

# Human Dimensions of the Environment

## | EVPP 336

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**Instructor:** Asst. Prof. Karen Akerlof  
**Email:** kakerlof@gmu.edu

**Class Schedule:** Tuesdays, 4:30-7:10 pm

**Location:** Enterprise Hall 274

**Office Hours:** Fridays, 10 am-noon,  
David King 3032 or upon appointment

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*Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.*

— Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

### Course description and objectives

In this class, we will take the stance of Leopold’s “doctor.” We will diagnose the environmental challenges that we face on a global scale, and locally, on our own campus and in our communities. In order to understand the causes and nature of the damage, we will take a historical perspective of how humans have interacted with their environments over time, and how they are likely to do so in the future. The path of human history is inextricably interwoven with that of Earth’s ecosystems. The abundance of natural resources has fueled the rise of human societies and, when these stores declined, sometimes led to the rapid demise of civilizations. But human ingenuity and social organization factor into these outcomes as well, increasing the complexity of the diagnostic task before us. As difficult as it is academically to answer the question “what makes certain societies more environmentally sustainable than others?,” it is of enormous practical import to do so. Only through better management of the social dimension of socio-environmental systems will we find opportunities for sustainable solutions.

During (~) the first half of the semester we will explore the arc of socio-environmental systems over time using Prof. Yuval Noah Harari’s book *Sapiens* as a guide. The second half of the semester we will read articles and book chapters in investigating present-day social dynamics: environmentalism, population, collective action, and social justice. We will learn about specific topics—such as food, energy, water, waste, and climate—through

three short projects each student will complete during the course and present to the class. Finally, will also have a class field trip to a local park (extra credit) to sharpen our laymen's eyesight by learning to detect the many ways in which human impacts manifest on landscapes, even in ostensibly "natural" areas.

### **Assignments and grading**

You will have five types of assignments: 1) a short blog detailing your experiences during one hour of media use (Internet, television, video games) versus one hour spent outside in relatively natural area; 2) a brief written description of your assigned character's perspective of a historical societal "collapse" and participation in a class panel with others from your society; 3) contribution of an example of human-environment interactions from a period in history for our class online timeline; 4) submission to the class online map of an example of human-environment interactions on George Mason University's Fairfax campus and ideas for new approaches; and 5) an environmental policy memo diagnosing a problem and potential solutions. These assignments will constitute your grade for the term. You will be given a rubric prior to each assignment that details all required components and their associated point value.

#### *Blog on your experiences of information from mediated vs. natural environments*

After reading chapters from Bill McKibben's book on the age of missing information, you will write a minimum of a paragraph each on the information you receive from (1) one hour of time spent in a mediated environment (television, computer games, social media, other online sources) and (2) one hour in a relatively natural setting with no forms of anthropogenic audio-visual information (aka, no music on head phones or Youtube on your phone). The blogs will be posted on the class website.

#### *Experiencing a societal collapse: Your character's perspective*

What was it like to see the last tree die on Easter Island? Would you notice if your society's way of life was out of sync with its environment? If so, how would you feel and who—or what—would you blame? You will write a paragraph as a character from one of four societies described in Jared Diamond's *Collapse*. In class, you will participate in a panel describing what life was like for your character and answer questions (in character) from your classmates.

#### *Class historical timeline of human-environment interactions*

During our reading of *Sapiens*, you will be assigned the creation of a timeline entry for one of the four broad historical periods of the book. In that timeline entry, you will describe an example of human-environment interactions that occurred during the period and its environmental and social implications. All information for the timeline entry must be appropriately cited. Your entry will be posted online on the class timeline.

### *Mapping human-environment interactions on Mason's Fairfax campus*

As a class, we will create an online map of how and where Mason students, faculty, and staff interact with their environment—both the things that we can see (recycling and waste) and aspects that can be less visibly apparent (air and water pollution). You will identify a place on Mason's Fairfax campus where people have a direct, or indirect, interaction with their environment. The interaction can either be positive—with benefits to people and healthy ecosystems—or negative, e.g. harmful in some way. An example of a positive interaction might be the campus honey bee initiative. An example with negative environmental implications might be food waste. In a short summary, you will identify the social reasons the interaction occurs and the environmental consequences. If the interaction causes harm to people and our ecosystems, you will also note whether Mason is currently taking steps to address it and what solutions might entail at the campus level. All information for the map must be appropriately cited. During the class period in which the map entry is due, you will walk your classmates to the location where the interaction occurs and present your findings.

