

SOCI 509A (202): Sociology of the Environment
Brief Course Description (Full Syllabus to be distributed at first class)
January - April 2021 -- Mondays 2:00pm - 5:00pm.
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Context: A core concern of contemporary environmental sociology is climate change. Anthropogenic climate change is arguably the greatest crisis facing humanity in the early part of the 21st Century. There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that the average temperature on the earth's surface is increasing and that this increase is primarily a result of human activities. This average increase in worldwide earth surface temperature is leading to global climate change, which is manifested in various ways. While climate change is often seen as a "natural science issue", its ultimate causes, consequences, and potential remedies are largely social and political. Environmental sociology is well situated to provide an understanding of the social aspects of climate change and other environmental issues. Environmental sociologists have been very active in terms of publishing in top scientific journals on the topic, and becoming involved with international bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Climate change is one of several topics we will consider in this course.

While it has gained contemporary recognition (as noted above), environmental sociology is somewhat of a latecomer as a subarea of mainstream sociology. It got its institutional start in the late 1970s and early 1980s, though there are threads of relevant scholarship going back about a century or more (including to some nascent ideas of Marx). In North America, environmental sociology arose in the aftermath of a rise in concern about pollution, overpopulation, natural resource depletion, energy shortages, and other environmental problems, and relatedly, in the wake of the second wave of the environmental movement. Canada, historically (during the settler-colonial period at least), has largely had a "staples" economy, which has relied on industries such as forestry, fishing, mining, agriculture, and the production of fossil fuels. A significant amount of work done by environmental sociologists in Canada has focused on natural resources, including pioneering work by UBC sociologist Patricia Marchak. We will consider environmental sociology approaches on some these topics as well as others (such as aspects of the built environment).

Brief description: This course will provide an overview of key theoretical perspectives and concepts in environmental sociology, and will consider a variety of substantive topics such as climate change, natural resource communities, social movements and counter-movements, environmental justice, media coverage of environmental issues, Indigenous peoples and the environment, and gender and the environment. Some key theoretical perspectives to be covered include: the New Ecological Paradigm; political economy perspectives such as the Treadmill of Production, and Ecological Modernization; the social construction of environmental issues; social network perspectives relevant to environmental issues such as the role of networks in micromobilization in environmental movements, environmental policy networks, and social-ecological networks; approaches to studying environmental values (such as Values-Beliefs-Norms Theory) and employment of the NEP scale. We may also consider select methodological issues relevant to studying environmental topics.

Key concepts to be considered may include: "sustainability", "environmental justice", "disproportionality", anthropocentrism/biocentrism", "wilderness", "growth/limits to growth", "carrying capacity", "ecological footprint", sense of place, and "normal accidents", metabolic rift, risk society, amongst others.

Format: The class will be delivered online and a course Canvas site will be developed. There will be a mix of instructor and student presentations, class discussion, some videos, and some guest lectures.

Evaluation: Evaluation for the course will be based on a term paper (including a short proposal), student literature review presentations, student research project presentations, and general participation. For the term paper, student will have a choice from amongst the three types of formats: 1) a journal article style paper, 2) a thesis proposal style paper, 3) a literature review paper.