

Program in Environmental and Resource Sociology

1. Description

Environmental and resource sociology is the study of relationships between societies and their biophysical environments from a sociological perspective. Environmental sociologists study the way social structures and processes change the environment, and the way changes in the environment shape social structures. Programs in environmental and resource sociology, which remain limited in number, feature sociological contributions to the broader interdisciplinary agenda in environmental science. Students wishing to pursue careers in environmental sociology find jobs in academia, state agencies, local public lands management agencies, and environmental organizations.

The Environment and Resource Sociology (ERS) program at the University of Florida links strengths in substantive and methodological specialties in sociology to the broader endeavor of better understanding environmental change in a way that benefits both societies and ecosystems. To this end, ERS program faculty highlight sociological contributions to a wide range of topics, including the study of development, institutions, social movements, demography, and social inequalities. In addition, ERS program faculty focus on key topical areas within environmental studies such as natural resource use, infrastructure impacts, standards setting for resource commodities, environmental pollution, and public health.

The ERS program at UF incorporates ties between the Department of Sociology to other units around the university which also provide training and offer courses to support environmental research. UF includes strong area studies programs with an environmental focus, as well as interdisciplinary environmental science programs, and includes both colleges of agriculture and medicine. ERS students at UF therefore have opportunities for exposure to perspectives and skills offered by a variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary programs.

Courses and research in environmental and resource sociology therefore highlight sociological perspectives on environmental issues, and seek to advance the theories and methods of cross-disciplinary social-ecological research and environmental policy. Courses on environmental and resource sociology are thus designed not only with sociology graduate students in mind, but also to serve the needs of other graduate programs at UF, in order to facilitate cross-disciplinary exchanges and communication between the social and natural sciences.

Here we provide ERS program faculty (section 2), emphasizing their specializations and research interests. This is followed by a listing of courses taught by the ERS program faculty (section 3) at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. We also note funding opportunities for graduate students (section 4). The final section (5) calls attention to periodic sociology colloquia on ERS-related issues.

2. ERS Faculty and Specialties

1. Christine Overdevest (coverdev@soc.ufl.edu)

- Assistant Professor (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005)
- Specializations
 - Environmental and Natural Resource Sociology
 - Economic Sociology
 - Social Change
- Research interests
 - Multi-stakeholder certification and standard setting schemes
 - Information Disclosure and Transparency
 - Community-Based Environmental Monitoring

2. Brian Mayer (mayer@soc.ufl.edu)

- Assistant Professor (PhD, Brown University, 2006)
- Research and Teaching Interests
 - Environmental Sociology
 - Medical Sociology
 - Social Movements
 - Qualitative Methods
 - Spatial Relations in Health and Illness

3. Stephen G. Perz (sperz@soc.ufl.edu)

- Associate Professor (PhD, University of Texas at Austin, 1997)
- Specializations
 - Environmental Sociology
 - Sociology of Development
 - Economic Sociology
 - Demography
- Research Interests
 - Effect of road impacts on social-ecological systems
 - Socio-spatial processes of road-building in the Amazon
 - Land use and land cover change in the Amazon
 - Demography of indigenous populations in Brazil

4. Regina Bures (rbures@soc.ufl.edu)

- Assistant Professor (PhD, Brown University, 1998)
- Specializations
 - Aging Families and the Life Course
 - Community and Urban Sociology
 - Social Demography
 - Stratification
- Research Interests
 - Historic preservation, segregation, and 20th century urban change
 - family transitions and life course change in later midlife
 - Aging, urban communities, and environmental amenities in Florida

5. Charles H. Wood (cwood@latam.ufl.edu)

- Professor (PhD, University of Texas at Austin, 1975)
- Specializations
 - Latin American Studies
 - Population and the Environment
 - Demography
 - Sociology of Development
 - Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity
- Research Interests
 - Determinants of deforestation in the Amazon
 - Property rights and resource use among small farmers
 - Cattle ranching and deforestation in Brazil, Peru and Ecuador
 - The demography of unequal development in Brazil
 - Skin color, discrimination and social identity in Brazil

3. ERS Courses

Undergraduate Courses

1. Environment and Society (SYD 4510), Stephen Perz

This course explores two general topics: 1.) the social foundations or causes of environmental problems, and 2.) social responses to environmental issues, including social contestation, conflicts and movements. By adopting these two foci, we will examine the ways societies drive environmental change, and the ways environmental change influences societies. The material highlights different contributions from materialistic and idealistic perspectives within the corpus of sociological theory. These distinct traditions provide much of the basis for theoretical debates within environmental sociology, a specialty area within sociology that we will discuss.

In examining social causes and responses concerning environmental problems, we will take up issues important on several scales, ranging from the local to the global. This course includes a substantial Latin American component. Overviews and case studies in Latin American environmental problems and movements highlight the unique history and challenges facing that region and provide a basis for comparisons with the US. In the process, you will get a broader, internationally-informed understanding of the relationships between environments and societies. We will also go beyond the US and Latin America in scale to consider global environmental problems that transcend national boundaries.

