
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

PHIL 221 | Spring 2024



In this course, we will examine the value and moral status of non-human entities: other animals, plants, “natural spaces,” etc. We will also explore the nature and extent of our obligations to these things. Our ultimate goal will be to answer the oldest question in philosophy: *how should we live?* But whereas traditional moral philosophy focuses on our dealings with other people, we will cast a wider net. Special topics include animal welfare, the idea of “nature,” conservation, environmental displacement, food sovereignty, technological optimism, and hope and loss.

Student hours

This is time I have set aside to meet and chat with you. We can talk about course topics, assignments, grading, philosophy or science more generally, or most anything else.

Email policy

I try my best to keep up with email. This means you can expect a response to an email within 48 of sending it (I will wait until Monday to respond to emails received during the weekend). If I don't respond in a timely fashion, please send me a follow-up email after 48 hours.

Course objectives

These describe the point of the class. The objectives are what I'd like you to get out of the course when everything is put together: activities, assignments, readings, and discussions. All these are geared toward these objectives.

Basic information

Instructor: Max Dresow ("Dray-zo")

Pronouns: he/him

Office: Old Main 113

Student hours: Tu 12:00–1:00

Email: mdresow@macalester.edu

Course meetings: TR 1:20-2:50 p.m.

Location: Humanities 214

Course objectives

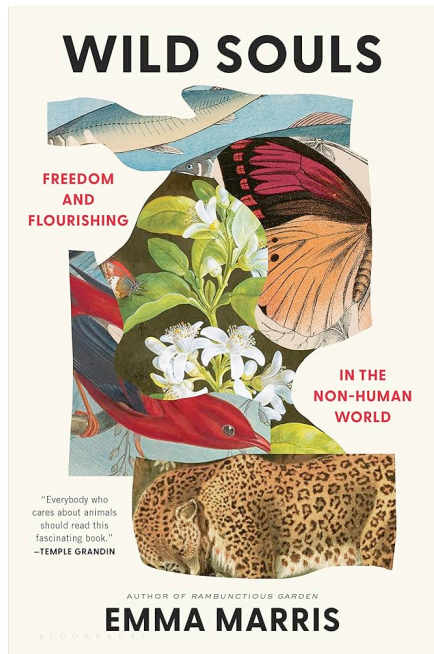
As people we are daily confronted with environmental problems and obligations. As citizens, we must navigate heated and sometimes confusing public discussions of environmental issues. This class will equip you to participate in these discussions, and to reason critically about the social, cultural, and affective dimensions of environmental problems.

During this course you will:

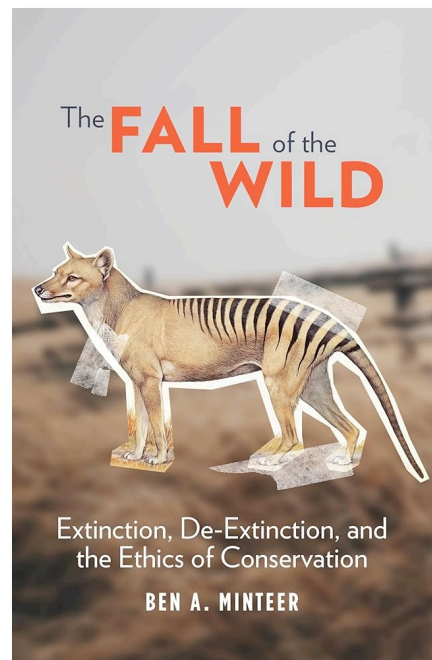
1. develop the analytic skills necessary to identify and evaluate the ethical dimensions of environmental problems;
2. learn to write cogent descriptions of your views on a range of philosophical topics arising from a scrutiny of environmental problems; and
3. gain a better appreciation of the relevance of ethical theory for important issues in contemporary society.

Course texts

*All readings other than those drawn from *Wild Souls and After Nature* will be available through Moodle*



→ We will read several chapters from Ben Minter's *The Fall of the Wild*, although it is not required that you acquire a copy of this book.



Assignments

Required Assignments

Attendance and Participation (30%) — Attendance is required for this class.

You are allowed to miss three class periods for any reason. Additional unexcused absences will result in a 25% reduction in this component of your grade— so, instead of 100% of the points being available, only 75% will be; then 50%; and so forth.

Expert for a Day (5%) — Once during the course of the semester, you will serve as “expert for a day,” with responsibility for a single assigned reading. This does not mean you will assume sole responsibility for leading classroom discussion that day. What it means is that you will

1. come to class prepared to concisely summarize the main points of the reading you have signed-up for
2. provide a list of questions to help guide our discussion, and
3. be expected to take an active role in that discussion.

This assignment will be graded as either “done satisfactorily” or “not done satisfactorily.”

Concise Papers (30%) — In addition, you will write two 1,500 word papers during the semester defending a position on some ethical question or controversy that we have examined in class. Prompts will be available but you are encouraged to find your own topic. Time will be provided in class to discuss ideas, workshop arguments, and (if there is interest) read draft essays. I will disseminate a grading rubric in advance of the assignment.

Manoomin Controversy Group Project (15%) — On March 28th, we will be reading about the “manoomin controversy” involving the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, the State of Minnesota, and manoomin (or “wild rice” in colloquial English). Based on our classroom activities you will conduct a group project that places you in the position of conservation biologists who must formulate policy recommendations on how to adjudicate the controversy between the First Nations people of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota. Working in groups, you will present your recommendations in the form of a policy brief. (More information will be disseminated prior to the day of the reading.)

