Sierra Institute
California Wilderness: Nature, Philosophy, Literature and Ecopsychology
Spring Quarter

Perspectives on Nature

X129.4
Course Overview

This course, along with two concurrent courses, is part of a 9-week, 15-unit field program called “California Wilderness: Nature Philosophy, Religion, Ecopsychology”. The program is taught entirely while out on a series of backpacking trips.

This particular course looks at the perspectives of nature from three types of human cultural organization: hunter-gatherer, agricultural, and industrial. Focus will be on representative perspectives as revealed through worldview, mythic images, religious practice, and daily life-support activities. Emergent post-modernist perspectives will also be reviewed including environmental justice, transpersonal ecology, and ecopsychology. Throughout the course students will work towards an understanding of specific environmental perspectives and traditions, the historical framework within which these perspectives are located, and the articulation of a personal environmental viewpoint.

Learning Objectives

1) To understand the outlines of human evolution, both physical and cultural.
2) To develop a sense of the great range and diversity of human cultures as observed vertically through time and horizontally through geography.
3) To note the broad distinctions and ramifications of three types of culture: hunter-gatherer, agricultural, and industrial.
4) To see how a people’s relationship with nature is shaped by the multiple factors that make up their cultural worldview.
5) To place current American attitudes toward nature in a coherent understanding of Western culture’s origins and development.
6) To understand one’s own perspective on nature: what it is (self-inquiry and articulation), how it got there (cultural and personal history), how it might be altered and deepened (ecopsychology).

Course Outline

At the outset, the general concerns of the course will be introduced: the diversity and relativity of worldviews and more specifically, the diversity and relativity of cultural attitudes toward nature. Students will be encouraged to write about and discuss their own attitudes toward nature and to try to discern how they came to these attitudes: what is universal, what is cultural, what is familial.

Attention will then be given to the Paleolithic period and hunter-gatherer culture. Recognizing the limitations of generalities, archaeology, and ethnography, the broad patterns of tribal relationship to place will be discussed. Specific focus will be given to the native Californian cultures of course field locales and the Dagara of West Africa. Lecture and readings will examine methods of subsistence, social structures, religious beliefs and practices, and the role of orality in cultural transmission.

Focus for the next segment of the course will be on the advent of agriculture and how human relationships to the earth changed during the Neolithic period. The archaeological evidence (and its various interpretations) of Goddess-oriented cultures will be examined. Farming technology (the digging stick to the plow) will be correlated to evolving social practices. Seasonal cycles with their associated rituals, mythological stories, symbols of fertility and harvest, and gender relations will be discussed.
We will continue by exploring the historical development of modern Western culture. Greek and Hebrew roots will be delineated. The influence of Christianity and its various attitudes toward nature will be discussed. The Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution will be considered for their innovations and impact. Lectures and readings will draw out the significance of such philosophical concepts as rationality, materialism, objectivity, and mechanism. Modern urban life with industry, technology, globalization, and consumerism will be analyzed to understand underlying attitudes toward nature.

The final weeks will be used for considerations of environmentally conscious trends in American culture such as deep ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology, ecopsychology, and environmental justice.

Schedule

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<tr>
<th>Session #</th>
<th>Topical Outline</th>
<th>Approx. Hours</th>
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| Weeks 1-2 | I. Nature and Culture  
A. The range and relativity of worldviews  
B. The range of interactions between people and ecosystems  
C. Uncertain terms: nature/culture, wild/domestic, backcountry/frontcountry  
II. Hunter-gatherers  
A. Human evolution and the Paleolithic period  
B. Ecological balance, carrying capacity, lifestyle  
C. Native American cultures  
1. California Indians  
2. Environmental ethics  
3. Shamanism and earth-based religion  
D. Dagara of West Africa: indigenous perspectives on nature, ritual, healing and community | 15 |
| Weeks 3-4 | III. Agricultural Societies  
A. Plowing the earth, controlling the water  
B. Goddess worship in Europe  
C. Sedentary lifeways, population increases, politics  
IV. The Roots of Western Culture  
A. Greek philosophy and science  
B. Judaism and Christianity  
C. Patriarchy and the oppression of the feminine  
V. The Rise of Modernism and Industrial Civilization  
A. Scientific revolution: Bacon, Descartes, Newton  
B. Nature as commodity, universe as mechanism  
C. Adam Smith and Karl Marx | 20 |
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<th>Weeks 5-6</th>
<th>VI. Environmental Philosophy in the Twentieth Century—the Expansion of the Ethic of Care</th>
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| A. Deep Ecology | 1. Biocentrism and inherent value  
2. Self-realization  
3. The practice of compassion |
| B. Ecofeminism | 1. Critique of patriarchy  
2. Alienation of the “other” from wild nature |
| C. Environmental justice | 1. The relationships between race, class, and environmental destruction  
2. Bringing inclusivity to the environmental movement |

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<th>VII. Ecopsychology</th>
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| A. The effects of technology on our relationship with nature  
B. Consumerism: an examination of false and true human needs  
C. Poetry as a language of ecopsychology |

**TOTAL HOURS**  50

**Required Readings**


Found in course reader:

- Somé, Malidoma. The Healing Wisdom of Africa. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998. (selections)
Assessment

1) **Class participation (consists of two parts) - 10%**
   a) Preparation: Thorough reading, as demonstrated primarily through bringing questions of clarification and larger questions to each class meeting that take group discussions deeper into the material.
   b) Involvement: Focused contribution to the group discussion, demonstrating a mature awareness of how to listen, respond to and build on others’ ideas, as well as the ability to facilitate equality of participation.

2) **Creative response - 20%**
   A written response to a Mary Oliver poem of your choice. The response will also be read aloud to the group.

3) **Class presentations - 40%**
   Two collaborative small group presentations on the reading material. Presentations should be two hours in length and convey the key points in the reading, define important terms, and provide the opportunity for group engagement with these ideas. A range of methods/learning styles is encouraged (verbal, visual/spatial, kinesthetic, musical, inter and intrapersonal). The one required element is the offering of discussion and/or journal questions and the facilitation of group discussion. Students will also be evaluated on the degree of collaborative effort. This is assessed by the instructor through sitting in on a portion of each group’s meetings as they prepare their presentations, as well as by observing the final presentations.

4) **Final paper - 30%**
   A 1250 to 1750 paper addressing one of the essay questions provided by the instructor; essay topic may also be self-designed with instructor approval. The paper should include references and citations to two or more authors and avoid loose generalities, clichés and unsubstantiated sentiments. It should be focused and intense, staying close and aware of one’s thesis at all times. The first person perspective (“I”) is welcome, especially if using it encourages one to push his or her comfort zone, write with authenticity and passion, and compose one’s manifesto. Please turn in nothing that could have been written before the program began. Because you will have no computer to edit your work, some concession will be made for misspellings and cross outs, but the final product should be as tidy as possible.

**Learning Outcomes**

1) Have knowledge of the vast diversity of human cultures over geography and archeological and historical time.
2) Have knowledge of how differing worldviews can create very different individual and human experiences.
3) Understand the significance of the differences between hunter-gatherer, agricultural, and industrial cultures.

4) Be knowledgeable in the attitudes toward and patterns of interaction with nature, as revealed through the study of diverse cultures.

5) Have a deepened understanding of contemporary American culture and its attitude and relationship with nature and the earth.

6) Be able to examine one’s personal relationship to earth with the tools of ecopsychology.