2. Illness & the Environment (SYA 4930), Brian Mayer

This course examines the relationships between human health and the environment from a sociological viewpoint. Using an interdisciplinary sociological perspective, we will explore the increasing number of illnesses linked to environmental pollution and disasters. Since this is a course in the social sciences, only a basic understanding of the biological and chemical sciences related to environmental health will be needed. The main focus will be on how scientists, policy makers, and laypeople mobilize and interpret scientific data to make claims regarding the link between health and the environment.

We will draw on the fields of medical and environmental sociology to explore environmental health problems such as asthma, breast cancer, and emerging infectious diseases potentially linked to global climate change. Using these perspectives, we will examine how social structures influence the relationship between human health and the environment.

This course will also explore issues such as how individuals and groups seek to demonstrate a link between health and the environment, the sociological implications of the scientific process, and how scientific trends influence the creation of public policy regarding environmental health issues. We will focus on the reaction of communities across the globe to environmental health problems and the organizing work of the environmental health movement to prevent future communities from being exposed to potential threats.

3. Social Institutions and Environment (SYA 4930), Christine Overdeest

This course will be of particular interest to students interested in institutional approaches to addressing environmental problems. This class outlines the emergence of and evaluates the capacity for social change associated with a number of environmental institutions.

Using cases from the wood products, coffee, food and chemicals, the course explores the potentials and limitations of corporate voluntary self-regulation, codes of conduct, multi-stakeholder monitoring systems, certification and labeling schemes, fair trade programs, transparency and reporting initiatives, community-based regulation, and international accords and agreements.

The main actors involved in these new institutions include NGOs, activists, media, communities, firms, states, and international actors. We will focus on the strengths and weaknesses of alternative approaches to addressing environmental problems. The course seeks to evaluate why new institutions have emerged, how they function, and when and under what conditions they can be effective in mitigating environmental impacts of production.

4. Urban Sociology (SYD 3410), Regina Bures

Urban sociology examines the development and functions of cities and their social consequences. The principal questions of urban sociology focus on social organization in cities, the spatial structure of cities, the impact of cities on their host regions and nations, and the consequences of urbanization. This course focuses on the social, economic and environmental dimensions of cities in the United States and Europe. Students will develop a general knowledge of current issues in urban sociology as well as the ability to frame those issues in the context of both European and American cities. The objectives of this course are to:

1. Introduce students to key concepts and issues in urban sociology.
2. Acquaint students with major theoretical paradigms associated with urban sociology.
3. Familiarize students with current urban conditions and policies in the EU and the US.
4. Teach students basic research concepts and give them practice writing research reports.

Graduate Courses

1. Environment and Society (SYA 7933), Stephen Perz

This course provides a selective survey of topics and issues at play in the struggle to constitute a cross-disciplinary environmental science with a strong social science component. The premise here is that there is a need for a better appreciation, but also more critical interrogation, of what the social sciences (especially sociology) offer environmental science. The objective of this course therefore is to foster cross-disciplinary exchanges about issues of conducting environmental social science research and its place in environmental science, community initiatives, and policy. (Continued)

With that objective in mind, we will discuss epistemological controversies, models of science, various theoretical debates, and a variety of topics relevant to both social and biophysical scientists conducting environmental research. Weekly discussions will draw on reading material organized around a set of issues, topics and case studies that provide intellectual and political “puzzles” which demand collaborative cross-disciplinary inquiry. The goal of this course is to sensitize students of sociology and other social sciences as well as the biophysical sciences to these puzzles by way of improving communication and appreciation of the challenges to advancing cross-disciplinary environmental studies.

2. Environmental Governance (SYA 7933), Christine Overdeest

Over the last 25 years, businesses and civil society groups have been creating new voluntary forms of regulation such as codes of conduct, certification and fair trade. Sometimes these forms are created by NGOs, sometimes by industry associations, and at other times by multi-stakeholder groups drawn from industry and the environmental, labor, and human rights civil society. We investigate the motivations and strategies of civil society and social movement to institute new regulation; the business motivation to adopt voluntary regulation and their relationship to the state and traditional authority. Some questions about non-state regulation will explore are: Under what circumstances have they emerged? When are they effective? What is the basis for their claims to authority and legitimacy? What is the relationship to broader changes in the economy and government? What could their relationship to the state and traditional authority be?

3. Environment & Inequality (SYA 7933), Brian Mayer

This graduate seminar examines the relationships between social inequality and the distribution of environment risks and benefits in the United States and internationally. We will explore various causes and consequences of environmental degradation and their relation to systems of inequality. In particular, we will look at and how various forms of institutionalized discrimination have affected the spatial distribution of environmental hazards and the efforts to address and remedy these environmental inequalities. In learning about the solutions to environmental inequality, we will read in depth about the environmental justice movement. Towards the end of the course, we will also explore the effects of globalization and unequal development on the environment.

