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NRSM 570.03: Political Ecology

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Political Ecology

Course Syllabus

NRSM 570 – Fall 2021

3 credits, CRN# 75898

Tuesday/Thursday 8:00-9:20am

Forestry Building (FOR) #206

Zoom: <https://umontana.zoom.us/j/96165561552>

Passcode: 675261

Instructor Info

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Office Hours: *dynamic and by appointment* at <https://brianchaffin.youcanbook.me/>

Course Description

Political ecology is a field of study for understanding social and environmental change, both problems and solutions. The introduction to a recently edited volume on political ecology (Perreault et al., 2015, 7-8) states that political ecology is distinguished from other “social-environmental” approaches by three key commitments. The first is to a *theoretical* commitment to critical social theory and a post-positivist understanding of nature and the production of knowledge about it, which views these as inseparable from social relations of power. The second is to a *methodological* commitment to in-depth understandings entailing both constructivist and material dimensions of reality, and as such, to using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods in place-based, historically situated analyses to reveal connected social-ecological dynamics and bottoms up considerations of broader, systemic social and environmental forces. And third, to a *political* commitment to social justice and structural political transformation (i.e., change of economic, political and institutional systems) to better support historically marginalized peoples and places.

While seeking to understand (let alone change!) the many forces operating in and on a social-ecological system is a daunting task, it is particularly challenging to do so through being attuned to the intersecting ways power and politics operate and influence material and ideational dimensions of the environment. It can be particularly difficult for those new to social science theory, especially to political economy of development/agrarian change and Marxian theory that are foundational to political ecology. This task is further confounded by the dynamic and increasingly vast sea of topics political ecologists have turned their attention to in recent years. For example, while early political ecologists tended to work in the “developing” world documenting the struggles, interests and plights of marginalized populations and places (typically against predatory colonial and independent states and elites), there has been a measured increase in political ecology research in and on industrialized countries in the global north and to new and different sets of actors, structures, policies and world events influencing the politics of socio-environmental change around the world.

Please recognize that NRSM 570 has not been organized to provide a comprehensive survey of social theories in environmental and natural resource social science, rather it focuses on those associated with the field of political ecology. Furthermore, it is impossible to provide comprehensive coverage of the field of political ecology in this one semester-long seminar. Thus, in this class, we will review the origins of

the field, some central approaches in the political ecology “tool box,” and examples of how political ecologists approach a few key environmental topics that I at least find interesting (i.e. water, climate change, social-ecological change in the American West, etc.). The course also offers an opportunity for you to explore other social-ecological topics of your choosing through a political ecology lens. A major objective of this class is for you to become sufficiently familiar with the field and its tools so that you can effectively use them to critically examine social and environmental subjects, including transitions and practical challenges—and hopefully those related to your own graduate thesis or dissertation.

Course Goal, Objectives, Learning Outcomes, and Evaluation Methods

The broad goal of this course is to *engage graduate students in the foundations and practice political ecology, which includes a review of the history, theory, and development of the field.* We will accomplish this through the following:

Course Objectives	Evaluation Methods
Students will explore the history, evolution, and contemporary concerns of political ecology.	1. In-class discussions 2. Leading a class discussion 3. Midterm & final paper assignments
Students will clearly communicate how social-ecological systems and their transitions, challenges, problems and potential solutions are explained within the political ecology approach.	1. In-class discussions 2. Literature review 3. Midterm & final paper assignments
Students will evaluate specific tools, approaches, and major concepts used by political ecologists in both international and U.S. contexts.	1. In-class discussions 2. Midterm & final paper assignments
Together with the instructor and various class visitors, students will explore and define what it means to be a “political ecologist” today from multiple perspectives including that of research, management, and scholar-activism.	1. In-class discussions 2. Leading a class discussion 3. Midterm & final paper assignments
Students will build critical analytic skills through in-depth application of the political ecology framework to a particular topic, ideally one related to your own thesis or dissertation research.	1. Midterm & final paper assignments

Course Structure and Required Text

This course will involve lecture, discussions, and a written final paper with progressive assignments that lead up to this deliverable. A *course schedule* of assigned readings, assignment due dates, and in-class activities will be posted on the Moodle course website and updated periodically as the course progresses.

