Welcome to **Political Ecology** (Geography 3801, AU 2025)

Time and Place: In-person, Tuesday and Thursday 11:10AM - 12:30PM in Journalism 274
Instructors: Professor Becky Mansfield and Graduate Teaching Assistant Aeri Torrento
Carmen support: OSU Tech Support: https://ocio.osu.edu/help, 614-688-HELP (4357)

Click to jump to a section:

Contact information

You can contact us for many reasons, including:

- *you have questions* about course material, assignments, or grades or you need extra time on an assignment
- *you are having difficulties* that prevent you from engaging fully in the course, whether those are related to health (including mental health), work, family, or anything else, and you need to talk about accommodation
- *you are excited about course material* and want to learn more about it or learn about opportunities beyond the course, e.g., research, internships, careers, other courses

Contact Professor Becky Mansfield: Talk to me after class (12:30-1:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays) or arrange an in-person or zoom meeting for another time. My office is 1054 Derby Hall. Or send a message via Carmen (best) or by email: mansfield.32@osu.edu. I will get back to you within 24 hours on weekdays (but not at all over the weekend).

Contact Teaching Assistant Aeri Torrento: Talk to me: I am available Mon 1-2, Wed 11:30-12:30 or we can arrange an in-person or zoom meeting for another time. My office is 1048 Derby Hall. Or send a message via Carmen or by email: torrento.1@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Course description

Political ecology and sustainability

This course introduces you to core concepts, methods, and applications of **Political Ecology**, a unique approach to describing human-environment interactions, explaining socio-ecological problems, and offering pathways to environmental and social well-being. What makes Political Ecology "political" is that it insists that nature and society are always intertwined and shaped by power dynamics, defined broadly as unequal influence and advantage across social domains (e.g., governmental, economic, social, cultural), time (past and present), and spatial scales (micro to macro).

Political Ecology offers alternatives to dominant, mainstream approaches to environment and development. Because mainstream approaches are not fully attentive to multiple forms of power, they consistently misdiagnose causes of problems and propose solutions that are not only misguided but often exacerbate both ecological degradation and social problems. Political Ecology offers different ways of thinking about environmental change, governance, and both human and planetary health and well-being. These perspectives have only become more relevant and necessary with the recent widespread acknowledgement of anthropogenic global environmental change, often called the Anthropocene, in which the intertwining of humans and nature is inherent.

In short, Political Ecology as a field offers alternative perspectives on **sustainability**, and the course is part of the **Sustainability Theme of OSU's General Education curriculum**. Throughout the semester the course covers all six dimensions of sustainability as defined at OSU. The six dimensions are covered as follows:

- *Human and natural systems* is a core idea of the course, addressed in the emphasis on integration of nature and society with variation over space and time
- *Earth and environmental systems* are addressed through attention to the causes and consequences of human degradation of natural systems, with attention to natural processes especially in case studies.
- *Economy and governance* are core ideas of the course, addressed through the emphasis on political economy and socio-economic inequalities across scales
- *Society and culture* are core ideas of the course, addressed through the emphasis on power and on social differences
- *Engineering, technology, and design* are addressed through emphasis on technological knowledge in the politics of the environment and through emphasis on the visual/design as a mode of communication
- *Health and well-being* are addressed through the course emphasis on issues of pollution and environmental health

Because the field of Political Ecology engages all six dimensions, it is uniquely situated to provide multiple perspectives on sustainability in the past, present, and future.

Expected learning outcomes

1. Understand foundational theories and methods in Political Ecology (PE): define key PE concepts, describe how they are used as analytical lenses, and critically read academic scholarship in PE.
2. Understand the history of geographic thought in nature-society relations: describe ideas that led to emergence of PE in the 1970s and how PE differs from other approaches.
3. Apply PE theories and methods to analyze nature-society relations: identify and evaluate existing approaches in specific real-world issues and cases, including their ethical implications for humans and non-humans.
4. Apply PE theories and methods to analyze an issue of your own choosing: ask questions; gather, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize information; and communicate your findings in multiple formats.

See the end of the syllabus for the full set of OSU's Sustainability GE learning outcomes.

How course content is delivered

Much of the content is provided in each day's class, and attendance is required.

A typical day will combine a short lecture on basic concepts and background information with *graded* in-class activities focused on real-world situations. These case studies *illustrate* concepts and give you practice *applying* concepts.

