

ENVIRONMENTAL CLASSICS

Macalester College

Prof. Chris Wells

Wed 7-10 pm

Olin-Rice 243

Course Description

How has environmental thinking and writing evolved? How have writers shaped the ways we understand our relationship with the natural world? This course explores these questions, drawing on an interdisciplinary range of influential works. The ideas introduced by these classic texts are still present, implicitly and explicitly, in much of today's environmental discourse.

This course will use a selection of books and papers that have had a major impact on academic and wider public thinking – primarily in the USA. Through engaged discussion, we will trace the impact of each text, beginning with the context in which it was written and ending with its influence on our contemporary understandings of the environment. In addition, we will seek to understand the characteristics of 'classic' texts that hold attention, encourage new ways of thinking, and facilitate social change.



Call me "Chris" (he/him/his)

Students are sometimes not sure what to call their professors. Like many others at Macalester, I invite you to use my first name, though if you are feeling formal Professor Wells or Dr. Wells are both fine. Please be sure to share what you would like to be called, as well!

Contact Information

Prof. Chris Wells

wells@macalester.edu

651-696-6803 (office)



You can always reach me by email. I will usually get back to you quickly on weekdays. You can also try texting my office number if you have a short pressing question, though that's new and I make no promises about how that will work.

Course Goals

- To trace the influence of the ideas, authors and texts that have shaped the environmental movement and the field of environmental studies.
- To question the process of canonization, and to explore the work of thinkers whose ideas were not immediately and widely embraced in the traditional environmental canon, but whose contributions are nevertheless important and timely.
- To consider and (re)define the essential qualities of a classic.
- To engage in participatory and collaborative learning through group discussion, debate, and the practice of respectfully expressing and listening to divergent opinions.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to

- Critically evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of traditional classic works, both with respect to the context in which they were written as well as to issues of today.
- Recognize the value of voices and ideas overlooked by the traditional environmental canon.
- Explain how writers have shaped the ways we understand our relationship with the natural world and influenced environmental policy and decision-making.
- Identify how the ideas presented in environmental texts are relevant to our own lives.
- Connect insights encountered in environmental texts to other sources of environmental thinking and rhetoric.
- Develop and improve public presentation skills and writing clarity.



Drop-In Hours



I will hold standing office hours (when you can drop in to talk with me) this semester in my office, Olin-Rice 249c, on **Monday 3:30-4:30, Wednesday 1:10-2:10, and by appointment.** To meet with me, just show up! You can also reserve a time, if you'd like, [here](#). If you'd like to meet but the scheduled times don't work, email me with a few times that will work for you and I'll check them against my calendar. Feel free to just come to my office—if I'm available, we can talk.

Talking to students is one of my favorite things about being a professor. No question is too small, and no pretext to talk is too flimsy: if you want to talk, we can talk!

Challenging Times

These are challenging times, and this course engages difficult issues that can at times be actively discouraging. I've designed this course with a great deal of flexibility and with your success as a top priority. If things aren't working for you, whatever the reason, please let me know and I'll do what I can to help.



Our Moodle site (moodle.macalester.edu) is not just a crucial resource, but is also our primary point of contact for this class. In addition to hosting this syllabus, it is where you can find our [complete daily schedule](#), as well as links to all of our readings, discussions, activities, and assignments—in short, anything and everything related to the course. Send me a quick email, subject line Easter Egg, and let me know you've read this! Please familiarize yourself with the Moodle site before doing anything else, and let me know promptly if you have any questions or run into any problems!

Required Texts

The following text is required for this class:

- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (any edition)

Please note several important things:

1. This book is available in a variety of formats and editions from a variety of vendors, including the college bookstore. Any format/edition will do.
2. The Macalester College library has a physical copy on reserve and a [digital copy](#), but both can be checked out by only one person at a time. Let me know if you have trouble finding a copy.
3. All other course readings (and our reading schedule) are available on Moodle.



Any version will do!

Attendance, Participation, and Engagement



Participation in class discussions is a vital component of this class. Our project in class meetings will be to discuss the major themes of the course, to answer questions, to clear up any confusion, and above all to engage with course readings. Please remember that we are all in this together, and we are all responsible for the success of the course. As eager as I am to share with you what I know, I expect that you will learn at least as much from one another as you will from me.

We will discuss together the mutual rights and responsibilities that you would like to see govern our discussions, but given the importance of discussions to the success of the class, at minimum it is important that we all respect one another's time, space, values, and ideas by showing up regularly for discussions prepared to engage in respectful, intellectually challenging exchange. Attending every class discussion might not be possible. Everyone may miss two classes without explanation or penalty, although I do need advance warning if you will miss the Round Robin discussion or if you need to reschedule your Alt Classic presentation. If you must miss more than that for any reason, it is essential that you reach out to me privately so that we can figure out how to accommodate whatever challenges you are facing and develop a plan for you to succeed in the class.

