

## **COURSE OUTLINE: Political Ecology**

Lecturers: Dr Adrian Nel

### **1. OVERVIEW OF THE MODULE CONTENT**

This module adds a dedicated Political Ecology focus to themes touched on, but underdeveloped in Geog 110 and 220. Forms of political, economic and social geography often have an implicit centring on the utility of natural resources to humans, and by contrast the proposed module considers non-human actors (such as rivers, forests, ecosystems) as active participants in the production of our varied socio-ecological infrastructure. In this light it provides a useful bridge to courses in physical geography, in ways that emphasise the politics of socio-ecological change.

This course introduces students to the study of political ecology and its usefulness in understanding the geography of human-environment relations, particularly in Southern Africa. Political ecologists focus on the political, social, cultural and economic sources, conditions and ramifications of environmental change and interaction.

The following content and concepts are covered, with concrete historical-geographical examples used as examples and illustrations throughout: Concepts of Social Nature and the Production of Nature – where students will come to understand how the social and physical world interact; Political Ecology Theory, which offers insights into the processes through which particular environmental conditions come about and are changed; The political ecology of conservation and forestry in Southern Africa as concrete examples for understanding how key actors shape environmental activities and their spatial configurations and outcomes; Conservation and Control – where students will come to understand critically the entanglements of social and natural conditions under contemporary conservation regimes; environmental conflict, environmental justice and liberation ecologies – where students will engage theoretical concepts underpinning various forms of resistance and environmental conflict; Indigenous, feminist political and more-than-human political ecology – to displace western, patriarchal and anthropocentric understandings and interpretations of environments and provide a space for conceptualising alternatives; Advances/conflicts in political ecology theory – where students will consider the scope of current political ecology and the ways in which its boundaries are pushed and challenged

Although these concepts and themes can be applied globally, this course will focus predominantly on **South Africa as a spatial context**. Africa is the continent in which we live and work, a unique place with diversity of history, resources and experiences and with a serious need for the resolution of numerous problems and we therefore will pay attention to contextual examples from South Africa as we cover the themes of the module.

## 2. KEY RESOURCES

### Textbooks:

Three short books form the key textbooks for this course and the students are expected to have read these during the duration of the module. They are available on moodle.

1. Robins, P. (2011). *Political Ecology – A Critical Introduction*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
2. Cock, J. (2007). *The War Against Ourselves: Nature, Power and Justice*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press
3. Extra - Beinart, W, and Coates, P (1995) *Environment and History: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa*. New York: Routledge.

### Supplementary reading:

The following non-compulsory supplementary resources have also been uploaded to moodle for the brave who wish to delve further into the topics introduced in this course, for use in assignments, and for reference in the participant's future studies and research.

1. Gregory, D., Johnston, R., Pratt, G., Watts, M., & Whatmore, S. (Eds.). (2011). *The dictionary of human geography*. John Wiley & Sons – This is a key reference text for all Human Geography courses, and will help to clarify terms and concepts you may be having trouble with.
2. Perreault, T., Bridge, G., & McCarthy, J. (Eds.). (2015). *The Routledge handbook of political ecology*. Routledge.
3. Extra readings: A number of extra reference readings are suggested for each week. The references can be found on the 'Extra readings' document uploaded to moodle, and the articles themselves can be found online or on request.

### Key Journals:

The following journals include articles and special issues relevant to this course, and can be browsed for further information:

Journal of Political Ecology  
Conservation and Society  
Antipode  
Environment and Planning (A, C and D)  
Capitalism, Nature, Socialism  
Annals of the American Association of Geographers  
Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers  
Geoforum  
Journal of Contemporary African Studies  
Review of African Political Economy

### Key issues to follow in KZN:

Finally, as this course aims to inform the participants about topical issues ongoing in our province and country, the students should keep an eye on the following developments (amongst others) for discussion in class:

- The development of energy infrastructure and its politics, particularly regarding nuclear energy.
- The ongoing process towards fracking exploration in the KZN midlands
- Contestations over mining in Pondoland and at Fuyeni and Somkele in northern KZN.
- Issues related to land reform on urban, agricultural, forestry and sugarcane land.
- Drought and its impact on water management in KZN
- The Rhino poaching crisis
- Relations between conservation authorities and surrounding communities

#### 4. COURSE STRUCTURE

This course is structured over 13 weeks, with the same weekly structure repeated throughout. The three sections are as follows:

- Lectures 1 and 2 - Interactive lectures on the structured course material.
- Lecture 3 – This lecture will either involve facilitated discussion led by the lecturer/a student on the course readings, or activities relating to the fieldtrip or assignment. Student may be required to do a short presentation in one of these sessions.
- One practical/ tutorial a week - Most often split into tutorial streams for discussions and tutorial exercises (9). On three occasions the practical slot will be used for two extended assessments and a fieldtrip. The first and third sessions will involve a test, and the second will involve a field trip, which will consist of a bus trip to a site of local environmental contestation.

**Term starts Mon 16<sup>th</sup> July**

### ***SECTION A: Introduction to Political Ecology***

#### **Week 1: What is Political Ecology (16- 20 July)**

- What is Political Ecology?
- Human-environment relations through a political ecology lens
- Political vs apolitical ecology

Media: Darwin's Nightmare

Core themes: 'contestation'; conflict; capital and nature; knowledge; limits; marginalisation; environmental justice; liberation ecologies; the landscape approach

#### *Required reading*

1. Robins, Paul. (2011): *Introduction, Chapter 1 and Chapter 4.*
2. (Optional) Perreault, T., Bridge, G., & McCarthy, J. (Eds.). (2015): Chapter 1

*Tutorial 1:* Differing engagements with Political Ecology: Exploring Political Ecology blogs.

*Tutorial Assignment:* A short reflection on your chosen blog and how it relates to Political Ecology issues.

## **Week 2. The emergence of PE (23-27 July)**

- The building blocks of Political Ecology, Including: hazards research; cultural ecology and environmental history.
- Overview of the key influences of Political Ecology: Common property theory; Marxist political economy; Peasant studies; Feminist development studies; Critical environmental history; Governmentality and creation of subjects; Objects, actor network theory and materiality
- The environmental history of South Africa's 'frontier environments'

### *Required Reading:*

1. Robins, P. (2011): Chapters 2 and 3.
2. Beinart, W and Coates, P. (1995): Chapters 1 and 2.

### *Tutorial 2: Key Political Ecology Thinkers*

*Tutorial Assignment:* A short reflection on the key thinker and their contribution to Political Ecology

**Term project preparation:** This week we will introduce the term project, and photovoice methodology.

## **Week 3: Human Impacts (30 July – 3 Aug)**

- The Political Ecology focus on human impact related to water security
- Defining and measuring degradation
- The limits of degradation explanations
- From destruction to production
- Concepts of ecological infrastructure and 'hydro-social territories'
- Human Impact on Water systems
- Droughts impact on Water systems

### **Core Readings**

1. R Robins, P. (2011): Chapter 5
2. Cock, Ch 1 "Ignoring Nature" and Ch2 "Understanding Nature"

*Tutorial:* Video and discussion. Please read an article related to the Cape Town drought and be prepared to discuss it in class.

*Tutorial assignment:* Reflection paper

## **Week 4: The construction/production of nature (6-10 Aug)**

- Applied critical tools and theories
- Marxist and poststructuralist political ecology
- Social Nature and the production/construction of nature
- From production to co-production

*Required Reading:*

1. Robins, P. (2011): Chapter 6.
2. Ch 4 Imitating Nature and Ch 5 Privatising Nature

Extra reading: (Optional) Braun, B & J. Wainwright. (2001) *Nature, Poststructuralism, and Politics*. Chapter 3 in Castree, N. & Brown, B. (eds.). *Social Nature: Theory, Practice and Politics*, pp 41-63. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

*Tutorial 3: Manufactured Landscapes and produced natures*

*Tutorial Assignment: Reflection on Brooks, S. 2005.*

Tutorial reading:

Brooks, S. (2005). Images of 'Wild Africa': nature tourism and the (re) creation of Hluhluwe game reserve, 1930-1945. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 31: 220-240

Brooks, S. (2000). Re-reading the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi game reserve: constructions of a 'natural' space. *Transformation* 44.

