

INTRODUCTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Group Contract, Fall 1990

The Introduction to Environmental Studies (IES) program provided an overview of the natural and social systems that define the environment and related environmental issues. The program provided an introduction to ecological concepts, political economy of the environment, and environmental ethics. These concepts were developed through readings and program lectures. They were illustrated through a series of guest lectures and field trips to major sites in the Nisqually River Basin which extends from Mount Rainier to Puget Sound. These trips and lectures provided opportunities for students to learn firsthand about forest ecology, timber management, hydroelectric power, fisheries, ground water, and the political/economic conflicts and constructs which govern the basin.

Readings and lectures in political economy and ethics provided a framework for understanding and evaluating environmental issues. William Cronon's history of the ecology of colonial New England, Changes in the Land, developed the concept that the relationship between humans and their environment is dynamic, dialectical, and constantly changing. Keith Ervin's Fragile Majesty illuminated both the ecological and economic dimensions of the political conflict surrounding ancient forests in the Pacific Northwest. Marc Riesner's Cadillac Desert demonstrated the significance of political symbols and institutional and economic interests in understanding the transformation of the hydrology of the American West. Lectures supplemented these texts and provided an introduction to basic economic and political concepts and history. Environmental ethics were introduced through a discussion of the concept of ecological consequences and land ethic in Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac. Diamond and Ornstein's book Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism offered both a significant political ecological critique of patriarchal society, and suggested alternative ethical and spiritual possibilities. Paul Gruchow's The Necessity of Empty Places emphasized the importance of reflection and observation in the natural world.

Ecological concepts were presented through readings in two texts, supported by lectures, discussion, and written assignments. Forests of Mount Rainier, by William Moir, provided an introduction to Northwest forests, forest ecology, and applicable ecological principles. Ecology and Our Endangered Life-Support Systems, by Eugene P. Odum, presented a overview of classical ecological topics complemented by Odum's views of human ecology and conservation. The lectures also developed perspectives of river-basins as ecological landscape units, particularly regarding the hydrologic cycle, the freshwater ecology of migratory (anadromous) salmon and trouts, and connections between forest and aquatic life, focusing on the Nisqually River basin of Western Washington as a local example.

Students participated in a major library research project on the ecology and political economy of a river basin. They were assigned to six-person teams and each team compiled an annotated bibliography and a 20-page overview paper on one of seven river basins. The students became familiar with the use of a very extensive range of library resources and reference materials. They developed a final presentation of their findings to the class. The rivers investigated were the Skagit, Columbia, Sacramento, Rio Grande, Rhine, Nile, and Yangtze.

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