Policy on class recordings: I have no plans to make any recordings of what we do in class. Should that change for any reason, such as to accommodate a documented disability, I will notify you in advance and any recording will be in a manner consistent with [Macalester's classroom recording policy](#). That policy states that no one may record any classroom activity, in whole or part, without the prior written approval of the Office of Disability Services and the knowledge of the instructor, and that any such recordings are limited to personal academic use only, may not be shared, replicated, or published, and must be destroyed or stored by the Office of Disability Services at the end of the semester.



Helpful Resources

Many wonderful resources exist that will help you with this class. To meet with a writing counselor at the **MAX Center**, visit [WCOOnline](#). **Research and instruction librarians** are another great resource for research and writing. Book an appointment with one of them [here](#). **Another useful resource** for writers is Macalester's [Write Well video series](#).



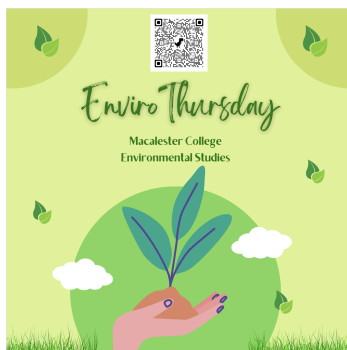
Academic dishonesty



Academic dishonesty erodes the basic foundations of higher education: exchange, debate, and the thoughtful consideration of what we know, how we know it, and why it matters. It has no place at Macalester or in this course. Find Macalester's academic integrity policy [here](#). For help avoiding plagiarism, visit the Library's Academic Integrity materials [here](#); on the ethical use of generative AI tools, visit the Library's guide on AI Literacy and Critical Thinking [here](#). For the Quick Guide to the Chicago Manual of Style, the citation system used by historians, visit [here](#).

Accommodations

I am committed to supporting all students in my class. I've designed this course with your success as a top priority, following the principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#), which aim to minimize systemic barriers to learning that come from cultural difference and/or disability. This means that you will have a great deal of flexibility in how you engage with the course. That said, if course design ever poses barriers to your ability to access or to demonstrate mastery of course content, or if things just aren't working for you for some reason, please let me know so that we can explore reasonable solutions together. Whether you have a known disability and have formal accommodations or are just struggling, Disability Resources can help. Reach them by [email](#), phone (651-696-6748), or use the [online scheduler](#).



EnviroThursday Attendance + Summaries

To build community and extend the important conversations we are having in class, you should attend two (or more) EnviroThursday presentations and submit a short (1-2 paragraph) summary and reflection afterwards. [This semester's EnviroThursday line-up](#) includes many indigenous speakers addressing a variety of topics. If you have a schedule conflict with most or all EnviroThursdays, please see me asap to make alternative arrangements.



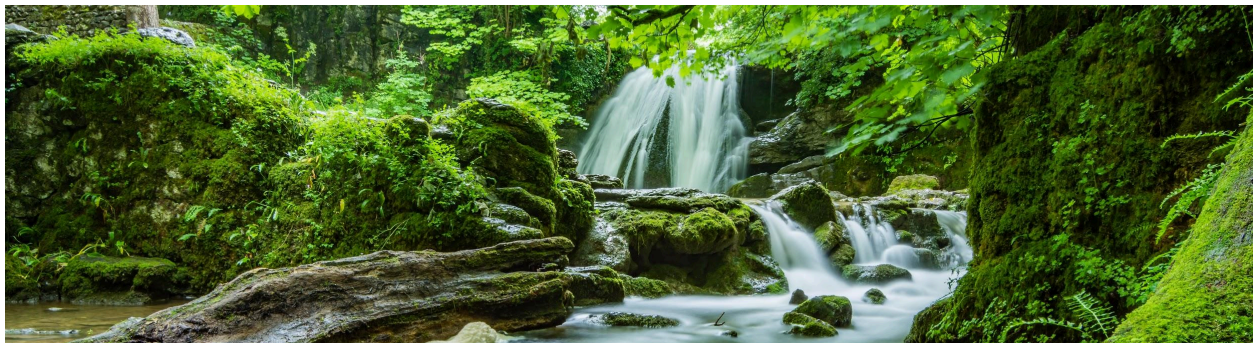
Writing Assignments

This course fulfills Macalester's Argumentative Writing (WA) General Education requirement. That means we will spend some class time discussing the conventions of good argumentative writing and honing our writing skills. In addition, it means that you will do various kinds of writing for this class, which range from relatively informal reflections (which are designed to help you think through ideas to understand them more clearly) to more formal assignments (which ask you to present your ideas in polished, carefully edited, thoughtfully considered prose). You will also have the chance to revise and improve some of your written work based on feedback from me and your peers.

