

# Collapse: An Anthropological Approach to Environmental Studies

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3 academic hours, 3 credits

## Course Description

The aim of the course is to explore the collapse or sustainability of ecosystems as a result of human activities. The course will investigate the role of culture in human - environmental relations and the contribution that cultural theory can make to environmental discourse. This course is taught in three parts.

### *Part One:*

The first part of the course introduces students to key ideas and principles relating to the concept of culture as well as methods and strategies used in conducting fieldwork. Understanding what culture is and how the anthropologist discovers, describes and analyzes cultural knowledge is essential in understanding different cultural perspectives and how individuals and communities perceive, interpret and interact with their environment. This section also introduces the subject of ecosystem ecology in order to give a more balanced perspective on human-environmental relations. Knowledge of ecosystem ecology provides the student with a better understanding of the pressures and driving forces that push an ecosystem into a changed state, a state that can ultimately lead to a collapse both within the ecosystem and the society living within that system. The students will study nutrient cycles, resource use, carrying capacity, land degradation and other principal concepts pertaining to ecosystem ecology.

### *Part Two:*

The second part of the course familiarizes the student with a cross-cultural perspective of social, political, economic and religious systems and world views and illustrates how these systems influence human – environmental relations. Case studies will be drawn from a range of cultural contexts in order to exemplify the impact of culture on environmental sustainability as well as environmental collapse. This section also discusses the concept of environmentalism as a cultural phenomenon as well as the value of cultural diversity in protecting the global environment.

### *Part Three:*

The third part of the course discusses how cultural knowledge can be applied on a practical level. This section focuses on both the uses of anthropological knowledge in carrying out projects relating to the environment as well as ethical considerations involved in the process.

**Grade components:**

Participation in class discussions	10%
Ethnographic fieldwork project presentation.	40%
Final exam	50%

**Assignments:**Exercise 1

Conduct a short ethnographic fieldwork exercise within the local community (on the kibbutz or somewhere in the area which is convenient).

The aims of the exercise are to provide an opportunity to experience and practice ethnographic fieldwork and discover the challenges involved in collecting data, to help students learn how to distinguish between the emic and etic points of view and to help students learn how to discover both the physical and cultural environment from the point of view of those who live within that environment.

Exercise 2

Use the ethnographic research skills learned in the first half of the course to conduct a short study of how permanent residents of Kibbutz Ketura both perceive and relate to their natural environment. The aims of the exercise are to practice ethnographic fieldwork methodology and analysis of the data and to discover how individuals within the community perceive and relate to their natural environment (the desert environment of the Arava) in terms of identifying with it, adapting to it, changing it or even trying to overcome it.

**Course Schedule and readings:****Part One: Introduction****Lesson 1: The Concept of Culture:**

An introduction to the field of Anthropology and its contribution to environmental discourse  
A critical analysis of definitions and interpretations of culture  
The role of culture as an ecological mechanism

**Lesson 2: Fieldwork and Methodology (Part one) – Strategies**

Anthropological research methods and strategies for obtaining cultural knowledge regarding the ways in which a particular culture perceives, interprets and interacts with its environment.

Reading:

Spradley, James P., "Ethnography and Culture" in Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology, Spradley, James and David. W. McCurdy (eds.), Boston, Pearson Education, Inc. 2003.

### **Lesson 3: Fieldwork and Methodology (Part two) – Describing and Analyzing Field Data**

Reading:

McCurdy, David W., James Spradley and Dianna J. Shandy, The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society, (second edition), 2005.pp. 21-41.

### **Lesson 4: An Introduction to Ecosystem Ecology: Nutrient cycles, resource use, carrying capacity, land degradation.**

Readings:

Selected chapters from the following books:

Samson F.B. and F.L. Knopf (eds.). Ecosystem Management Selected Readings. Springer Verlag. 2003.

Jones, C.G. and J.H. Lawton (eds.). Linking Species and Ecosystems. Chapman and Hall, N.Y. 1995.

### **Part Two: The interrelationship between cultural systems and the environment: sustainability or collapse.**

### **Lesson 5: Cultural perspectives on human-environmental relations.**

Readings:

Descola, Philippe and Gisli Palsson, "Human-Environmental Relations: Orientalism, Paternalism and Communalism" in Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives. Routledge: London and New York. 1996.

### **Lesson 6: Human – Environmental relations**

South Pacific Islands (Easter Island, Tonga, Bali).

Readings:

Diamond, Jared, "Adaptive Failure: Easter's End", in Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology, Spradley, James P. and David W. McCurdy (eds.), Boston, Pearson Education, Inc. 2003.

"Twilight at Easter" in Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive, Diamond, Jared, London, Penguin Books, 2005.

### **Lesson 7: Human – Environmental relations:**

Amazonia: (Yanomamo and Kayapo)

Readings:

Turner, Terence, "The Kayapo Resistance" in Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology, Spradley, James P. and David W. McCurdy (eds.), Boston, Pearson Education, Inc. 2003.