Students have approximately one assignment per week to complete outside of class. Some of these involve reading (or viewing) assigned material—and for some of these there will be a written component of these assignments. There is also a semester project, which is a political ecology of a place; you will produce several products, each with a different due date.

The daily in-class activities often will be based on material from that week's assignments. At other times, new material will be provided during class for the activity, for example, an excerpt of a magazine article to read or a film clip to watch prior to the activity.

Most days will feature current events, whether in passing or as the substantive material for the day's activity.

There will be several guest speakers: graduate students in Geography sharing information based on their ongoing political ecology research.

Weekly schedule

Subject to change: follow what appears in Carmen

The items listed for each day are the assignments due BEFORE class.

Week 1 (Aug 26 and 28) Introduction to Political Ecology and Sustainability

This week introduces the course and the idea of Political Ecology: what it is and what makes it a unique approach to sustainability. We will also introduce ourselves.

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: read Robbins, "Political Ecology" Excerpt 1

Week 2 (Sept 2 and 4) Political Ecology of Environmental Degradation

This week covers key themes in political ecology, with a focus on different perspectives on causes of environmental degradation.

Tuesday: read Robbins, "Political Ecology" Excerpt 2

Thursday: no assignment

Week 3 (Sept 9 and 11) Semester Projects and a Case Study

Tuesday we will focus on your Semester Projects. Thursday there will be a guest speaker to talk about water contamination from PFAS chemicals in Parkersburg, West Virginia

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: Personal response to a visual political ecology example

Week 4 (Sept 16 and 18) Degradation: Marginalization, Colonialism, and Development

This week provides greater historical context, linking degradation to dynamics of inequality

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: Academic literature assignment 1

Week 5 (Sept 23 and 25) Political Ecology of (Sustainable) Development

This week provides a political ecology perspective on key themes in 20th century development, from modernization to sustainable development.

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: Project Assignment 1 (your place)

Week 6 (Sept 30 and Oct 2) Political Ecology of Global Environmental Discourses

This week extends the focus from the previous week on different perspectives on environment and development, including sustainable development

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: Current Events assignment 1

Week 7 (Oct 7 and 9) Political Ecology of Conservation and Control: Protected Areas
This week focuses on conservation strategies, with a specific focus on power relations in protected areas. A guest speaker (still unconfirmed) will update us on the protected area in India that is the focus of Thursday's film.

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: Watch *Suits and Savages* (film)

Week 8 (October 14 and 16) Semester Projects
This week focuses on the semester project. There is no class on Thursday.

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: AUTUMN BREAK, NO CLASS and no assignment

Week 9 (October 21 and 23) Market-Based Environmentalism
This week provides multiple perspectives on another popular conservation strategy: harnessing markets and the profit motive to environmental protection.

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: Project Assignment 2 (background research: information gathering)

Week 10 (Oct 28 and 30) Twenty-first Century Socionatures
Starting this week, the course focuses on pollution and toxic exposures. Because this is my specific area of expertise, it has been a theme throughout the semester. From here we dive in deeper, focusing on specific concepts and their application across multiple cases.

Tuesday: Watch *My Louisiana Love* (film)

Thursday: no assignment

Week 11 (Nov 4 and 6) Chemical (mis)information
This week describes and explains controversy over whether chemical exposures are harmful and, if they are, what to do about them.

Tuesday: Current Events assignment 2

Thursday: no assignment

Week 12 (Nov 11 and 13) Chemical knowledge: risk and uncertainty
This week dives deeper into controversy about pollution, focusing on the nature of regulatory science. There is no class Tuesday.

Tuesday: VETERAN'S DAY, NO CLASS and no assignment

Thursday: Project Assignment 3 (original research: generating new information)

Week 13 (Nov 18 and 20) Risk and uncertainty, continued

This week continues our focus on risk and uncertainty, focusing on the variety of ways that people are generating a wider range of perspectives on the problem of pollution. A guest speaker (still unconfirmed) will talk about oil and gas development in Ohio.

Tuesday: no assignment

Thursday: Academic literature assignment 2

Week 14 (Nov 25 and 27) Semester Projects

There is no class this week: use the time to work on the visual component of your project, which you will exhibit next week.