“Unessay” Summative Project (20%) — Your summative assessment will take the form of a project that draws on the knowledge and skills you’ve developed inside and outside of this class. There are few restrictions on what you can do— make a quilt, create a video, record a podcast, write a short story or graphic novel, etc.— so long as your project explores a topic related (somehow) to the class. Focus on your interests and passions and don’t be afraid to take risks!

The only requirements are that your treatment of the topic be *compelling* and *effective*: that is, well-crafted and appropriate (with a format and medium that suits its subject matter and approach), and as complete and/or convincing as your subject allows.

Whatever you decide to do, you need to make a proposal to me (in person or in writing) no later than the week of April 1, and preferably before this!

Grading

Scale:

		A	≥	93
93	>	A-	≥	90
90	>	B+	≥	87
87	>	B	≥	83
83	>	B-	≥	80
80	>	C+	≥	77
77	>	C	≥	73
73	>	C-	≥	70
70	>	D+	≥	67
67	>	D	≥	63
63	>	D-	≥	60
60	>	F		

There will be no grading curve in this class and grade boundaries will be strictly enforced (e.g., 89.5 is a B+, not an A-).

Grade Breakdown:

Final grades will be computed as follows:

Attendance and Participation	30%
“Expert for a Day”	5%
Concise Papers	30%
Manoomin Controversy Project	15%
Unessay Summative project	20%

Schedule

Week of | Topic and Readings

January 15 Introduction to the Course
Thursday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 1

January 22 Natural Value and Moral Considerability
Tuesday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 2 and 3
Thursday: Read "Ethical Veganism and Free Riding"

January 29 "Wilderness" and Alienation
Tuesday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 4, and "The Myth of a Wilderness without Humans"
Thursday: Read "Alienation, Nature, and the Environment"

February 5 Pets and Zoos, or What we Owe to Animals
Tuesday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 5, and "Do Humans Owe Animals Equal Rights? Martha Nussbaum Thinks So" (*New York Times*)
Thursday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 6, and *The Fall of the Wild*, Chapter 3

February 12 Conservation and the Problem of Intervention
Tuesday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapters 7 and 8
Thursday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 9, and *The Fall of the Wild*, Chapter 4
 [Optional supplement: "The Land Ethic"]



Week of | Topic and Readings

February 19

Hunting, Killing, and "Compassionate Conservation"

Tuesday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 10 [Optional supplement: "A Native Tribe Wants to Resume Whaling" (*New York Times*)]

Thursday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapters 11–13

*** Concise Paper #1 due on Thursday**

February 26

Debating "Techno-optimism": De-Extinction and Geoengineering

Thursday: Read *Wild Souls*, Chapter 14, and *The Fall of the Wild*, Chapter 5

Thursday: Read "Rethinking the Unthinkable: Environmental Ethics and the Presumptive Argument Against Geoengineering"

March 4

Climate Change and Individual Moral Obligation

Tuesday: Read "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Justice, and the Problem of Moral Corruption"

Thursday: Read "Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations" [Optional supplement: "It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations" (to skim)]

March 18

Climate Justice and the Problem of Environmental Displacement

Tuesday: Read "Two Kinds of Climate Justice: Avoiding Harm and Sharing Burdens" (focus on pages 134–147), and "The African Anthropocene" (*Aeon*)

Thursday: Read "Climate Change Refugees, Compensation, and Rectification"

*** Concise Paper #2 due on Thursday**

Week of | Topic and Readings

March 25 "Relational Tipping Points," Food Sovereignty, and Solidarity

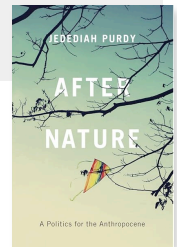
Tuesday: Read "Too Late For Indigenous Climate Justice: Ecological and Relational Tipping Points," and "Way Beyond the Lifeboat: An Indigenous Allegory for Climate Change"

Thursday: Read "Institutions and Solidarity: Wild Rice Research, Relationships, and the Commodification of Knowledge" [Optional supplement: "Indigenous Food Sovereignty, Renewal, and U.S. Settler Colonialism"]

April 1 Ecological Imagination and the Politics of Nature

Tuesday: Read *After Nature*, Prologue and Introduction. [Optional supplement: "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene"]

Thursday: Read *After Nature*, Chapters 1-3



April 8 Romanticism and Utilitarianism in American Environmental Thinking

Tuesday: Read *After Nature*, Chapter 4

Thursday: Read *After Nature*, Chapter 5

April 15 Towards a New Politics for the Anthropocene

Tuesday: Read *After Nature*, Chapter 6

Thursday: Read *After Nature*, Chapter 7

*** Manoomin Controversy Group Project due on Thursday**

Week of | Topic and Readings

April 22

Hope, Loss, and Wrapping Up the Course

Tuesday: Read *After Nature*, Chapter 8

Thursday: Read "The Ethics of Human Extinction" (Aeon), and "Beyond 'Gloom and Doom' or 'Hope and Possibility': Constructing Motivating Visions of a Greener Future without Dismissing Loss"

Final exam
period*** Unessay Summative Project due**