

SOCIOLOGY HONOURS

2025: Term 2

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the environmental sociology module. This six-week module will run in the second term from 7 April to 16 May. Use the insights and various sociological tools that you have acquired throughout your academic career.

The central premise of this module rests on the recognition of the inextricable link between humans and their natural environment. Throughout this module, we will explore this multifaceted, inseparable and mutually constitutive relationship. It is an undeniable fact that our ecological footprint is at odds with the quest to achieve sustainable development and a just society. Environmental sociology calls for the urgent need to reconcile humanity with its natural environment. It goes beyond technical and scientific issues to the complex social processes of the ecological crisis. One of the basic premises of environmental sociology is that we cannot satisfactorily understand environmental problems/issues, let alone hope for a solution, without a basic understanding of the wider context within which they occur. It is imperative for us to examine critically the human-environmental interface and understand the main drivers of ecological disorganisation and destruction.

The module attempts to develop an empirically grounded understanding of the dynamic society-environment interface by examining the following topics: global environmental governance, environmental justice and racism in South Africa, and waste management with a specific focus on the urban environment in South Africa.

MODULE STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVES

The course is divided into four sections:

The first section examines various theoretical and conceptual issues.

The second section focuses on global environmental governance.

The third section provides a critical discussion of the environmental justice discourse and movement in South Africa, reflecting on its historical development, current trends and future direction. To contextualize this theme, we will examine the history of environmentalism in South Africa.

The fourth section focuses on waste management in the urban environment in South Africa.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

A general learning outcome is to read widely and critically on the subject in order to develop a comparative perspective and to structure your arguments accordingly.

At the end of the module, students should:

- have an understanding of environmental issues from a sociological perspective;
- understand the various attempts to conceptualise, define and theorise the human-environmental interface;
- have developed an independent critical capacity to evaluate these different conflicting, yet sometimes, overlapping strands of thought;
- have a grasp of global, national and local environmental issues; and
- be able to critically analyse selected case studies.

MODULE REQUIREMENTS

It is important to read the module handout to familiarise yourself with the core themes that will be covered and to understand the general message and direction of this module.

Seminars will be held on Mondays (10:00 to 13:00) and Thursdays (10:00 to 13:00), Eden Grove Seminar Room 2.

You are expected to submit a **three-page assignment** addressing the question posed for each seminar session. These assignments form part of the in-term formative assessment and together with the term essay, constitute 50% of the final mark for this module. A four-hour exam in June will make up the remainder (50%) of the marks for the module.

You are expected to consult additional readings to deepen your understanding. The prescribed texts are in the **short loan** section of **Rhodes Library**. It is advisable to use these prescribed readings before any other sources are utilised. Full-text readings have also been posted on the Library's webpage. **Check under Course support --- Course materials ---- Scroll down the list of course guides---- click Sociology II**. Use the web sparingly and with caution.

As a department, we are committed to reflecting on our teaching practices and module content to strengthen our courses. Towards the end of the term, you will be asked to participate in a module evaluation process. Please take this seriously and evaluate the module honestly and comprehensively. Your input will be highly appreciated and will make a real contribution to enhancing teaching and learning in the department.

ASSESSMENT

1. In-term assessment:
 - a) Write-up for each seminar theme.
 - b) Seminar presentations
 - c) An essay: **7 May 2025 @ 15:00**
2. An examination in June.

Guidelines for assignments:

All work (where indicated) must be submitted on the designated Turnitin platform and *not* via any other media.

Please consult the *Sociology Handbook* for an outline of the University's policy on plagiarism, guidelines on the formatting and writing of assignments, the departmental rules regarding citations and referencing, and the criteria for assessing written work. A copy of the Assignment Cover Sheet, which must accompany all assignments submitted to the Department, is also available in the Handbook. Rhodes University's *Common Faculty Policy on Plagiarism* has also been uploaded on this module's page on RUConnected.

1. It is important to note the overlapping nature of the various sections. This means that you can use information from all sections of the module.
2. All pages must be *numbered* consecutively, with the exception of the title page.

