

Political Ecology: Power, Knowledge, and the Environment

ENVS 0715
Spring 2027
T/Th, 1-2:20 pm
Location: TBD
Prerequisites: none
WRIT course

INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. Leslie Acton
Office location: 85 Waterman St., room 205
Office hours: TBD, sign up for a slot **[update]**
Email (preferred): leslie_acton@brown.edu
Office phone (not preferred): 401-863-5324

Please note that Dr. Acton reserves the right to make changes to any part of this document should it be necessary and appropriate. **The most up to date version of this document can be found on the course's Canvas page.**

PREREQUISITES:

None

MANAGING SHOPPING PERIOD CLASSROOM DENSITY:

Seats will be reserved for those who register for the course first, and remaining seats may be taken by waitlisted students to the extent possible.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Political ecology asks how power mediates human-environment relationships. How do we, as society, understand "the environment," environmental problems, our role in them, and potential solutions? How have human-environment interactions reproduced inequity related to class, race, gender, and worldview; how does inequity, in turn, relate to environmental realities? Whose environmental "truth" counts, whose doesn't, and why? Are better futures possible (and who defines "better futures")? In this course, we will consider these questions and more. We will examine how knowledge production and socio-economic structures and processes relate to environmental change across economic, political, social, and ecological contexts. The first part

of the course will introduce political ecology's roots and major arguments. We will use this foundation to analyze real-world cases and consider the opportunities, or "openings," for different environmental futures.

COURSE GOALS:

By the end of this course students should be able to:

1. Explain how environmental issues, their causes, and their impacts are both relational and political.
2. Describe the history of political ecology as a field, and apply the main tenets of political ecology as an approach to understanding human-environment interactions.
3. Critically analyze human-environment interactions with a focus on context, knowledge and its production, structural and poststructural power, actors, and relations.
4. Use critique to identify opportunities for more sustainable and just environmental futures.
5. Write a well-organized research paper that offers and defends complex arguments using scholarly evidence and appropriate citations.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

Brown University is located in Providence, Rhode Island, on lands that are within the ancestral homelands of the Narragansett Indian Tribe. We acknowledge that, beginning with colonization and continuing for centuries, the Narragansett Indian Tribe have been dispossessed of most of their ancestral lands in Rhode Island by the actions of individuals and institutions. We acknowledge our responsibility to understand and respond to those actions. The Narragansett Indian Tribe, whose ancestors stewarded these lands with great care, continues as a sovereign nation today. We commit to working together to honor our past and build our future with truth.

DISCUSSION AND COMMUNICATION:

Interacting with respect

Instructors and students are expected to interact respectfully and honestly at all times. This includes all written, verbal, and electronic communications.

Discussion guidelines

In-class discussion is a particularly important learning component of this course. Ideas and comments should be expressed thoughtfully and with respect to one's peers. Critiques should

remain civil and allow for rebuttal. It's also important to allow time for others to participate and never interrupt or talk over fellow students. Respecting your peers and openly listening to their comments creates a positive learning environment. We will spend time drafting our own discussion guidelines in more detail at the beginning of the semester.

Timely communication

I will do my best to respond to email messages within 48 hours or on the next working day.

ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS:

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures. You may speak with me after class, during office hours, or by appointment. Student Accessibility Services (SAS) provides accommodations and support for undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities. To learn more or to request disability accommodations, reach out to SAS at sas@brown.edu, 401-863-9588, or visit the [SAS website](#). If you encounter any digital materials in this course that are inaccessible, complete the [Digital Accessibility Concern Reporting Form](#). For any accessibility or accommodation concerns, please contact the ADA/504 Coordinator at ada_504@brown.edu. Undergraduates in need of short-term academic advice or support can contact an academic dean in the College by emailing college@brown.edu. Graduate students may contact one of the deans in the Graduate School by emailing graduate_school@brown.edu.

CAMPUS RESOURCES:

[Student Support Services Deans](#) can be a helpful resource to discuss personal, family or health-related concerns, as well as a potential academic and personal plan. They are available for same-day consult and/or scheduled appointment. A list of other resources can be found [here](#).