Hames, Raymond B., "The Settlement Pattern of a Yanomamo Population Bloc: A Behavioral Ecological Interpretation" in Adaptive Responses of Native Amazonians, Hames, Raymond B. and William Vickers, Academic Press, 1983.

**Lesson 8: Human – Environmental relations:**

Israeli Bedouin communities

Guest Speaker on cultural-environmental relations among Israeli Bedouin

**Lesson 9: Human – Environmental relations:**

The contribution of Syrian Bedouin culture to sustainable conservation

Readings:

Chatty, Dawn, "Enclosures and Exclusions: Conserving Wildlife in Pastoral Areas in the Middle East", Anthropology Today, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Aug., 1998).

Rae, Jonathan, "Getting in Steppe: The Evolution of Participatory Institutions for Rangeland Management in the Syrian Arab Republic", FAO Corporate Document Repository, [www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/X8050T/x8050t07.htm](http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/X8050T/x8050t07.htm)

**Semester Trip:** the culture of the Bedouin society and their interaction with the environment (Part of the Negev trip)

**Lesson 10: Environmentalism as a cultural phenomenon:**

Cross cultural attitudes towards environmentalism as a social and political movement.

Readings:

"Anthropology, Culture and Environmentalism" in Milton, Kay, Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse, London and New York, Routledge 1996. Pp. 22-36.

**Lesson 11: The value of cultural diversity in protecting the global environment.**

Reading:

"Environmentalism and Cultural Diversity" in Milton, Kay, Anthropology in Environmental Discourse, London and New York, Routledge, 1996.

**Part Three:**

**Lesson 12: Applying Cultural Knowledge**

The uses of cultural knowledge for directing change in human-environmental relations.

*Administrative Anthropology:* The use of cultural knowledge for planned change by those who are outside of the local cultural group.

*Action Anthropology:* The use of cultural knowledge for planned change by the local cultural group.

*Advocate Anthropology*: The use of cultural knowledge in order to increase the power of self-determination for a particular cultural group.

Readings:

Reed, Richard, "Two Rights Make a Wrong: Indigenous Peoples versus Environmental Protection Agencies in Applying Cultural Anthropology" in Applying Cultural Anthropology: An Introductory Reader, Podolefsky, Aaron and Peter J. Brown, Boston, McGraw Hill 2003.

### **Lesson 13: Ethical considerations:**

Strategies for engaging local knowledge as a basis for building culturally and environmentally appropriate projects.

Reading:

Faust B.B. and R.C. Smardon, "Introduction and Overview: Environmental Knowledge, Rights and Ethics: Co-managing with Communities" in Environmental Science and Policy, Vol. 4 Issues 4-5, Aug. 2001.

### **Recommended Readings.**

Milton, Kay, Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse, London and New York, Routledge 1996.

Introduction

Chapter One: The Concept of Culture in Anthropology

Chapter Two: Culture as Mediator

Rosado, Caleb, "The Concept of Cultural Relativism in a multicultural World".

Ph.D. [www.rosado.net/articles-relativism.html](http://www.rosado.net/articles-relativism.html)

Kottak, Conrad, P., "The New Ecological Anthropology", American Anthropologist, 101(1): 23-35, 1999.

Gold, Tim, "Culture, Nature, Environment". The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Environment, Dwelling and Skill, Routledge, London and New York 2002.

Malm, Thomas, "No Island is an "Island": Some Perspectives on Human Ecology and Development in Oceania" in: Alf Hornborg & Carole Crumley (eds.), The World System and the Earth System: Global Socio-environmental Change and Sustainability since the Neolithic. pp. 268-279. Walnut Creek, Ca. 2007.

Brosius, Peter J., "Anthropological Engagements with Environmentalism",

Current Anthropology, Volume 40, No.3, June 1999.

Diamond, Jared "Why Do some Societies Make Disastrous Decisions?" in  
Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive. London, Penguin Books, 2005.

Diamond, Jared, "The World as a Polder: What Does It All Mean to Us Today?"  
Final chapter of Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive, London,  
Penguin Books, 2005.

Smith, Nigel J.H., Serrao, Emanuel Adilson S., Alvim, Paulo T. and Italo C.  
Falesi, Amazonia: Resiliency and Dynamism of the Land and Its People, The  
United Nations University, 1995.

Harris, M. "Forbidden Flesh" in Cannibals and Kings. Vintage Books. 1978.

"The Goddess and the Green Revolution" in The Balinese: Case Studies in Cultural  
Anthropology, Lansing, J.S., Harcourt Brace Publishers, 1994.

"Environmentalism in Social Science" in Milton, Kay, Environmentalism and Cultural  
Theory: Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse, London and New  
York, Routledge 1996. Pp. 69-88.

"Environmentalisms" in Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society,  
Herzfeld, Michael, Blackwell Publ. , Oxford and USA, 2001.

"Solving the Environmental Equation: An Engaging Anthropology" by Pamela J. Puntenney  
in  
[www.anthrosource.net](http://www.anthrosource.net).