SECTION ONE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

Environmental sociology has developed several theoretical tools over the years. Each of these represents an attempt to contribute to sociological thought by explaining the nature of the human-environmental interface. This module will attempt to expose students to various theoretical perspectives that have been used to analyse and explain societal-environmental interactions. We will start by examining the multidimensional, evolving concept of the environment. What is clear in the current discussion is the acknowledgement that the environment cannot be limited to primarily green issues (fauna and flora) but must include the social side as well. This will be followed by a discussion of two eco-philosophies, anthropocentrism and deep ecology. The two philosophies are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, anthropocentrism emphasises human supremacy in relation to other species, whilst deep ecology advocates for a rethink of our exploitative relationship with other life forms. Its key emphasis is on the intrinsic value of all life forms, irrespective of their usefulness to humans or society.

Prescribed Readings

- Adams, C.L. (2010). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. (Twentieth anniversary edition). New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing.
- Barry, J. (2007). *Environment and social theory* (second edition). London: Routledge. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283345483_Environment_and_Social_Theory_2nd_edition
- Benton, T. & Redclift, M. (eds.) (1994). *Social theory and the global environment*. London: Routledge.
- Buttel, F.H. (2000). Reflections on the potentials of ecological modernization as a social theory. *Natures Sciences Societes*, Vol. 8 (1), pp. 5-12.
Available at: <https://www.nss-journal.org/articles/nss/pdf/2000/01/nss20000801p5.pdf>
- Clark, B. & Foster, J.B. (2009). Marx's ecology in the 21st century. *World Review of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (1), pp. 142-156.
Available at: https://johnbellamyfoster.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/2010_Marxs-Ecology-in-the-21st-Century.pdf
- Foster, J.B. (1999). Marx's theory of metabolic rift: Classical foundations for environmental sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105 (2), pp. 366-405.
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- Foster, J.B. (2005). The treadmill of accumulation: Schnaiberg's environment and Marxian political economy. *Organization & Environment*, Vol. 18 (1), pp. 7-18. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26161945.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A08cbd9bc1e5850c636128ab0e8e64fb2>
- Gould, K. A., Pellow, D.N. & Schnaiberg, A. (2004). Interrogating the treadmill of production: Everything you wanted to know about the treadmill but were afraid to ask. *Organization & Environment*, Vol. 17 (3), pp. 296-316. Available at:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26162434.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A70a2033b4b757386e0164dab011f8002>

Goralnik, L. & Nelson, O.P. (2012). Anthropocentrism. Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics (second edition).

Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268506880_Anthropocentrism

Grey, W. (1986). A critique of deep ecology. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (2), pp.211-216. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24353496.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3a40406e5e2be3aeab39ce5b6455b078>

Hannigan, J.A. (2006). *Environmental sociology: A social constructivist perspective*. New York: Routledge. [Chapters 1 and 5]

Kopnina, H., Washington, H., Taylor, B. & Piccolo, J.J. (2018). Anthropocentrism: More than just a misunderstood problem. *Journal of Agricultural Environmental Ethics*. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10806-018-9711-1>

Langhelle, O. (2000). Why ecological modernization and sustainable development should not be conflated. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, No. 2, pp. 303-322. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247965740_Why_ecological_modernization_and_sustainable_development_should_not_be_conflated

Lauer, D. (2005). Expropriating nature: The decoding of deep ecology. *Worldviews*, Vol. 9 (3), pp. 315-337. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43809310.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae3b5a8f0f812f8d5bbc55591cd32a3b7>

Ling, C. (2014). Ecological criticism based on social gender: The basic principles of ecofeminism. *Higher Education of Social Science*, Vol. 7 (1), pp. 67-72. Available at: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/viewFile/4895/pdf_62

Longenecker, M. (1997). Women, ecology and the environment: An introduction. *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, Vol. 9 (3), pp. 1-17.