### *Writing an environmental policy memo*

During the second class, you will hear from Alex Robbins, a staff member for Rep. Gerry Connolly. Connolly represents the university's district in the U.S. House of Representatives. Robbins also serves as an environmental advisor to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. He will describe policy areas of concern that the class will use as the topics for its memos. The memos will outline the environmental problem and potential solutions. As a class, we will summarize the memos and deliver them to Robbins.

### **Grade distribution overview**



1	Blog on information from mediated vs. natural sources	15%
2	<i>Collapse</i> paragraph and panel participation	15%
3	Timeline entry	20%
4	Entry for the map of Mason's human-environment interactions	20%
5	Environmental policy memo	30%
*	<i>[Extra credit] Field trip</i>	5%

### **Grades**

Your final letter grade will be assessed based on the total points you have accumulated through completing the assignments. Grades will not be curved.

A	93-100	A-	90-92	B+	87-89
B	83-86	B-	80-82	C+	77-79
C	70-76	D	60-69	F	59 or less

## Course Schedule (subject to change)

Week	Date	Topics	Readings & Assignments
Week 1	Aug. 27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• Course overview</li> </ul> <p> <i>Speaker: Sarah D'Alexander, Sustainability Program Manager – Patriot Green Fund, George Mason University's Office of Sustainability</i></p>	<p><b>** Due by Aug. 25: Survey on your course goals and interests, and availability for (extra credit) weekend field trips, click link <a href="#">HERE</a>.</b></p> <p><i>In class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form teams for developing a timeline of human dimensions of the environment</li> <li>• Conduct panel selection for past societies that “collapsed”</li> <li>• Select a presentation date for your addition to a George Mason University map of our campus’s human dimensions of the environment</li> </ul>
Week 2	Sept. 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The age of missing information</li> <li>• Ideas of nature</li> </ul> <p> <i>Speaker: Alex Robbins, Outreach Representative, U.S. Congress Rep. Gerry Connolly, Environmental Quality</i></p>	<p><b>** Due: “2 hours of information” blog post</b></p> <p>McKibben, B. (1992). <i>The age of missing information</i> (1st ed.). New York: Random House.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— 7:00 am</li> <li>— Daybreak</li> </ul> <p><i>Continued ...</i></p>

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*Advisory Council, Fairfax County  
Board of Supervisors*

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Review: Rep. Connolly's positions on energy and the environment at <https://connolly.house.gov/issues/issue/?IssueID=14895>

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- Week 3    Sept. 10
- **Human-environment interactions over time**
  - **Time-travel panel report on participants' experiences of "collapsed" societies**
    - (Panel 1) *Easter Island*
    - (Panel 2) *The Anasazi*
    - (Panel 3) *Maya*
    - (Panel 4) *Norse Greenland*

**\*\* Due: Short essay on your character's perspective of societal collapse (submit on Blackboard before class starts); in-class panel participation**

Diamond, J. M. (2005). *Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed*. New York: Viking.

- (Panel 1) Chpt. 2: Twilight at Easter
- (Panel 2) Chpt. 4: The ancient ones: The Anasazi and their neighbors
- (Panel 3) Chpt. 5: The Maya collapses
- (Panel 4) Chpt. 8: Norse Greenland's end

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- Week 4    Sept. 17
- **Cognitive revolution**

**\*\* Due: Team 1 cognitive revolution timeline additions**

Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Toronto, Ontario: Signal.

- Part One; Chpts. 1-4

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- Week 5    Sept. 24
- **Agricultural revolution**

**\*\* Due: Team 2 agricultural revolution timeline additions**

Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Toronto, Ontario: Signal.