Tuesday: NO IN-PERSON CLASS: work on visual project, no assignment due

Thursday: THANKSGIVING, NO CLASS and no assignment

Week 15 (Dec 2 and 4) Visual Project Exhibit

Share your project with the rest of the class! Half the class will exhibit on Tuesday, the other half on Thursday

Tuesday: Project exhibit

Thursday: Project exhibit

Week 16 (Dec 9) Wrap-up

This is our final day of the course. We will use it to provide some synthesis: what have you learned?

Tuesday: Current Events assignment 3

Week 17 (Finals Week)

There is no final exam for this class. Instead, the final component of your project is due at the scheduled time if there were a final exam.

Monday, Dec 15 at noon: Project Assignment 5 (Reflection)

Course requirements

Required course materials

Course materials are available at no cost in Carmen. Specific readings (or films) will be provided with further directions through Carmen assignments and posted in weekly modules.

Assignment overview (see the Course Schedule for due dates)

Category	Item percent	Category percent
Attendance	<.5%	10%
Participation	*Not graded but can bump your final grade*	
Read/View assignments	*Not graded but in-class activities are based on them*	
In-class activities	1-2%	25%
Write-ups	4%	20%
Semester project		45%
Visual PE response	2%	
Topic (your place)	2%	
Background research	8%	
Original research	8%	
Visual product/exhibit	15%	
Written reflection	10%	

Attendance

Attendance is required, and I do take attendance every day. I won't count the first week and your two lowest scores after that will be dropped, regardless of the reason for which you miss or are late for class.

Participation

Participation is required: this is an interactive course. I do not assign a separate grade but use your performance to bump your grade if you are on the cusp of a higher grade at the end of the semester. For example, if you have 89.7 but were an active participant, you will get an A- instead of B+.

Read/view assignments

Some weeks I provide material for you to read or view outside of class but do not include a written assignment. *You will still be responsible for having completed these assignments, for example through closed-computer in-class activities*.

In-class activities

Most days there will be in-class activities that result in a written assignment, whether individual or group. (Days with or without graded activities are *not* announced ahead of time.) Whether based on material assigned outside of class (the read/view, academic article, and current event assignments) or additional material provided during class, these

are activities that allow you to reflect on and apply material from lecture and discussion. The precise percentage each is worth will depend on the final number across the semester, but the category will remain 25% of your total grade. **These CANNOT be made up if you miss a class, but your two lowest scores will be dropped. Plan ahead if you know you will be missing class for whatever reason!**

Write-ups (x5)

Write-ups are of two kinds. **Academic article write-ups** teach you to read and evaluate academic literature, improve your understanding of PE theories and methods, improve your understanding of the development of geographic thought, and prepare you for your project. The articles will be recent, topical, case-based political ecology articles by geographers. Each write-up is a couple of pages that do more than summarize: they must identify political ecology theories and methods and how they matter in the analysis and they must provide evaluation and personal reaction.

Current event write-ups evaluate your knowledge of course material, give you practice applying course material to real-world events, and prepare you for your project. You will be assigned to read recent news stories from reputable newspapers and magazines. Each write-up is a couple of pages that do more than summarize: you must identify how PE *is* applied and/or suggest how it *might be* applied and with what effect and you must provide evaluation and personal reaction.

Semester Project (divided over a 6-part assignment):

You will apply concepts and methods covered in the course to develop a political ecological account of a place that is meaningful to you. Examples might be the house, neighborhood, or town where you grew up, or a favorite place near where you live or one you have visited. The project will include both library/internet research to find existing knowledge and original research such as interviews or map analysis.

The project unfolds over the course of the semester, and we devote class time to it throughout the semester. The project culminates in a visual product of some sort (photo essay, map (or story map), TikTok, painting, game, zine, virtual fieldtrip, mini-documentary, etc.) that you will share in a class exhibit at the end of the semester. Pieces of the project include:

1. A response to one of several examples of a visual political ecology provided in class
2. A brief description and photo of the place you are choosing
3. A report providing background information drawn from existing sources
4. A report based on original research (e.g., interviews, site visits, map analysis, etc.)
5. A visual product that represents a key message about your place
6. A written reflection about the project, including what makes it political ecology

Grading

Attendance is graded on a 1-point scale. You will get one point for each day you are present and half point if you come late. Late is defined as after attendance has been taken.

In-class activities are graded on a 1-point scale. Full credit requires work that is good to excellent. Mediocre work earns half credit. Missing or off-target work earns a 0.