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION & JUSTICE:

Though many political ecologists explicitly examine how injustices related to race, gender, class, and other bases for historical marginalization lead to inequitable and unjust outcomes, the field of political ecology has historically been built on a small subset of privileged voices, most often white men (though this is certainly changing). I acknowledge that some of the texts assigned for this course were authored by those privileged voices. Integrating a diverse set of experiences is important for a more comprehensive understanding of human-environment relations and power structures, and I have attempted to engage with scholarship produced by diverse authors with diverse perspectives. However, this is a continual work in progress; please contact me (in person or electronically) or submit anonymous feedback if you have any suggestions to improve the quality of the course materials in this or any way.

Furthermore, I would like to create a learning environment for students that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives and experiences, and honors your identities (including race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.) To help accomplish this:

- If you have a name and/or set of pronouns that differ from those that appear in your official Brown records, please let me know.
- If you feel like your performance in the class is being impacted by your experiences outside of class, please don't hesitate to come and talk with me. I want to be a resource for you. Remember that you can also submit anonymous feedback (which will lead to me making a general announcement to the class, if necessary to address your concerns). If you prefer to speak with someone outside of the course, Dean Bhattacharyya, Senior Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, is an excellent resource.
- I (like many people) am still in the process of learning about diverse perspectives and identities. If something was said in class (by anyone) that made you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to contact me about it. Again, anonymous feedback is always an option.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT YOUR LEARNING IN THIS COURSE:

The IT Service Center (<https://it.brown.edu/get-help>) provides many IT Services including remote assistance, phones, tickets, and chat.

COURSE MATERIALS:

Required texts:

Robbins, Paul. 2020. *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction (3^d edition)*. John Wiley and Sons, Ltd. (estimated cost: \$40)

Suryanarayanan, Sainath and Daniel Lee Kleinman. 2017. *Vanishing Bees: Science, Politics, and Honeybee Health*. Rutgers University Press. (estimated cost: \$30)

Tsing, Anna L. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press. (estimated cost: \$15)

All other readings and assignments for this course will be posted in the course page on Canvas. Please check Canvas regularly for updates. If you have trouble accessing materials on Canvas, please let me know ASAP so that I and/or the Help Desk (help@brown.edu) can work with you to give you access to the resources you need.

Brown undergraduates with a financial aid package that includes the Book/Course Material Support Pilot Program ([BCMS](#)), can submit questions or concerns to bcms@brown.edu. For all other non-tuition course-related expenses, students can apply for "Emergency Funds, Curricular & Co-curricular Gap (E-Gap) Funds" via [UFunds](#).

COURSE RELATED WORK EXPECTATIONS:

Over 13 weeks, students will spend 2-3 hours per week in class (36 hours total). Required weekly readings are expected to take approximately 7 hours per week (91 hours). Writing 5 blog posts will take approximately 10 hours. Studying for the mid-term exam should take about 13 hours. Researching, drafting and finalizing your final project is expected to take approximately 30 hours. (36 hrs + 91 hrs + 10 hrs + 13 hrs + 30 hrs = 180 hrs)

ASSESSMENT:

Grades for this course will be determined as follows:

Reflection blogs and discussion questions: 20%

Participation: 20%

Mid-term exam: 25%

Final project: 35%

 Paper proposal: 2.5%

 Paper draft: 5%

 Presentation: 2.5%

 Paper: 25%

Readings and Reflection Blogs:

Students should expect to read 40-50 pages of required reading each week for this course. In addition, students will write a minimum of 3 reflection blogs and two sets of 4 discussion questions over the course of the semester. Reflection blogs are based on the week's reading and should respond to one or more of the Reading Reflection Questions provided during the first week of class. Students will receive substantive feedback on at least one blog; lessons from this feedback should inform students' writing for the final project. Reflection blogs should be posted to Canvas by noon on Monday of your assigned week. Discussion questions are written in response to the week's reading and one or more of your group's reflection blogs; these should be posted by noon on the Wednesday of your assigned week. Students must submit reflection blogs and discussion questions for their assigned weeks; however, please feel free to post responses to blogs for other weeks to enrich class discussion and understanding. Additional information on readings, blogs, and discussions will be provided during the first week of class.