- Part Two; Chpts. 2-8
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Week 6    Oct. 1    •    **Unification of mankind**

**\*\* Due: Team 3 mankind's unification timeline additions**

Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Toronto, Ontario: Signal.  
— Part Three; Chpts. 9-13

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Week 7    Oct. 8    •    **Scientific revolution**

**\*\* Due: Team 4 scientific revolution timeline additions**

Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Toronto, Ontario: Signal.  
— Part Four; Chpts. 14-20

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Week 8    Oct. 15

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Week 9    Oct. 22    •    **Environmentalism**

**\*\* Due: Group A campus map additions**

Rootes, C. (2007). Environmental movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (pp. 608–640). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

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Week 10    Oct. 29    •    **Population**

**\*\* Due: Group B campus map additions**

Cafaro, P. (2012). Climate ethics and population policy. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 3(1), 45–61.  
Ehrlich, P. R., & Holdren, J. P. (1971). Impact of population growth. *Science*, 171(3977), 1212–1217.

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Week 11	Nov. 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public goods and collective action</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>** Due: Group C campus map additions</b></p> <p>Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. <i>Science</i>, 162(3859), 1243–1248.</p> <p>Ostrom, E., Burger, J., Field, C. B., Norgaard, R. B., &amp; Policansky, D. (1999). Revisiting the commons: Local lessons, global challenges. <i>Science</i>, 284(5412), 278–282.</p>
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Week 12	Nov. 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Values and social justice</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>** Due: Group D campus map additions</b></p> <p>Bullard, R. D. (1990). Environmentalism and social justice. In <i>Dumping in Dixie: Race, class, and environmental quality</i>. Boulder: Westview Press.</p> <p>Dietz, T., Fitzgerald, A., &amp; Shwom, R. (2005). Environmental values. <i>Annual Review of Environment and Resources</i>, 30(1), 335–372.</p>
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Week 13	Nov. 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Student memo presentations &amp; summaries</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>** Due: Policy memos</b></p>
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Week 14	Nov. 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Student memo presentations &amp; summaries</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>** Due: Policy memos</b></p>
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Week 15	Dec. 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Discussion of the final campus map of human</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>** Your only assignment is to respond to questions about the final campus map on the course discussion board</b></p> <p><i>Continued ...</i></p>

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**dimensions of  
our  
environment  
with Sarah**



**D'Alexander, George Mason  
University's Office of  
Sustainability**

- **Discussion of the policy memo summaries delivered to Alex Robbins**
- **Documentary movie, National Geographic "Collapse"**



### **Possible syllabus changes**

As the instructor, I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus. Students will be given ample notice regarding any major changes to the course plan.

### **Late assignments**

Assignments turned in late will be penalized by deducting 5% from the total points for each day it is late. Assignments will no longer be accepted after 3 days past the due date.

### **General**

This course adheres to all university policies described in the academic catalog. Please pay close attention to the following policies:

- **Students with disabilities**

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at (703) 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

- **Academic integrity: Mason's Honor Code**

At George Mason University, Academic Integrity is demonstrated in our work, community, the classroom and research. We maintain this commitment to high academic standards through Mason's Honor Code. It is an agreement made by all members of our community to not "cheat, steal, plagiarize, or lie in matters related to your academic work." Students sign an agreement to adhere to the Honor Code on their application for admission to Mason and are responsible for being aware of the [most current version of the code](#).

- **Dropping the course**

You are responsible for understanding the university's policies and procedures regarding withdrawing from courses found in the current catalog. You should be aware of the current deadlines according to the [Academic Calendar](#).

- **Email**

All course information will be sent to your George Mason University email account, including changes to the class schedule due to weather conditions.

- **Notice of mandatory reporting of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking**

As a faculty member, I am designated as a "Responsible Employee," and must report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking to Mason's Title IX Coordinator per University Policy 1202. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason's confidential resources,

such as Student Support and Advocacy Center (SSAC) at 703-380-1434 or Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 703-993-2380. You may also seek assistance from Mason's Title IX Coordinator by calling 703-993-8730, or emailing [titleix@gmu.edu](mailto:titleix@gmu.edu).