Required Text

I will provide you with PDFs of all the texts you will need for this course, but the following texts might be helpful during this course and beyond:

- Cleaver, F. 2012. *Development Through Bricolage: Rethinking Institutions for Natural Resource Management*. London and NY: Routledge.
- McMichael, P. 2021. *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective*. 7th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. (**any of the last several editions would work)

All other readings will be available on the Moodle as PDFs at least one week prior to the class period on which they are assigned.

Reading for this Course

Reading and synthesizing peer-reviewed and other academic and technical literature is a critical requirement of any graduate-level course. Each week I expect you to read and be prepared to discuss the equivalent of 4-8 peer-reviewed articles or anywhere between 20k and 60k words. This is not out of the ordinary for a graduate-level course. However, this amount of reading can be onerous and intimidating given what is required of you in your other courses and to progress in your research. Plan ahead, read strategically, and learn techniques for assessing sources quickly and effectively.

Student and Instructor Expectations

Participation

Class discussion is an essential aspect of this course. NRSM 570 is a graduate seminar, which means that students are responsible for contributing to the content of the course through engaged participation, leading some discussions, independent research, and presentations thereof. The success of the course depends on a collective dialogue about the meaning and implications of the course material and beyond. Enrollment in this course is small and there is a significant amount of material to cover in order to gain a broad understanding of foundational concepts, tools, and research approaches in political ecology. Discussion and learning from each other is a critical tool for collective synthesis of the complex and often difficult topics we engage in this class. Thus, I expect all students to *read the reading assignments prior to class and to also be prepared to discuss the readings* each day in class. We will all get out what we put in to group discussions. Thus, please think of your preparation for class and participation during class as showing respect to your fellow students and to me.

Any student who misses class will be held responsible for all materials covered and all announcements made during their absence. The UM “Class Attendance/Absence Policy” can be found in the [UM Catalog Academic Policies and Procedures](https://catalog.umt.edu/academics/policies-procedures) (<https://catalog.umt.edu/academics/policies-procedures>).

Respect, Inclusiveness and Diversity of Thoughts, Ideas and People

In teaching courses, I believe and act upon the idea that all students are entitled to and deserve respect, courtesy and tolerance, regardless of their race, ethnicity, background, religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, disability or any other perceived difference. Likewise, faculty, staff and fellow students deserve the same treatment from other students. Therefore, within the bounds of my courses and professional responsibilities as a university instructor, I make every effort to promote and create a safe space for diverse thoughts, regardless of the form of communication. I ask that you do the same. Given the amount of discussion expected in this course, showing respect for others is paramount and is taken very seriously. We will strive towards an engaging, respectful, open forum in which numerous opinions related to the course material can be discussed and explored.

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism

All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the [Student Conduct Code](http://www.umt.edu/student-affairs/community-standards/default.php) (<http://www.umt.edu/student-affairs/community-standards/default.php>).

I will not tolerate plagiarism in any form. Students need to be familiar with plagiarism and how to properly cite references and attribute the ideas of others to original sources in their work. More information on plagiarism can be found in the [UM Catalog Academic Policies and Procedures](https://catalog.umt.edu/academics/policies-procedures) (<https://catalog.umt.edu/academics/policies-procedures>).

Equal Access

The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and the Office for Disability Equity (ODE). If you anticipate or experience barriers based on disability, please contact ODE by phone at (406) 243-2243, by email at ode@umontana.edu, or visit the [Office of Disability Equity](https://www.umt.edu/disability/) (<https://www.umt.edu/disability/>) online for more information. Retroactive accommodation requests will not be honored, so please, do not delay. As your instructor, I will work with you and ODE to implement an effective accommodation, and you are welcome to contact me privately if you wish to ask questions and discuss.

