-own reading: 5%

Reflection Essays

I will ask you to write two reflection essays. The first one should be brief (no more than 500 words) and will count for 10% of your grade. The second reflection essay will take the place of a final exam. It should be 1500-2000 words long and will account for 20% of your grade. The first essay is due on 1/30. The second essay is due on 5/14.

Field Trips

We will go on two field trips. Both are required, and each is worth 10% of your grade. If you can't make a field trip, I will give you an alternate assignment. The tentative dates for the field trips are Sunday, 3/24 and Saturday, 4/13. Both trips will take about half a day. Talk to me if you have any accessibility concerns—we can work to make any accommodations you need.

Report on Environmental Issues in the NRV

This will be a group project, but most of the work you do will be independent, and your final grade will reflect your individual work. Every class member will take responsibility for a given area of research (energy policy, wildlife, public lands, etc.). Everyone will also develop their personal contribution to the report in consultation with me. I will give you monthly deadlines with something specific (a research summary, an outline, a rough draft, and a final draft) due each month. You will also have a chance to present your work to the rest of the class. The grading scheme and deadlines for the project are as follows:

- Research plan: 10%. Due 2/4.
- Outline: 10%. Due 3/6.
- Rough draft: 10%. Due 4/10.
- Final draft: 10%. Due 5/8.
- Class presentation: 5%. Dates TBD.

Fine Print

- **Participation:** This is a participatory class. You will do a lot of talking and writing during our meetings together. This means that you need to come to class prepared to engage with everyone, not merely to listen to a lecture. Read the assigned chapters ahead of time. As you read, take your own notes and think of discussion questions. Bring the relevant texts with you to class. The level of engagement I am asking for is demanding, but in return, I won't overload you with overly long reading assignments.
- **Attendance:** I fully expect you to come to class unless illness or other personal circumstances prevent you. After three absences, I will start deducting points from your final grade for each additional absence. If you anticipate needing to miss more than

three classes, you and I need to talk 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/>

Texts

There are three required books for this course:

- *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- *Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle*, by Daniel Steel
- *Rethinking Wilderness*, by Mark Woods

Any other readings will be available on our Canvas site.

Reading Schedule

1 Introduction

Date	Content
Wed. 1/23	<i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> , pp. 310-340

2 The Wilderness Ideal

Date	Content
Mon. 1/28	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , Introduction and ch 1
Wed. 1/30	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 2
Mon. 2/4	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 3
Wed. 2/6	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 4
Mon. 2/11	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 5
Wed. 2/13	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 6
Mon. 2/18	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 7
Wed. 2/20	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 8
Mon. 2/25	<i>Rethinking Wilderness</i> , ch 9
Wed. 2/27	<i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> , selections

3 The Precautionary Principle

Date	Content
Mon. 3/4	<i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> , selections
Wed. 3/6	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 1
Mon. 3/18	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 2
Wed. 3/20	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 3
Mon. 3/25	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 4
Wed. 3/27	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 5
Mon. 4/1	Collaborative work session
Wed. 4/3	No class
Mon. 4/8	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 6
Wed. 4/10	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 7

Date	Content
Mon. 4/15	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 8
Wed. 4/17	<i>Philosophy and the Precautionary Principle</i> , ch 9
Mon. 4/22	<i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> , selections

4 Applications

Date	Content
Wed. 4/24	<i>Rambunctious Garden</i> , selections + student presentations
Mon. 4/29	<i>Rambunctious Garden</i> , selections + student presentations
Wed. 5/1	<i>Rambunctious Garden</i> , selections + student presentations
Mon. 5/6	<i>Rambunctious Garden</i> , selections + student presentations
Wed. 5/8	Review