Participation:

Participation is a very important part of this course. The participation grade will be based on in-class contributions to large and small group discussions (both quantity and quality) and engagement with individual in-class activities. Students will also each be assigned two weeks to create discussion questions and lead the discussion in your assigned small discussion group. To contribute effectively, you must attend class periods; see below for an overview of the course attendance policy. Students are expected to come prepared to each class period, having read assigned materials. In-class contributions should demonstrate preparation for the class through reading, writing (if completing a reflection blog or discussion questions that week), critical thinking, and reflection. Thursday class periods are particularly important to attend, as they consist of group discussions and reflection based on weekly readings and student blogs. Additional details about participation and the weekly structure for the course will be provided in the first week of class.

Attendance:

Students are expected to attend all class periods; attendance is part of your participation grade, and I expect that you will prepare, attend class, and actively engage with material and other class participants. Please let me know if you will be missing any classes or be arriving late to class ahead of time. Students are allowed two unexcused absences (these include arriving more than 5 minutes late to class); after that, points will be taken from your participation grade. Students are responsible for any lecture material or assignments missed.

Mid-term exam:

The mid-term exam will test student knowledge on political ecology as a field and analytical method. It will cover information presented during the first half of the course, including readings, lectures, and class discussion. Further details and a review session will be provided before the exam.

Final project:

Students will write a research paper (2,000 – 3,000 words) for their final project. The project offers students the opportunity to apply concepts learned throughout the course to a topic of their choice. The paper can take one of two forms: students can (1) select a book in the field of political ecology and submit a book review, or students can (2) select an environmental issue or object of interest and write a paper discussing the political ecology of that issue or object. Guidance on choosing appropriate books/topics and a list of suggestions will be provided in class, and topics must be approved by the instructor. Students will use readings and information provided in class as well as information gained through individual research to support their arguments. Students will receive substantial feedback on the initial draft related to arguments and supporting evidence, organization, clarity, and flow. Additional guidance on paper structure and requirements will be provided in class.

MISSED/LATE ASSIGNMENTS:

Assignments must be completed in a timely manner and submitted at the specified time. Assignments submitted up to 24 hours late will be penalized by 10%; assignments submitted up to 48 hours late will be penalized by 25%. Any assignment submitted more than 48 hours after the due date will be regarded as incomplete and given a grade of 0.

WRITING REQUIREMENT:

As this is a WRIT-designated course, you will be required to complete multiple written assignments, including three blog posts and the draft and revised versions of a final paper. You will receive substantive feedback on at least one blog post and your final paper draft, which you will use to help you revise your work and to enhance subsequent writing assignments.

USE OF GENERATIVE AI IN THIS COURSE:

We are all continuing to explore the use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, and their role in learning, teaching, and engaging in the world for us individually and in our various communities. While I encourage this exploration and of course practice it myself, you are not permitted to use generative AI tools for completing assignments in this course. Using these tools, even with appropriate citations, will be considered plagiarism (see the Academic Code, quoted and linked below). My reasons for this are varied, and as we learn more, my stance may evolve. However, the assignments for this course, particularly the reading and writing components, were crafted to support you in deep learning and critically examining the complexities of human-environment relationships and how they change over time. Completing the assignments as written, without the aid of generative AI, is essential to gain the understanding and skills offered in this course. That said, I encourage everyone to check out this [brief overview of Generative AI](#) on the Brown Library website and continue to pay attention as this new technology and our understanding of it evolves!

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Academic achievement is ordinarily evaluated on the basis of work that a student produces independently. Students who submit academic work that uses others' ideas, words, research, or images without proper attribution and documentation are in violation of the academic code. Infringement of the academic code entails penalties ranging from reprimand to suspension, dismissal, or expulsion from the University.

