

Course information 2025-26

DV2166 Global Environmental Problems and Politics

General information

MODULE LEVEL: 5

CREDIT: 30

NOTIONAL STUDY TIME: 300 hours

Summary

This course provides analytical frameworks for understanding global environmental problems such as climate change and declining biodiversity. The course will provide insights from International Relations and Political Science to show two key themes: how environmental regimes, or shared rules for addressing problems, emerge formally through treaties or other coordinated action; and the challenges and politics of implementing these regimes. The course will review debates within environmental politics, and illustrate these themes especially in relation to climate change and conservation of biodiversity, with additional information about stratospheric ozone depletion, deforestation, and new initiatives concerning agricultural commodities, plastics and waste, and oceans and with attention to dilemmas faced by developing countries. Students will attain an understanding of how social sciences analyze and advance understandings of environmental policies as well as information about the problems themselves.

Please note: this course was originally DV3166 Global Environmental Problems and Politics. It is proposed to relaunch this course as Level 2 to appeal to a wider number of courses. Also, we could rename the course more simply as “Global Environmental Politics” or “Global Environmental Governance.” All comments are welcome.

Conditions

Prerequisite: no other courses are proposed as a prerequisite for this course. (Chapter 2 of the proposed course outlines some basic ideas in International Relations about regime theory: everything else is specific to this course).

Aims and objectives

The aim of the course is to:

- Introduce students to the core environmental challenges discussed within global politics
- Develop students' analytical skills for understanding environmental regimes and their challenges
- Promote critical engagement with debates about environmentalism to show tensions between different actors, richer and poorer nations and societies, and the relationships between defining environmental problems and proposed solutions to them.
- To display this engagement by development students' ability to present, substantiate and defend complex arguments with reference to diverse examples.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course, and having completed the essential reading and activities, students should be able to demonstrate:

- An ability to apply theories and concepts from global and national environmental politics to relevant empirical examples
- A critical understanding of the issues involved in making and implementing global environmental regimes
- An awareness of the contexts, tension, and constraints that characterize global environmental problems relating to complex biophysical changes simultaneously with diverse social and political interests and exposures from diverse social groups.

Employability outcomes

By the end of the course, and having completed the essential reading and activities, students should have developed the following skills:

- Communication skills: developing excellent written communication skills through note-taking and essay writing.
- Decision-making and evaluation: interpreting different texts and arguments from diverse sources (including, for example, academic texts, and publicity from governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)), and using this interpretation to draw evidence-based conclusions or recommendations.
- Complex problem-solving: seeking solutions to entrenched political divisions or diverse and sometimes incommensurate objectives, expressing an awareness of the complexity of problems and likely solutions.
- Environmental knowledge and governance: students will also gain useful empirical and analytical knowledge about global environmental problems and policies that can prepare them for employment in the field of environmental policy and international development.

Essential reading

This course does not have one single textbook is recommended as the core reading for the subject as a whole. The reason for this is that the course covers a wide range of environmental problems, and no one textbook covers them all. Each chapter of the study guide lists readings that are useful and accessible for student.

In addition, it is strongly advised to keep abreast of recent developments by reading newspapers and online sources for this course.

Assessment

This course is assessed by a 3 hour written examination.

Syllabus

A. Background

1. Why are global environmental problems political?
systemic and cumulative problems; sovereignty; varieties of environmentalism
2. States and regimes
what are regimes? State-based regimes; power-based regimes and institutional approaches to regimes; North versus South?
3. Non-state actors and knowledge regimes
knowledge regimes and epistemic communities; non-governmental organizations (NGOs); business actors
4. Trade and environment
product versus process; labelling; WTO
5. Finance and investment
World Bank and Global Environment Facility; private sector; sustainable finance
6. Early regimes: atmospheric ozone depletion and transboundary air pollution
the early model of regime formation; what is certainty

B. Climate change

7. Climate change and the UNFCCC
origins of the Climate Change Convention; targets; the convention text and assumptions
8. The Kyoto Protocol
origins of the Kyoto Protocol; targets; flexible mechanisms; assessment
9. The Paris Agreement
origins of the Paris Agreement; targets and terms; finance; lessons for the climate regime
10. Industrialization and energy transitions
coal; oil; nuclear power; the Just Transition
11. Technology transfer and renewable energy
what is technology transfer; international agreements and technology; renewable energy; electric vehicles
12. Climate change and forests
Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES)
13. Vulnerability to climate change
adaptation and resilience; community-based adaptation; Loss and Damage; refugees and conflict

C. Biodiversity

14. Biodiversity and the Convention on Biological Diversity

what is biodiversity; the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD); Access and Benefit Sharing; Biosafety

15. Deforestation
international negotiations; logging campaigns; International Timber Trade Agreement; plantations
16. Conservation and habitats
trade in endangered species; in-situ conservation of landscapes; inclusiveness of conservation
17. Agricultural commodities
the potential threats of agricultural commodities such as palm oil; certification and zero-deforestation supply chains; climate smart agriculture; Landscape Approaches

D. Emerging themes

18. Oceans and the Blue Economy
overfishing; pollution and mining; international agreements; Blue Economy
19. Chemicals and toxic waste
chemical pollution; toxic waste trade; governing expert knowledge
20. Cities
cities as actors; climate change and cities; municipal waste; urban biodiversity and ecosystems; environmental justice movements