## ***SECTION B: Political Ecology in Practice***

### **Week 5: Urban vs Rural Political Ecology? (13-17 Aug)**

- Urban vs rural political ecology
- Urban Metabolisms and Urban Political Ecology
- In the nature of cities
- Rural Political Ecology
- Agriculture and the nature of peasant production

Required reading

1. Swyngedouw E. (2006) Circulations and Metabolisms: (Hybrid) Natures and (Cyborg) Cities. *Science as Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 105–121.
2. (Optional) Heynen N., Kaika M., and Swyngedouw E. (2006) (Eds.) *In the Nature of Cities - Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*, Routledge, London and New York (Chapters 1 and 2)

Extra: Beinart, W and Coates, P. (1995): Chapter 4.

Practical 1: **Test 1, Thurs 16 Aug.**

### **Week 6. Forestry and degradation (20 Aug – 24 Aug)**

- The challenge of land change science
- The challenge of causal explanation
- The Political Ecology argument about degradation and marginalisation
- The evidence
- Evaluating the thesis – Forestry in Uganda and South Africa

*Required reading:*

1. Robins, P. (2011): Chapters 7 and 8
2. Cock Ch 6 - Polluting Nature, and Ch 7 abusing nature

Extra - Beinart, W and Coates, P (1995): Chapter 3

*Tutorial 4:* Critical Reading and reviewing of literature.

Tutorial assignment: Annotated bibliography

### **Week 7: Conservation and Control (27 Aug – 31 Aug)**

- Coercion, governmentality and internalization of state rule
- Disintegration of moral economy
- The constructed character of natural wilderness
- Territorialization and conservation space
- South African Conservation Spaces

*Required Reading:*

1. Robbins, P. (1995): Chapter 9.
2. Cock, Ch 8 – Protecting Nature
3. Beinart, W and Coates, P. (1995): Chapter 5

**Tutorial 5/Fieldtrip: TBA**

**Term project preparation:** Annotated Bibliography submission

### **Week 8 Conservation and Control Week 2 (3 Sept – 7 Sept)**

**Tutorial 5/FIELDTRIP: TBA**

### **Week 9. Environmental conflict: Mining (10 - 14 sept)**

*Required Reading:*

1. Robbins, P. (1995): Chapter 10
2. Perreault, T., Bridge, G., & McCarthy, J. (Eds.). (2015): Chapter 46.

Tutorial 6: TBA

**Mid Term Break (15 – 24 Sept)**

***SECTION C: Advances in Political Ecology***

## **Week 10. Environmental Subjects (25 Sept – 28 Sept)**

- Identify our own identities
- Identity and more than human political ecology
- Feminist Political Ecology
- Moral economies, indigeneity and peasant resistance
- Environmental hegemony and Environmentality

Required Reading:

1. Robins, P. Ch 11 Environmental Subjects and Identities
2. Comaroff, J and Comaroff, J. 2008. Ethnicity. In Shepard, N. and Robins, S. (eds) *New Keywords*. Johannesburg: Jacana
3. Mpofu, R. 2016. Review: 'Blacks do Caravan'  
<https://www.iol.co.za/entertainment/books/review-blacks-do-caravan-2041916>

### ***Practical 3, Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> Sept- Test 2.***

**Week 11:** Reading and writing week (1 Oct – 5 Oct).

## **Week 12. Political objects and Environmental Justice (8 Oct- 12 Oct)**

- non-human nature
- assemblages, networks and participation
- resistances and unintended consequences
- Environmental justice

*Required reading:*

1. Robbins, P (2015): Chapter 12
2. Cock, Ch 9 – Organising for Nature
3. Perreault, T., Bridge, G., & McCarthy, J. (Eds.). (2015): Chapter 45

Tutorial 7 - Follow the thing

Tutorial Assignment: Report on a brief 'online' study of the supply chain of one everyday 'thing'.