Assignments and Assessment

Attendance, Participation, and In-class/Pre-class Assignments (20%)

I expect that you come to class **on time**, be prepared to discuss the assigned readings for the day, and participate fully in class activities. If you will miss a class, please email me at least 2 days in advance; prior notification would be appreciated if possible. I am flexible if you have extenuating circumstances or emergencies; please be open and communicative with me about your attendance. I reserve the right to subtract a maximum of 1 point (out of 20 total for attendance and participation, see below) per class missed—this will apply to cases where you do not show up for class, you do not communicate with me about your absence prior to class, and/or your absence is not a university excused absence (see above) or essential to pursuing your graduate work (e.g., research or conference presentation). Some weeks, I will ask you to participate in brief in-class writing assignments or preparations prior to class in addition to the assigned readings for that week. I will use these mini-assignments to structure our class discussions that week with an emphasis on clarifying difficult concepts and expanding your theoretical and practical understanding of the material. I will communicate the details of these assignments as applicable.

Leading a Class Discussion (10%)

During the semester, you will each lead one class discussion about a major topic area on the course schedule. The purpose of preparing for and leading a class discussion is for each student to participate in illuminating key concepts and analyses in assigned readings, and facilitate class interaction suitable to a graduate seminar. The requirements for leading a class discussion are threefold:

1. Choose one additional reading (a reading not required by me in the course reading schedule) for addition to our suggested reading list for that topic area. This reading should be emailed to me at least one week (7 days) prior to your scheduled in-class discussion so that I can post it on Moodle and the class has a chance to review it. This reading should either be a peer-reviewed article, a book chapter, or a technical document (NGO or agency publication) of similar content or depth. See the extensive reference lists from the organizations listed at the end of this syllabus under “additional resources.”
2. Prepare a “reading response” for the **assigned readings** which you will email to myself and the class at least 24-hours prior to the day you are assigned to lead class discussion. The reading response should be 1-2 pages single spaced and include the following: (1) complete citation for each assigned reading; (2) a summary of the major points of each reading including identification of key theories and terms referred to in the reading (see *background* readings I post on Moodle for reference or feel free to do additional reading); (3) an analysis of each assigned reading’s insights into and contributions to theoretical, methodological or political debates in political ecology; and (4) raise at least three further questions. Questions can address tensions or contradictions in the readings and applications, raise alternative interpretations, or indicate gaps or missing pieces in the arguments.

3. Develop a brief introductory presentation for the class (PPT not required, but perfectly acceptable) on the topic and be prepared to lead discussion that day through probing questions and/or other techniques to generate and further discussion. At a minimum, I would like you to discuss the elements of your reading response outlined above.

Abstract and Literature Review Assignment (10%)

It is critical that you identify a specific topic (or question) to address in your midterm and final paper early on in this course—this assignment forces you to do that. The topic or question you choose should be relatively specific and well-defined, and related to environmental change, conservation, or natural resource management internationally or in the U.S. The topic may address a theoretical or methodological issue or a topic applied to a particular case study. You are encouraged to select a topic that relates to your thesis or professional paper. You must, however, examine the topic through the lens of political ecology (even if that is not the theoretical focus for your thesis work). All midterm and final papers must involve a rigorous engagement with political ecology. Please remember that your work for this class must be new and original (i.e., you cannot turn in a chapter you have already written for your thesis or a paper written for another course but you can revise and rethink the topic in light of political ecology).

For this assignment, identify the topic that you will use for your midterm and final project. Include a preliminary title, a 1-2 paragraph description of the major topic or question you will examine, a few lines on why this topic is important, and at least 5 references relevant to the topic *beyond* those listed in the course schedule. Please do not change topics after your abstract has been submitted—to avoid this, please meet with me prior to this assignment if you are unsure about your topic choice.

Midterm Writing Assignment (20%)

The midterm is a writing assignment designed as a first step to help you think about how to address your topic through a political ecology approach. I will provide detailed instructions on how to complete the midterm at least four weeks before it is due.