Reading Preparation

Before each class, everyone will post a short but substantive written response to the reading assignment. This required response is the major writing assignment for the course, and is structured to help you synthesize the readings and begin to articulate your own thoughts on the reading. Check Moodle for each class's response format before composing your post. (I strongly recommend that you compose your response in a separate, saved document and then paste it into Moodle when you are finished.) It may also be helpful to look at the questions on Moodle before doing the reading.

These 600-1000 word responses are your opportunity to critically evaluate the ideas, arguments, and points of view from the week's readings. Your response should display your own genuine reflection upon the material of the week. The best reading responses are both substantive and focused, and will refer to specific passages as evidence or to illustrate a point; it is better to choose a few key points and develop them well than to describe a set of disconnected and underdeveloped ideas. Where relevant, you should explicitly connect to ideas and readings from previous readings and discussions. Once you have posted your response, you will be able to read everyone else's posts. I encourage you to read through your peers' posts before class begins.





Essays

Over the course of the semester you will write three short essays (3-5 pages each). For the final essay, you will complete written evaluations of your peers' work and revise your essay based on feedback from your peers and from me. These papers are designed to give you a chance to demonstrate a deeper understanding and synthesis of course themes and readings.

As part of the peer review process, you will meet with others in your assigned peer review group to discuss one another's writing and strategies for improvement. You will also meet with me to discuss your essay and your personal writing goals for the class.

For each essay, you will compose a "dear reader" paragraph that (1) identifies/restates the thesis of your paper for your reader, (2) comments on what you see as the strengths of the paper and what you enjoyed during the writing process, and (3) describes what you struggled with or where you see weaknesses in the essay.

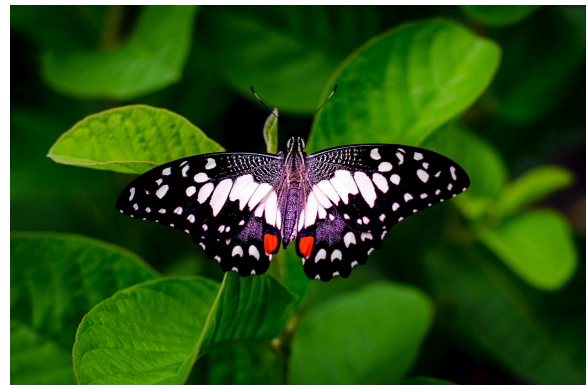
Topics for the papers will be discussed in class approximately 2 weeks before they are due. The assignment dates and deadlines are listed in Moodle.



Alternative Classic Presentation

Sometime during the semester, each student will make a 7- to 8-minute formal presentation to the class describing a piece of environmental writing that has been suggested as a classic but is not included in the course reading list. The list of "alternative classics" is flexible; students should decide by the end of the second week which classic they would like to investigate, summarize, and present to the group. The in-class presentation specifications focus on organization, depth, interest/appeal, and professional style. Students should practice their presentation ahead of time and hold to the time limit.

Use the link on Moodle to choose and claim a text. You may also suggest a text not on the list. Just be sure to get it approved by Chris!





Grading

In most learning situations in life outside of school, you are not assigned a grade. In academic settings, they are the norm. Yet conventional grading structures are often counterproductive. They may lead students to think more about their grades than about their writing or learning, or to focus on impressing (or fooling) a teacher rather than engaging wholeheartedly with the material, or to fear failure and thus be reluctant to take risks with writing or ideas. Many decades of psychological research in education suggests that this approach can actually harm learning.

Therefore, in this course, we will take a different approach to assessment and grades; we will use a combination of “co-grading” (also called “ungrading,” [\(Stomel 2020\)](#)), and Specifications Grading. The intent is to create flexibility and give you agency so that you can focus on learning rather than grades.

How it works:

Throughout the semester, you will earn completion points for class participation, reading responses, formal written work, and other assignments – as long as they reflect satisfactory work. You will not receive a grade from me on this work; instead, I will give you feedback and the opportunity to revise. You can see my rough expectations for different grades in the table at right. With these rough expectations in mind, you complete an end-of-course reflection that includes a question about what letter grade you would give yourself for the course and why. You and I will meet and talk about your work, your reflection, and your self-evaluation, and together we will arrive at your final grade — thus the term “co-grading.”

Tokens

To provide some flexibility with deadlines, you also have 5 tokens for essays/revisions (each good for a 24-hour extension) and 4 tokens for reading forum posts (each also good for a 24-hour extension). You may use these without letting me know ahead of time and can track their use in Moodle.

