

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Environmental Philosophy
Philosophy 4993F

Fall 2011
Time: Th 2:30-5:30
Classroom: UC 222

Instructor: Eric Desjardins
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course in environmental philosophy explores some ethical and epistemological issues that arise in the contexts of conservation and restoration ecology. We commonly hear that that we ought to preserve biodiversity. But what are the moral justifications for such a widely accepted normative claim? An increasing number of philosophers think that we cannot answer this question by attributing intrinsic value to nature. Is it possible instead to develop an ethic of conservation based on anthropocentric values but yet maintain some kind of reverence towards nature? We will also look at some of the problems related to attributing value to natural environments. On the one hand, formal cost-benefits analysis is sometimes criticized for undervaluing nature. But on the other hand, attributing infinite value to environment creates a problem of incommensurability and renders formal decision-making ineffective. Another related topic of this course is the problem of defining biodiversity. Is there a satisfying operational definition of biodiversity? Finally, this course will also look into the problem of unpredictability. Scientific and applied ecology were for a long time deeply influenced by an equilibrium paradigm in which nature was conceived of as balanced and predictable. Starting in the 1970s, ecologists have challenged this view and now endorse a non-equilibrium view of nature. We will reflect on this new ecology and how it can affect the way in which policy makers and ecologists approach ecological management.

TEXT

Sarkar, Sahotra (2005), *Biodiversity and Environmental Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (available at UWO Bookstore and on Amazon.ca)

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course has two main objectives. The first one is to expose students to some of the central ethical and epistemological issues arising in conservation and restoration biology. Typical environmental philosophy courses focus essentially on moral issues, but there are a variety of interesting epistemological issues that arise in this context, too. How should we define biodiversity? How much can traditional scientific ecology contribute to environmental management? What are the different sources of unpredictability in environmental decision-making? How can we deal with unpredictability? What is the place of society and culture in ecological management? Another objective is to develop the problem-solving skills of students. The approach used in this course will be problem based. Every week students will work in small groups to

analyze a problem/case, identify central issues and develop a list of learning objectives. Then they will do some research and readings on their own and comeback in class the next week for a more in-depth analysis of the problems they have identified the previous week.

REQUIREMENTS

- Mid-term paper (10 pages) 30%
- Term paper (15 pages) 50%
- In class participation 20%

AUDIT

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

The Department of Philosophy Policies which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website at <http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/proceduresappeals.html>. It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus cannot be used as grounds of appeal.