Presentation of Final Paper (10%)

Each student is required to present their final paper research and writing to the class. Presentations offer students the opportunity to engage the class in their topic prior to finalizing their paper. Students should provide the class with a brief reading and/or background information prior to the presentation (one week preferred lead time). During the second or third week of class, students will sign up for presentation dates. You will have 15 minutes to present your work—no more. Presentations will be followed by 5-minutes of seminar-like critical questions and discussion with myself and the class. Presentations will be evaluated based on your ability to effectively convey key details of the topic, aspects of political ecology involved, application of theory, original analysis, and conclusions.

Final Paper (30%)

The goal of the final paper (and assignments leading up to it) is for you to use and apply political ecology concepts and approaches. You will likely build off your midterm but provide a much more detailed literature review and analysis. If you are new to your graduate program, my suggestion is to treat the final paper as a critical literature review on a particular topic. If you are further along in your project (e.g., you have data or have extensively reviewed the project/topic), you can offer specific findings or conclusions from a political ecological perspective. If you are trying to make a compelling case for a particular interpretation or analysis, you'll need to provide evidence or illustration with data, history, examples, facts and figures, quotations, etc., or if no empirical data is available, through some other type of analysis and argument. **Whatever format, the paper should clearly demonstrate a political ecological approach to your topic.**

Final papers should be ~10 pages double-spaced (not including references), 11- or 12-point font, and properly referenced (any social science style e.g., APA or Chicago is acceptable as long as you follow it consistently). You must use in-text citations (last name of the author and the year, include page number if using a direct quotation) as well as place your references list at the end. Papers will be evaluated on their depth of understanding and application of political ecology approach and concepts, compelling analysis and insightfulness of applying political ecology to the topic, and overall quality of organization and writing. Grammar and presentation will be assessed. Please visit the [UM Writing and Public Speaking Center](https://www.umt.edu/writing-center/default.php) (https://www.umt.edu/writing-center/default.php) for assistance with this aspect of your paper.

Grading

This course is graded on the traditional A – F letter grade scale only, it is not offered under the credit/no credit option. Upon completion of the course, your points earned on assignments will be expressed as a percentage of total points possible in the course and translated into a letter grade as follows:

<i>Grading scale</i>	<i>Points available</i>
A 93-100%	Attendance and participation: 20 points
A- 90-92%	Leading a class: 10 points
B+ 88-89%	Abstract and literature review: 10 points
B 83-87%	Midterm writing assignment: 20 points
B- 80-82%	Final paper presentation: 10 points
C+ 78-79%	Final paper: 30 points
C 73-77%	
C- 70-72%	Course Total = 100 points
D+ 68-69%	
D 63-67%	
D- 60-62%	
F 59% and below	

Course Topics and Readings

See course schedule on Moodle for complete list of topics and assigned readings.

Additional Political Ecology Resources

- [POLLEN Political Ecology Network](https://politicalecologynetwork.org/) (https://politicalecologynetwork.org/). One of the best resources. Follow the network on Twitter or via Email; they have an informative newsletter.
- [University of Kentucky Political ecology Working Group](https://uky.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/pewg) (https://uky.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/pewg). This group hosts a conference every year called “Dimensions of Political Ecology” or DOPE. This is a particularly good venue for graduate students to present political ecology research.
- [The Center for Political Ecology](https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-groups/political-ecology) (https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-groups/political-ecology).
- [Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group \(CAPE\) of the American Association of Geographers \(AAG\)](http://community.aag.org/communities/community-home?CommunityKey=eb20d371-c8c5-468e-8fe3-ff8a7ab89640) (http://community.aag.org/communities/community-home?CommunityKey=eb20d371-c8c5-468e-8fe3-ff8a7ab89640).
- [Journal of Political Ecology \(JPE\)](https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/JPE) Case Studies in History and Society (https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/JPE). Open access political ecology journal.