Participation	Alt Classic Presentation	Reading Forum Posts	Essays	EnviroThursday (attend + sum)	Self-Reflections	Course
10	1	10	3	2	2	A
10	1	9	3	2	2	A-
10	1	9	3	1	2	B+
10	1	8	3	1	2	B
10	1	8	3	0	2	B-
9	1	8	2	0	1	C
9	1	7	2	0	1	D

Schedule and topics

WK			Introductions
1	Wed	9/4	What Are Environmental Classics and Why Are We Studying Them? Introductions
			Unit 1: Conservation
2	Wed	9/11	What Does It Mean to Value Nature? Henry David Thoreau, selections from <i>Walden</i> (1854) Theodore Roosevelt, "Opening Address" (1909) Gifford Pinchot, <i>The Fight for Conservation</i> (1910) John Muir, "My First Summer in the Sierra" (1911) and "Hetch Hetchy" (1912) Virtual yearbook page due 7 pm
3	Wed	9/18	Whose Voices Were Ignored? W.E.B Du Bois, <i>Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil</i> (1920), Sec. IX Zitkala-Sa [aka Gertrude Simmons Bonnin], "The School Days of an Indian Girl" (1900) Anna Botsford Comstock, <i>Handbook of Nature-Study for Teachers and Parents</i> (1916), 1-15 & 24
4	Wed	9/25	What Are Our Ethical Obligations to Nature? Aldo Leopold, <i>A Sand County Almanac</i> (1949), Part 1 "A Sand County Almanac" plus "A Fierce Green Fire," "Goose Music," and "The Land Ethic"
5	Wed	10/2	What Are Our Ethical Obligations to Nature? Take Two Winona LaDuke, <i>All Our Relations</i> (1999), selections Robin Wall Kimmerer, <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> (2013), selections Peer Draft Paper 1 due 7 pm
	Mon	10/7	Paper 1 due 7pm: Letter to an Author Unit 2: Classical Environmentalism
6	Wed	10/9	Who Has the Right to Make Earth-Altering Decisions? Rachel Carson, <i>Silent Spring</i> (1962), selections Harriet Washington, <i>A Terrible Thing to Waste</i> (2019), selections
7	Wed	10/16	What Did "the Environment" Mean to Early Environmentalists? Round Robin: Classics from the "Environmental Decade" Group 1: Donella Meadows et al., <i>The Limits to Growth</i> (1972), selections Group 2: Barry Commoner, <i>The Closing Circle</i> (1971), selections Group 3: Frances Moore Lappé, <i>Diet for a Small Planet</i> , selections Group 4: Black Survival (1970); George Wiley, <i>Ecology and the Poor</i> (1970); and N. Scott Momaday, "An American Land Ethic" (1970) and "A First American Views His Land" (1976)
8	Wed	10/23	Are Pictures Worth a Thousand Words? Movie Night Mid-semester learning reflection due 7 pm
9	Wed	10/30	Where Did Early Definitions of Environmentalism Fall Short? United Church of Christ, <i>Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States</i> (1987), selections <i>Proceedings of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit</i> (1991), selections SouthWest Organizing Project, Letter to Big Ten Environmental Groups, 16 March 1990 Lavelle and Coyle, "Unequal Protection," 1992 Peer Draft Paper 2 due 7 pm
	Fri	11/1	Paper 2 due 7 pm Unit 3: Going Global
10	Wed	11/6	Where Did Early Definitions of Environmentalism Fall Short? Take 2 Chico Mendes, "The Destruction of Our Rain Forest Affects Not Only the Brazilian People, but in Fact All the People on the Planet," 1988. Ken Saro-Wiwa, "A Deadly Ecological War in Which No Blood Is Spilled but People Die All the Time" 1993. Vandana Shiva, "Sharing and Exchange, the Basis of Our Humanity and Our Ecological Survival, Has Been Redefined as a Crime" 2000. Wangari Maathai, "The Challenge Is to Restore the Home of the Tadpoles and Give Back to Our Children a World of Beauty and Wonder" 2004.
11	Wed	11/13	How is "Sustainability" Different from "Environmentalism"? Gro Brundtland, "Our Common Future" (1987), selections Kate Raworth, "A Safe and Just Operating Space for Humanity" (2012) Julian Agyeman, <i>Introducing Just Sustainabilities: Policy, Planning and Practice</i> (2013), selections Paper 3 ideas (for peer discussion) due 7 pm
12	Mon	11/18	Paper 3 draft (for discussion with Chris) due 10 am
	Wed	11/20	How Can We Improve Our Writing? No class tonight - one-on-one paper conferences with Chris this week
13	Wed	11/27	No Class - Thanksgiving
14	Wed	12/4	What Else Should We Read Together? Students choose this week's readings
15	Wed	12/11	What Are This Semester's Most Important Takeaways? No readings -- continue to work on your final paper!
Finals	Mon	12/16	Final revised Paper 3 and final self-reflections due 10 pm