**Essay submission Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> Oct in 320 Box (10%)**

## **Week 13. Advances/conflicts in PE (16-20 oct)**

- New Environmental Determinisms
- Anthropocentrism/Capitalocentrism? the case of climate change
- Sustainability

Required reading:

1. Robbins, P (2015): Chapter 13
2. Cock, J (2015) – Chapter 10 - Rethinking Nature
3. Beinart, W and Coates, P. (1995): Chapter 6

*Tutorial 8: Photovoice exhibition* and presentation

Tutorial assignment: Peer marking exercise, and reflection on the exhibition of one or two of your colleagues.

## **Week 14. Revision (22- 23 Oct)**

LECTURES END 23rd OCT

### **3. OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

#### **Attendance and participation**

In order to satisfy their DP requirements students must have a minimum of 80% attendance at academic contact sessions (unless a valid excuse or doctors note is provided). Students are expected to be fully involved in discussions and read the assigned chapters of the text books. Two students will briefly present on the proscribed chapters in the third lecture of each week, in order to open up subsequent discussion.

#### **Assessment**

The course will be assessed as follows:

Essay and groupwork assignment (15%), Tutorials/Practicals (15%), Tests (20%); 3h Exam (50%). The Final course mark will comprise of class work (50%) and examination (50%).

#### *Key dates:*

Test 1 - Thurs 16 August.

Test 2 - Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> September

Essay: Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> October

Annotated bibliography submission: Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> Aug (not for marks)

#### **Fieldtrip: TBA**

#### **Tutorials**

Tutorial modules will be based on the lecture and practical content. The objective of these sessions is to deepen your understanding of the material covered, and to convey practical skills relevant to the course outcomes. Tutorials are an opportunity for peer learning and open discussion with your facilitator and peers, where you can seek guidance from your tutor on concepts you do not clearly understand

*It is essential that you read for this course. The readings provided are not a limited list. You will need to look for further readings that supplement the course content.*

### Course outcomes: Skills and attitudes

Area	Outcome
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students will gain a theoretical background to Political ecology and its application as a tool-kit for analysing differential ecological and environmental outcomes.</li></ul>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students will develop writing, reflection and critical thinking skills by carrying out assignments and participating in tutorial discussions.</li><li>• These Skills will include:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Both critical thinking and critical reading skills</li><li>○ An ability to communicate personal learning and self-reflection</li><li>○ An ability to 'read' landscapes as social texts and think critically about the relationships between people and their environments</li><li>○ An ability to analyse power relationships and the way they underpin environmental outcomes</li><li>○ An ability to assess the merits of contrasting theories and explanations</li><li>○ Ability to relate theoretical argument with empirical evidence in addressing the political ecology of Southern Africa</li></ul></li></ul>
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appreciate why the under-emphasised 'political' is crucial in understanding the unfolding of the ecological, which we already know to be important.</li><li>• Students will gain an understanding of their position and responsibilities as global citizens</li><li>• Students will appreciate how to translate theory into politics</li></ul>

***The course also explicitly aims to instil the following attitudes:***

Respect and appreciation for cultures other than your own – something you will be learning from your classmates as well as from the course content.

- Acceptance that there are different ways of knowing the world, even in a university context. Methodologies and approaches differ, for example, between scientific/technical and social science approaches.
- Respect for both specialist scientific knowledge and local knowledge as being necessary.
- The development of an environmental ethic which accepts the need for development to be sustainable.
- We encourage questioning and critical thinking as an overall approach to information and to your own observations.