The Human Place in Nature:  
A Campus Series on Sustainability

Session Topics and Tentative Readings–Spring 2010  
Draft of Nov. 9, 2009

All Sessions will be held Thursdays, 4:10-5:50 p.m., in 213 Gregory Hall  
PDF files of readings, when available, will be marked by session number  
(roman numeral) and capital letter, keyed to the list set forth below.

Series summary: Our environmental problems are, at root, due to human actions  
that in some sense misuse or degrade nature. People are at fault; we cannot fairly  
blame problems on nature itself. Like other species, humans must use nature in  
order to live and uses of nature necessarily change it. What changes, then, are  
appropriate and which ones are not? That is, how do we draw the normative line  
between using nature and abusing it? To the extent that we misuse nature, why do  
we do so, and what tools or mechanisms might we employ to reform actions that  
are unwise or morally wrong?

This seminar series will encourage participants to construct an overall  
intellectual framework for understanding the place of humans in nature and  
coming to terms with our environmental challenges. It highlights big-picture  
issues that are typically pushed aside in the rush to undertake specialized work.  
The series begins by asking the fundamental normative questions: How do we  
draw the line between using nature and abusing it? Put otherwise, what is the  
overall goal for conservation work? Given that human behavior is the underlying  
cause, why do we behave as we do and how might an understanding of human  
behaviors help us shape remedial actions? What roles can science fill in this work  
and when must we go beyond science to evaluate actions, probe problems, and  
craft solutions? What are the special problems posed by the fragmentation of the  
planet into countless political jurisdictions and privately owned parts of nature?  
What roles does the market play in exacerbating problems and offering possible  
solutions? How do issues of social justice come into play, and what about the  
moral status and ecological roles of other life forms? Finally, are major  
universities, as critics have long contended, as much part of the problem as they are  
part of the solution? What might a university do to help lead the world in the right  
direction?

I. February 4: Sustainability and Its Critics  
UIUC has several initiatives aimed at promoting the widely used goal of sustainability.  
What are the term’s various meanings and does it provide adequate guidance for  
identifying and addressing environmental challenges? What are the chief criticisms of the  
concept and are they valid?

II. February 11: Alternative Visions and Goals
For decades scholars have promoted the use of various other normative terms and frameworks for assessing how well we use nature and to serve as goals or benchmarks for conservation efforts. This session will consider several alternatives to sustainability, including the now-popular idea of protecting “ecosystem services” and the older goal proposed by Aldo Leopold, “land health.”

D•Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis (Island Press 2005), pp. v-viii, 1-2, 4-6, 9-12.

III. February 18: Root Causes of Ecological Degradation
Environmental problems are the result of misuses of nature by people, acting individually and in combination. Indeed, it is possible and perhaps wise to view environmental degradation as a symptom, with the true problem (or illness) lying in the human conduct that causes the degradation. Why do we behave toward nature as we do? What are the underlying causes of these human behaviors?

IV. February 25: The Roles and Limits of Environmental Science

Science is a vital tool in helping us understand the natural world and our effects on it, yet are we expecting too much of scientists? What functions can science perform and what tasks are outside its scope? Further, how reliable is science, particularly scientific theories based on observations from the surrounding world rather than controlled laboratory experiments? And do we err by focusing so much on what we know from science without appreciating the vast gaps in our understanding?


V. March 4: The Challenges of Spatial Scale

The issue of spatial scale arises in various ways. One way--not considered here--is the challenge to scientists in understanding nature, work that often needs to consider varied spatial scales. A second way arises from the need to consider human uses of nature at varied scales as part of the effort to distinguish proper from improper uses of nature. Finally and significantly, our efforts to remedy misuses of nature require coordinated action at scales from the most local (the individual land parcel) to the global. How can this coordination take place in a world that is fragmented into political jurisdictions and
privately owned pieces of nature? How does the fragmentation of the planet, that is, add to our misbehaviors and make remedial action so much more difficult?

D•Excerpts from four articles on landscape-scale governance, from Eric T. Freyfogle, Natural Resources Law: Private Rights and Collective Governance (Thomson/West 2007), pp. 675-93.

VI. March 11: The Market as Tool and Problem
The market has become the most dominant social institution and significantly affects how humans use nature, for good and ill. What are its strengths and weaknesses as both an institution and constellation of values? How does economic- and market-based thought aid or hinder efforts to diagnose and address environmental ills? And how does our tendency to use the market as our prime mechanism of resource allocation clash with efforts to engage in collective land-use governance?

E•Herman Daly, “The Perils of Free Trade” Scientific American (Nov. 1993), pp. 50-57.

VII. March 18: Mechanisms for Environmental Improvement
Environmental policy is, at root, an effort to alter the human behaviors that cause ecological degradation (or, we might say, that amount to “bad uses” of nature). What mechanisms exist to encourage and compel people to act better, given the underlying causes of poor behavior? What mechanisms have brought about the most change in the
past, particularly the enactment of major environmental laws? Can any significant improvement come from changes by individuals in daily life? Are we better off focusing our efforts instead on promoting structural and systemic changes?


VIII. April 1: Environmental Justice
The Earth’s billions of human inhabitants in some just way need to share the planet among themselves. What are the various challenges that get lumped together under the heading environmental justice? (Some have to do with access to land and other parts of nature required to live; others with the distribution of hazardous or degrading land uses (within the U.S. and among nations); still others with the ways we share the atmosphere and oceans. Then there are the issues relating to the ways global trade and global corporations undercut local practices and local governance.)


G•Brent Cunningham, “Cornucopia Blues,” The Nation (Sept. 21, 2009), pp. 39-44.

H•Angus Wright, “Grassroots Land Reform in Brazil,” in The Land Report no. 72 (Spring 2002), pp. 16-18.
IX. April 8: Nonhuman Life
How should nonhuman life forms fit into our thinking about the human place on earth and our overall environmental goals? We will touch upon the moral status of individual animals (animal welfare issues) and contrast animal welfare thinking with ecological orientations. We will also consider the moral status of species and rare communities, and consider the essential roles of biodiversity in the functioning of healthy landscapes. Further, how might we revive wildlife in intensively used landscapes?


X. April 15: The University
A major (though little noticed) element of serious conservation thought has long offered a pointed critique of higher education, particularly major research universities. According to critics, we are a big part of the problem, dominated by the various cultural values and attitudes that are the root causes of ecological degradation. What are these criticisms and are they sound? What changes would universities need to make to play significant roles in addressing environmental problems, particularly in light of earlier discussions exploring (i) overall normative goals, (ii) root causes of bad behavior, and (ii) the mechanisms most likely to bring about environmental improvement?