Mallory, C. (2006). Ecofeminism and forest defense in Cascadia: Gender, theory and radical activism. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 17 (1), pp. 32-49. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10455750500505408?needAccess=true>

Nightingale, A. (2006). The nature of gender: Work, gender and the environment. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 24, pp. 165-185. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236648287_The_Nature_of_Gender_Work_Gender_and_Environment

Rabie, M.A. (1992). Nature and scope of environmental law. In: R.F. Fuggle & M.A. Rabie (eds.) *Environmental management in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta. [Chapter 6]

Rae, G. (2014). Anthropocentrism. Encyclopedia of Global Ethics. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gavin-Rae/publication/305377084_Anthropocentrism/links/5b0e5fcf4585157f8722a9e7/Anthropocentrism.pdf

- Redclift, M. & Woodgate, G. (2010). *The International handbook of environmental sociology*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Rice, J. (2009). Transnational organisation of production and uneven environmental degradation and change in the world economy. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. 50 (3/4), pp. 215-236.
Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258129858_The_Transnational_Organization_of_Production_and_Uneven_Environmental_Degradation_and_Change_in_the_World_Economy
- Sahu, S. (2023). Anthropocentrism: A study on environmental ethics. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, Vol. 5(1), pp. 13-15.
Available at:
https://www.academia.edu/105887655/Antropocentrism_A_study_on_environmental_ethics
- Schnaiberg, A. (1980). *The environment: From surplus to scarcity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shiva, V. (2010). Resources. In: W. Sachs (ed.) *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge as power* (second edition), pp. 228-242. London: Zed Books.
- Strydom, H.A. & King, N.D. (2009). *Environmental management in South Africa* (second edition), pp. 1-4. Cape Town: Juta.
- Toke, D. (2001). Ecological modernization: A reformist review. *New Political Economy*, Vol. 6 (2), pp. 279-291. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460120060652>
- York, R. & Rosa, E.A. (2003). Key challenges to ecological modernization theory: Institutional efficacy, case study evidence, units of analysis and the pace of eco-efficiency. *Organization & Environment*, Vol. 16 (3), pp. 273-288.
Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26162475>
- Weitzenfeld, A. & Joy, M. (2014). An overview of anthropocentrism, humanism, and speciesism in critical animal theory. In: A.J. Nocella III, J. Sorenson, K. Socha, & A. Matsuka (eds.), *Defining critical animal studies: An intersectional social justice approach for liberation*, pp. 3-27. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
Available at:
https://www.academia.edu/6086062/An_Overview_of_Anthropocentrism_Humanism_and_Speciesism_in_Critical_Animal_Theory
- Wilson, M. (2019). The green economy: The dangerous path of nature commoditization. *Consilience*, No. 21, pp. 86-99. Available at:
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26775085.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3d9b1e55a9a72805bd509c6401ee4b9d>
- Yilmaz, A.F. (2019). Contemporary feminist politics of veganism: Carol Adams' the sexual politics of meat and alternative approaches. *Global Media Journal – The Canadian Edition*, Vol 11 (1), pp.23-38. Available at: <http://gmj-canadianedition.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/02-Yilmaz-Volume-11-issue-1-Final.pdf>

SECTION TWO: GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE: DEBATES, PROGRESS, CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES

The negative human footprint on the environment is indisputable. Underscoring this fact is that this is largely irreversible and anthropogenic. Global warming, destruction of the ozone layer, soil degradation and erosion, freshwater pollution, overcrowding, deforestation, loss of genetic diversity, toxic waste, effects of pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides, and floods, among others, are all visible ongoing environmental problems in our world today. It is for this reason that the environment occupies centre stage of scholarly and public concern and debate. What is at stake is a real commitment to collective environmental citizenship, action and responsible stewardship. Globally we have witnessed 'intensified global efforts' to make the environment a priority. The impact of the above-mentioned developments led to the development of international environmental diplomacy (or global environmental governance) and the rise of environmental consciousness and action. The former has evolved since the inaugural United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. We have seen the establishment of many institutions, multilateral environmental instruments, agreements and processes. We will explore the evolution of global environmental governance focusing on environmental discourses including sustainable development and the relatively recent notion of the 'green economy'. The performance record of sustainable development is far from satisfactory. With the notion of the green economy, critics have cast doubt on its effectiveness in tackling the current environmental crisis. Proposals have been made for the reform of global environmental governance in order to tackle current realities.