A student's name on any exercise (e.g., a theme, report, notebook, performance, computer program, course paper, quiz, or examination) is regarded as assurance that the exercise is the result of the student's own thoughts and study, stated in their own words, and produced

without assistance, except as quotation marks, references, and footnotes acknowledging the use of printed sources or other outside help ([Academic Code, p. 5](#)).

COURSE POLICIES:

The use of laptops, phones, or e-tablets in class is not permitted, except for Thursday small group discussions and activities or unless otherwise stated in class. You should take notes by hand on key points we discuss in class, and then use your computer after class to help you expand on and clarify your understanding of the topic and concepts discussed. This method allows you to participate fully and also review your thoughts in a productive way when you have a quiet moment after class. Please let me know if this policy will limit your access to or participation in the course, and we will strategize together.

CLASS RECORDING AND DISTRIBUTION OF COURSE MATERIALS:

Lectures and other course materials are copyrighted. Students are prohibited from reproducing, making copies, publicly displaying, selling, or otherwise distributing the recordings or transcripts of the materials. The only exception is that students with disabilities may have the right to record for their private use if that method is determined to be a reasonable accommodation by Student Accessibility Services. You may take notes and make copies of course materials for your own personal use, and you and other students in the class may share notes and materials when studying. Any other sharing of lecture notes or any course materials cannot be done unless you have my permission in writing, whether you are paid for the materials or not. Similarly, I will not share anything you submit to me unless I have your written permission. Disregard of the University's copyright policy and federal copyright law is a Student Code of Conduct violation.

(Week) and Topic	Dates	Readings and Assignments
(1) Welcome and Course Intro	Jan. 22	NONE
(2) What is Political Ecology?	Jan. 27 & 29	• Robbins Chap. 1 and 4 • Davis, J. S. (2005) Representing Place: "Deserted Isles" and the Reproduction of Bikini Atoll. <i>Annals of the Association of American Geographers</i> 95(3): 607-625. **just skim pp. 609-612, 2 sections on place conceptualizations • (optional) Paulson S, Gezon LL and Watts M. (2003) Locating the political in political ecology: An introduction. <i>Human organization</i> 62: 205-217. • (optional) Walker PA. (2005) Political ecology: where is the ecology? <i>Progress in Human Geography</i> 29: 73-82. • (optional) Robbins Introduction
(3) Early Political Ecology	Feb. 3 & 5 (end of shopping, discussion groups assigned)	• Robbins Chap. 9 • Neumann, R. (2005) <i>Making Political Ecology</i>. Chap. 2 • Ybarra, M. (2012) Taming the jungle, saving the Maya Forest: Sedimented counterinsurgency practices in contemporary Guatemalan conservation. <i>Journal of Peasant Studies</i> 39 (2): 479-502. • (optional) Robbins Chap. 3, 5 and 7

(4) Political Analysis in Political Ecology	Feb. 10 & 12	• Robbins Chap. 6 • Fairhead J and Leach M. (1995) False Forest History, Complicit Social Analysis - Rethinking some West-African Environmental Narratives. <i>World Development</i> 23: 1023-1035. • Lave, R., M. Doyle, and M. Robertson. 2010. Privatizing stream restoration in the US. <i>Social Studies of Science</i> 40(5): 677-703 • <i>(optional)</i> Blomley, N. (2008) Simplification is complicated: Property, nature and the rivers of law. <i>Environment and Planning A</i> 40: 1825-1842.
(5) Control, Identity, and Justice in PE	Feb. 19 <i>No class Feb. 17</i>	<u>**Paper proposal due Feb. 19</u> • Robbins Chap. 8 and 10 • Purifoy, D. (2021) The Plantation Town: Race, resources, and the making of place. <i>The Routledge Handbook of Critical Resource Geography</i>. pp. 114-125. • <i>(optional)</i> Gibbs, H.K., et al. (2016) Did ranchers and slaughterhouses respond to zero-deforestation agreements in the Brazilian Amazon? <i>Conservation Letters</i>, 9(1): 32-42.
(6) What do we "know"?	Feb. 24 & 26	• Suryanarayanan and Kleinman: Chap. 1-4 • <i>(optional)</i> Suryanarayanan and Kleinman: Introduction