4. Population, Migration and Environment (SYA 7933), Regina Bures

This seminar examines human migration, population change and the environment from a sociological perspective. Defining environment broadly as the social, geographic and physical conditions that surround individuals, we begin with an overview of the traditional literature on population and the environment. As the course progresses, we focus on an in-depth examination of the social and physical dimensions of population change, particularly human migration, and the impact such change has on the environment in both the developed and developing world. Topics include: urbanization and the environment, migration and development, the impact of population mobility on both the urban and rural settings, and sustainable development. (Continued)

The objectives of this course are to:

- Review current research that examines the relationship between demographic and environmental change.
- Examine conceptualizations of sustainable development and their implications for diverse social contexts.
- Provide students with an understanding of the key concepts and research methods that are used to examine environmental issues in the context of population change.

5. Design and Methods of Research in Latin American Studies (LAS 6938), Charles Wood

The seminar introduces the logic of inquiry that guides the design and methods of quantitative and qualitative research. A hands-on approach, based on weekly Problem Sets, provides a practical guide to research design, the choice of quantitative or qualitative methods, the formulation of testable hypotheses, and the use of statistical methods to analyze survey data. The last three weeks teach participants how to write a research proposal. Half of the Problems Sets are based on environmental data, and the final research proposal may address an environmental topic.

6. The Sociology of Development in Latin America (LAS 6938), Charles Wood

The seminar analyzes the historical and political events that led to the rise and demise of the succession of paradigms that define the sociology of development in Latin America, from Nineteenth-century Marxian and evolutionary theories to present-day concerns. The second half of the seminar addresses contemporary issues, such as globalization, Neo-liberalism, crime and violence, race and ethnicity, social exclusion, the new populism, social movements, and environmental change.

4. ERS Funding Opportunities

The Department of Sociology has several different mechanisms for supporting graduate training, including research assistantships, teaching assistantships, and various fellowships. Further, participating faculty in the environmental and resource sociology program are affiliated with many other units at UF which have their own sources of funding for graduate fellowships and summer fellowships.

1. NSF Project on Road Impacts in the Southwestern Amazon

Through the National Science Foundation (NSF) and its “Human and Social Dynamics” (HSD) Program, the Department of Sociology has acquired funds for a 3.5-year project to study road impacts in the tri-national “MAP” frontier where Brazil, Bolivia and Peru meet. The project is entitled “Agents of Change: Infrastructure Change, Human Agency, and Resilience in Social-Ecological Systems” and calls for social research fieldwork during the summers of 2007-2008, and perhaps 2009. (Continued)

Matching funds through the Department of Sociology will provide for a Sociology Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) for three years, beginning in 2006-2007. The participating Sociology GRA will be involved in the social research fieldwork, as well as attendance at regional workshops and meetings with collaborators and stakeholders, data compilation and analysis, and co-authorship opportunities. Applicants must be enrolled in the Sociology graduate program. Some familiarity in either Spanish or Portuguese will be necessary.

Those interested should send a vita and 1-page statement of purpose to Stephen Perz, Department of Sociology, PO Box 117330, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-7330, sperz@soc.ufl.edu. E-mail submissions encouraged. Submissions will be accepted until the position is filled.

2. NSF Project on Direct-Action Land Reform in the Brazilian Amazon

Through the National Science Foundation (NSF) and its Geography and Regional Science Program, the Department of Sociology has acquired funds for a 2-year project to study direct-action land reform (DALR) movements in the Brazilian Amazon. DALR involves planned land occupations by grassroots groups, often with the support of DALR organizations.

Fieldwork began in 2006 and will continue in 2007, with data analysis proceeding thereafter. The project is focusing on the spatial strategies of DALR NGOs, the occupation tactics of DALR grassroots groups, the land cover impacts of DALR occupations, and land use in DALR settlements. A key focus of the UF component of this project concerns the migration patterns of DALR participants.

Funds from this project will provide for a one year GRA position in 2007-2008. The initial focus of this position will be on demographic estimation of migration patterns in the Brazilian Amazon. Later, the focus will shift toward analysis of field survey data of DALR participation and land use practices. Applicants must be enrolled in a UF graduate program. Some familiarity in either Spanish or Portuguese will be necessary.

Those interested should send a vita and 1-page statement of purpose to Stephen Perz, Department of Sociology, PO Box 117330, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-7330, sperz@soc.ufl.edu. E-mail submissions encouraged. Submissions will be accepted until the position is filled.

5. Colloquium Series

Every year, the Department of Sociology organizes a sociology colloquium series. In 2003, the colloquium series was on Environment and Society. The Department continues to sponsor individual colloquium speakers who focus on environmental issues.