“What should be our society’s relationship with nature? What are the intellectual causes of the current environmental crisis? These “great questions” of environmental studies are essentially humanistic inquiries into ethics and values.”—Jeanne Kay, “Human Dominion over Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers.

In this course we explore the intellectual, social, scientific, and rhetorical backgrounds of sustainability. We read technical and imaginative literature, view and discuss visual arts, and try to come to a collective understanding of the movement that has attracted so much academic, community, and environmental attention and commitment. Our approaches will be to explore the assumptions, values, and practices of sustainability wherever we find them, with an eye toward practical, meaningful applications in our personal and professional lives, and in our community.

Sustainability has a now-classic definition: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”
originally articulated by the U.N.’s *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (1987). In that context, it’s interesting to think about how Adam and Eve may have felt upon their expulsion from their rich orchard to labor on the land and to grow their own food:

Cursed is the ground because of you
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.
(Genesis 3: 17-19)

Since 1987 sustainability has taken on many additional meanings—spiritual, global, economic, scientific, social, cultural, and more. If the average person is overwhelmed by conflicting messages found in the media regarding climate change and sustainability, and my Mom sure is, what role can engineers, scientists, writers, editors, and artists play in developing a coherent and active understanding of the concept? I propose that we frame some of these questions in terms of creativity and the imagination.

We’ll look at and discuss some visual art in this class, read parts of the bible, poems, farm manuals, personal narratives, and interdisciplinary research in ethnobiology, hydrology, and microbial ecologies. We’ll meet people from campus and from the local community whose work in sustainability take on many different approaches.

**Why “Rhetoric & Poetics of Sustainability”?**

To begin, we will frame our work in a couple of humanities concepts that will help us organize our work, and find ways to make that work meaningfully generative:

**Poetics** refers to an organizing principle—a systematic study—of literature, information, and knowledge. A poetic principle is not necessarily always an artistic or creative principle, but the word *does* come from the Greek philosopher Aristotle’s text by the same name, in which he analyzes the “characteristic functions” of poetic genres.

**Rhetoric** is the language that people and communities use to negotiate meaning and values. The languages may be visual, textual, auditory; they may be persuasive, which connects rhetoric to one of its classical roots; rhetoric is also a generative tool for discovery, and a means for analyzing forms of communication. All representations of the environment and of climate change—engineering, scientific, literary, artistic, educational, legislative—are rhetorical.
J.S. Curry, *Our Good Earth*, 1942 (see his *Wisconsin Landscape*, 1939)

Santiago Crespin *Sin Titulo* (*Dollars From Heaven*)
We'll also inquire into various technical, scientific, and argumentative pieces that appeal to our attention in different ways. For example, what is the appeal and the organizing principle here?

We are involved now in a profound failure of imagination. Most of us cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history beyond the farm. Most people cannot imagine the forest and the forest economy that produced their houses and furniture and paper; or the landscapes, the streams, and the weather that fill their pitchers and bathtubs and swimming pools with water. Most people appear to assume that when they have paid their money for these things they have entirely met their obligations.

—Wendell Berry, In Distrust of Movements
Science, Technology & Humanities II

HU2506 | Spring 2008: The Rhetoric & Poetics of Sustainability

Course Links

- Course Art (w/ MTU login)
- Course Calendar
- Course Flyer (PDF)
- Course Policies
- Course Projects & Grading
- Course Resources
- Course Texts & Materials

Course Calendar

Please note that this calendar is designed to be flexible: we may make changes along the way, depending on your interests and the needs of the class. You are responsible for knowing about—and adjusting for—any changes.

Week 1
Introductions, course goals; ecological narratives

Monday 1/14
Course introduction: key terms & goals
Handout: Individual ecological narrative

Wed. 1/16
In class: Discussing Oliver
Reading: Oliver, *What Do We Know*; “sustainability” in the OED

Friday 1/18
In class: Present individual ecological narrative
Reading: Oliver, continued
Due: Individual ecological narrative

Week 2
Reading nature: sustainability & the individual

MLK Day Celebrations

“Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. strove to raise awareness about urban environmental issues and public health concerns that disproportionately affect communities of color. Environmental justice is based on the principle that all members of a society have the right to clean air, water, and soil, as well as a right to live in communities where they can raise their families and send their kids out to play in healthy and nurturing natural environments. Further, it embraces the notion that no one possesses the right to degrade and destroy the environment, whether the government at all levels, private industry, or individual citizens. Finally, environmental justice includes a guarantee of equal access to relief and the possibility of meaningful community participation in the decisions of government and industry.”