(7) Eco-Governmentality	March 3 & 5	• Robbins Chap. 11 • Agrawal, A. (2005) Environmentality: Community, intimate government, and the making of environmental subjects in Kumaon, India. <i>Current Anthropology</i> 46(2): 161-190. • (optional) Adhikari, D. (2026) Critical Polycentric Governance: Indigenous Peoples' Tenure Security in India's Forest. <i>Society and Natural Resources</i>. • (optional) Li T.M. (2000) Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia: Resource Politics and the Tribal Slot. <i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i> 42: 149-179.
(8) Political Actors: Human and Non-Human	March 10 & 12	• Robbins Chap. 12 • Tsing: Prologue • Margulies JD and Karanth KK. (2018) The production of human-wildlife conflict: A political animal geography of encounter. <i>Geoforum</i> 95: 153-164. • Mitchell, T. (2002) Can the mosquito speak? <i>Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity</i> pp. 19-53. • (optional) Despret, V. (2013). Responding bodies and partial affinities in human-animal worlds. <i>Theory, Culture & Society</i>, 30(7-8), 51-76.
(9) Review and Exam	March 17 & 19	

Spring recess	March 21-29	
(10) Assemblage Thinking	March 31 & April 2	• Tsing: Parts I and II
(11) Community Economies	April 7 & 9	<u>**Final paper draft due on April 9 (send to Prof Acton and Writing Fellow)</u> • Introducing Community Economies: 5-minute video • Cameron, J. 2022. Post-capitalism now: A community economies approach. In <i>Post-Capitalist Futures</i>. p. 41-52. • Lyne, I. and I. Rado. 2023. Dynamics of power & participation: lessons from Cambodia and Thailand. In <i>Entanglements of designing social innovation in the Asia-Pacific</i>. • Yates et al. 2023. Dialogues for wellbeing in an ecological emergency: Wellbeing-led governance frameworks and transformative Indigenous tools. <i>Dialogues in Human Geography</i> 13(2): 268-287. • (optional) Cameron, J. and J.K. Gibson-Graham. 2022. The Diverse Economies Approach. <i>Handbook of Alternative Theories of Political Economy</i>.
(12) Final project presentations	April 14 & 16	<u>**Final paper presentation due before class on April 14</u>

(13) PE: Possibilities and World-Making	April 21 & 23	• Robbins Chap. 13 • Tsing Chap. 15, 16, 17, and 19 • Lopes, A.M. et al. 2018. Infrastructures of Care: Opening up “Home” as Commons in a Hot City. <i>Human Ecology Review</i> 24(2): 41-59. • Naylor, L. 2022. Solidarity as a development performance and practice in coffee exchanges. <i>Sustainability Science</i> 17: 1195-1205. • <i>(optional)</i> Gibson, K. and A. Hill. 2022. Living with flux in the Philippines: negotiating collective wellbeing and disaster recovery. <i>Asia Pacific Viewpoint</i> 63(1): 126-137. • <i>(optional)</i> Do Thi, H. and K. Dombroski. 2022. Diverse More-than-human Approaches to Climate Change Adaptation in Thai Binh, Vietnam. <i>Asia Pacific Viewpoint</i> 63(1): 25-39. • <i>(optional)</i> Rice JL, Long J and Levenda A. 2021. Against climate apartheid: Confronting the persistent legacies of expendability for climate justice. <i>Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space</i> 5(2): 625-645. • <i>(optional)</i> Youdelis, M. (2020) “Wilderness” Revisited: Is Canadian park management moving beyond the “wilderness” ethic? <i>The Canadian Geographer</i> 64 (2): 232-249.
	May 8 at noon	<u>**Final paper due on May 8 at noon</u>