Other assignments are all graded on a 10-point scale, regardless of how they are weighted for your final grade.10=excellent; 8=good; 6=passable; 0=missing or completely misses the mark.

For all assignments, what is excellence? Simply following the directions and doing everything asked doesn't mean the work is excellent or earn you top grades! Excellent work goes beyond checking the boxes: it demonstrates deeper engagement with the material. This might appear as complexity of thinking, creativity, self-reflection, ability to make connections, etc.

Final grade scale (lower cut-off): 93=A, 90=A-, 87=B+, 83=B, 80=B-, 77=C+, 73=C, 70=C-, 67=D+, 55=D

Late policy for work completed outside of class

For work completed outside of class, I accept late assignments without question or penalty if turned in within a week of the due date. (Remember: there are no make-ups for in-class activities.) There are also **NO extensions** for the Project Visual Exhibit and Project Reflection.

I will not accept work that is more than one week late unless you have made special arrangements, which we put in writing. If you are having problems, contact me.

Academic integrity in this course

Individual assignments: you may discuss the assignment with other students in the class before writing your response, but you must do your own, unique write-up.

Semester project: you are encouraged to talk about your project with others throughout the semester and you can propose a collaboration (group project) for the visual component of the project, but you must do your own, unique written documents.

Use of AI: Consider AI to be like any other internet source: you cannot simply copy its work as if it is your own. You can use AI to generate ideas, pull thoughts together, check grammar, find sources, etc., but you must do your own, unique work. **Remember that course assignments are not designed to produce a product**. Nor are they only a means to communicate to me what you know. They are designed to help you learn more, including by reflecting on what you are learning and putting that in words. AI cannot learn or reflect for you (if AI does it, then you have neither learned nor reflected!).

I can call into question any assignment that appears to be AI-generated. For example, I might give you a 0 and give you the opportunity to demonstrate that you, not AI, know the material and wrote the assignment.

University syllabus statements

The University's "Standard Syllabus Statements" website contains university policy on the following items:

- Academic Misconduct
- Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity
- Religious Accommodations
- Disability Statement (with Accommodations for Illness)
- Intellectual Diversity
- Grievances and Solving Problems
- Creating an Environment Free from Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Misconduct

General Education: Sustainability

This course meets the goals and learning objectives of the **Sustainability Theme of the GE curriculum**:

1. Successful students will analyze sustainability at a more advanced and in-depth level than in the Foundations component.
   1.1 Engage in critical and logical thinking about the topic or idea of sustainability.
   1.2 Engage in an advanced, in-depth, scholarly exploration of the topic or idea of sustainability.

2. Successful students will integrate approaches to sustainability by making connections to out-of- classroom experiences with academic knowledge or across disciplines and/or to work they have done in previous classes and that they anticipate doing in future.
   2.1 Identify, describe and synthesize approaches or experiences as they apply to sustainability.
   2.2 Demonstrate a developing sense of self as a learner through reflection, self-assessment and creative work, building on prior experiences to respond to new and challenging contexts.

3. Successful students will analyze and explain how social and natural systems function, interact and evolve over time; how human well-being depends on these interactions; how actions have impacts on subsequent generations and societies globally; and how

human values, behaviors and institutions impact multifaceted potential solutions across time.

3.1 Describe elements of the fundamental dependence of humans on Earth and environmental systems, and on the resilience of these systems.

3.2 Describe, analyze and critique the roles and impacts of human activity and technology on both human society and the natural world, in the past, present and future.

3.3 Devise informed and meaningful responses to problems and arguments in the area of sustainability based on the interpretation of appropriate evidence and an explicit statement of values.

As reflected in the Course Description and Course Goals, political ecology is a unique and inherently synthetic approach to sustainability. It starts from the premise that nature and society are intertwined and it explicitly incorporates values of equality, justice, and an environmental ethic. You will be learning to describe and analyze these socionatural dynamics, and to understand how they function in the context of real socio-environmental problems.

The course content builds from your basic literacy across the GE foundations by teaching political ecology concepts and methods, and how they are different from other approaches. This teaches and requires advanced skills in critical thinking and interpretive analysis.

You will learn to apply these to understanding real-world situations in assignments, including a project on a place and topic that is meaningful to you for which you will produce both a visual and written product.

As noted in the Course Description, the course engages all six dimensions of Sustainability as defined at OSU.