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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| Wed. 1/23 | In class: Discussing Oliver  
Reading: Oliver, continued  
Due: your nature poem |
| Friday 1/25 | In class: The Rhetoric of Science  
Reading: Oliver, continued; preview Our Common Future  
Due: revised poem into textbook paragraph form; attach poem |

**Week 3**

**Reading science: sustainability & dirt**

| Monday 1/28 | In class: Discussing Our Common Future  
DUE: Reading journal |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wed. 1/30   | Guest speakers: Focus the Nation group –  
Amanda Norris  
Bronwynn Kelly  
Julie Jarvey  
Katie Hietala |
| Friday 2/1  | Our Common Future, continued  
In class: Previewing Kingsolver |

**Week 4**

| Monday 2/4 | In class: Discussing Kingsolver  
Reading: Kingsolver, 1-10 |
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<tr>
<td>Wed. 2/6</td>
<td>No class: Winter Carnival</td>
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<td>Friday 2/8</td>
<td>No class: Winter Carnival</td>
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**Week 5**

| Monday 2/11 | In class: Discussing Kingsolver  
Reading: Kingsolver, continued (1-10)  
DUE: Reading journal |
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<td>Wed. 2/13</td>
<td>In class: Kingsolver, continued (1-10)</td>
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<td>Friday 2/15</td>
<td>In class: Kingsolver, continued (11-20)</td>
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Week 6
The political economy of nature: dominion or stewardship?
Monday 2/18
In class: Kingsolver, continued (11-20)
Due:

Wed. 2/20
In class: Kingsolver, continued (11-20)

Friday 2/22
In class: Kingsolver, continued (11-20)

Week 7 Seeing nature: sustainability & rhetoric

Art, humanities, and the environment

Monday 2/25

Art, humanities, and the environment

Wed. 2/27

Art, humanities, and the environment

Preview: Grassroots Struggles for Sustainability in Central America

Friday 2/29

Week 8
Writing nature
Monday 3/3  In class: Horton, *Grassroots Struggles for Sustainability in Central America*  
Due: Reading journal

Wed. 3/5  In class: Horton, continued  
Due:

Friday 3/7  In class: Horton, continued  
Due:

**Spring Break Saturday March 8th - Sunday March 16th**

**Week 9**  
**Writing nature**

Monday 3/17  In class: Horton, continued  
Due:

Wed. 3/19  In class: Horton, continued  
Due:

Friday 3/21  In class: *Previewing Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*  
Due:

**Week 10**  
**Writing nature**

Monday 3/24  In class: Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*  
Due: Reading journal

Wed. 3/28  In class: Louv, continued  
Due:

Friday 3/28  In class: Louv, continued  
Due:

**Week 11**  
**Sustainability as a research practice?**

Monday 3/31  In class: Microbial Communities: From Life Apart to Life Together & Previewing projects  
Due: Reading journal

Wed. 4/2  No class: TBA

Friday 4/4  No class: TBA
### Week 12
**Sustainability as an ethic?**
- **Monday** 4/7
  - In class: Preparing projects and discussing *Worldchanging: A Users Guide for the 21st Century*
  - Due: Project notes
- **Wednesday** 4/9
  - Project Development & Steffen’s Worldchanging
- **Friday** 4/11
  - Project Development & Steffen’s Worldchanging

### Week 13
**Sustainability as an individual or collective action?**
- **Monday** 4/14
  - In class: Project workshop and previews
- **Wednesday** 4/16
  - In class: Project workshop and previews
- **Friday** 4/18
  - In class: Project workshop and previews

### Week 14
**A Rhetoric of Sustainability: Presentations**
- **Monday** 4/21
  - Project Presentations
- **Wednesday** 4/23
  - Project Presentations
- **Friday** 4/25
  - Project Presentations

**Finals Week**