Prescribed Readings

- Carter, N. (2007). *The politics of the environment: Ideas, activism, policy* (second edition), pp. 201-226. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chasek, P.S. & Wagner, L.M. (eds.) (2012). *The roads from Rio: Lessons learned from twenty years of multilateral environmental negotiations*. New York: Routledge.
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- Dryzek, J.S. & Schlosberg, D. (eds.) (2005). *Debating the earth: The environmental politics reader* (second edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Chapters 18-20]
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- Klarin, T. (2018). The concept of sustainable development: From its beginning to contemporary issues. *Zagreb International Review of Economics & Business*, Vol. 21 (1), pp. 67-94. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326164068_The_Concept_of_Sustainable_Development_From_its_Beginning_to_the_Contemporary_Issues
- Levidow, L. (2014). *What green economy? Diverse agendas, their tensions and potential futures*. IKD Working Paper No. 73. England: Innovation Knowledge Development, Open University.

- Morrow, K. (2012). Rio+20, the green economy and re-orienting sustainable development. *Environment Law Review*, Vol. 14 (4), pp. 279-297. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1350/enlr.2012.14.4.166>
- Najam, A., Papa, M. & Taiyab, N. (2006). *Global environmental governance: A reform agenda*. Canada: Winnipeg, Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development.
- Nyekwere, E.H. (2019). Global environmental governance reform: The emerging debate on the need for a world environmental organisation. *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research*, Vol. 7 (2), pp. 23-48.
Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313711276_Global_environmental_governance_a_ref_orm_agenda/link/5d75a40b299bf1cb809308c7/download
- Wilson, M. (2019). The green economy: The dangerous path of nature commoditization. *Consilience*, No. 21, pp. 86-99. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26775085.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3d9b1e55a9a72805bd509c6401ee4b9d>

SECTION THREE: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND RACISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

Environmental justice as a rights-based, people-centred and community-based discourse with local, regional and global alliances is multi-issue and action-oriented with the primary goal of achieving healthy and sustainable communities. Its transformative character advocates for inclusiveness, justice and 'democratic accountability' (McDonald, 2002: 3), focusing on the marginalised, voiceless, powerless and sometimes disenfranchised communities according to their class, gender, race, ethnicity and geographical locations. Its core principles rest on distributive and participatory justice, referring respectively, to a fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens and the inclusion of all stakeholders in the environmental decision-making. Environmental justice in South Africa is an offshoot of the environmental justice movement of the United States of America. Compared to the US, environmental justice in South Africa is relatively new evolving slowly since the late 1980s into the current dispensation. The distinctive character of the discourse and movement in South Africa lies in its critique of mainstream environmentalism and apartheid. This section provides a critical discussion of the environmental justice discourse and movement in South Africa, reflecting on its historical development, current trends and future direction. To contextualize this theme, we will examine the history of environmentalism in South Africa. The discussion will be grounded in real-life examples.

Prescribed Readings

- Agyeman, J., Bullard, R.D. & Evans, D. (2002). Exploring the nexus: Bringing together sustainability, environmental justice and equity. *Space and Polity*, Vol. 6 (1), pp. 77-90.

Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248990837_Exploring_the_Nexus_Bringing_Together_Sustainability_Environmental_Justice_and_Equity
- Bowen, W.M. & Haynes, K.E. (2000). The debate over environmental justice. *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 81 (3), pp. 892-894. Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293603119_The_debate_over_environmental_justice

- Cock, J. (2007). *The war against ourselves: Nature, power and justice*, pp. 169-198. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Dryzek, J.S. & Schlosberg, D. (eds.) (2005). *Debating the earth: The environmental politics reader*. (second edition). London: Oxford University Press. [Chapters 30, 31, 32]
- Hallowes, D. (2011). *Toxic futures: South Africa in the crises of energy, environment and capital*, pp. 1-2. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339077267_Toxic_Futures_South_Africa_in_the_crises_of_energy_environment_and_capital
- Lawson, B.E. (2008). The value of environmental justice. *Environmental Justice*, Vol. 1 (3), pp. 1-3. Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249233181_The_Value_of_Environmental_Justice/link/5495ed320cf29b94482413fc/download
- McDonald, D.A. (ed.) (2002). *Environmental justice in South Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press. [Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5]
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https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1350/enlr.2010.12.1.074?casa_token=y5BogpKx-NAAAAAA:kcmvgWCydwqP2WE34wqWqmL6Wj-jjNL8jr2J1ZF1_DpR2MFu6QtgQ8Q-p6n80mJWN8B6JtS_uO1h-g

SECTION FOUR: WASTE MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The urban environment still mirrors the apartheid landscape both in its spatial planning and inefficient (or non-existent) service delivery. We examine this topic historically. Critical to this discussion is waste management. We examine this issue within the context of the National Waste Management Strategy (2020) and the Integrated Urban Development framework (2016), amidst the collapse or dysfunction of local government and the mounting waste problem in the country. Municipalities are in the stranglehold of an unprecedented waste management crisis, with repercussions for public health, the environment and the quality of life of residents. The problem is manifold: large-scale incapacity with inefficient and outdated waste collection practices and processes, illegal dumping, rapid urbanisation and consumerism, to mention just a few. We will revisit the previous discussion on environmental justice. As a policy document, the National Waste Management Strategy is unrealistic in its approach and has proven incapable of addressing the waste problem.

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- Christopher, A.J. (1987). Apartheid planning in South Africa: The case of Port Elizabeth. *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 153 (2), pp. 195-204. Available at:
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/634871.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae2dd5791042474bb7dd150bfeb170dcc>
- Department Cooperative Governance. South Africa. (2016). Integrated urban development framework: A new deal for South African cities and towns. Available at:
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- Department of Environment, Forestry & Fisheries. South Africa. (2020). National waste management strategy. Pretoria: Dept. Environment, Forestry & Fisheries. Available at: https://www.dffe.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/nationalwaste_management_strategy.pdf
- Department of Environmental Affairs. South Africa. (2011). Addressing challenges with waste service provision in South Africa: Municipal waste sector plan. Available at: <http://sawic.environment.gov.za/documents/760.PDF>
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- Naidoo, K. (2009). *An analysis of municipal solid waste management in South Africa using the Msunduzi municipality as a case study*. Unpublished MSc Thesis. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal.
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- Agyeman, J. (2002). Constructing environmental (in)justice: Transatlantic tales. *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 11 (3), pp. 31-53.
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- Cutter, S. (1995). Race, class and environmental justice. *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 19 (1), pp. 111-122.
- Devall, B. & Sessions, G. (eds.) (1985). *Deep ecology: Living as if nature mattered*. Salt Lake City: G.M. City.
- Dryzek, J.S. & Schlosberg, D. (eds.) (2005). *Debating the earth: The environmental politics*

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USEFUL WEB SITES

- African Centre for Biosafety
www.acbio.org.za
- African Wildlife Foundation
www.awf.org
- Biowatch South Africa
www.biowatch.org.za
- Earthlife Africa
www.earthlife.org.za
- ELDIS: the gateway to development information
www.eldis.org
- Endangered Wildlife Trust
www.ewt.org.za
- Environmental Monitoring Group
www.emg.org.za
- GreenNet
www.gn.apc.org
- Greenpeace
www.greenpeace.org
- Groundwork
www.groundwork.org.za
- International Institute for Environment and Development
www.iied.org
- Southern Africa Environment Project
www.saep.org
- UN Environmental Programme
www.unep.org
- WorldWide Fund for Nature
www.wwf.org
- World Resources Institute
www.wri.org