REL 298/ENVT 352: Special Topics—“The Spirit of Sustainability”

“What kind of world has a place for us and for everything else, both now and for future generations? What does it mean for such a world to carry on? How can we make it happen?”—Tim Ingold

“Much of what must be done will be in conflict with human desires, if not human needs.”—Wes Jackson

Instructor: Dr. Todd LeVasseur
Office: ECTR 207E    Phone: 953-3911
Office Hours: MWF 12pm to 1pm; or by appointment (email works best)
Email: levasseurtj@cofc.edu (I typically respond to emails within 24 hours, but expect longer on weekends)
Lectures: MWF RSS 106  11:00-11:50am
Credits: 3 Semester Hours (fulfills core requirement for Religion Major or Minor and the Environmental and Sustainability Studies Minor)

***Any student may email me for a copy of my teaching philosophy.***
***Students should be aware that I communicate class items by email, so you are expected to check for emails regularly.***

“The need is for each community to be coherent. Knowing this, we must offer our homecomers the most rigorous curriculum and the best possible faculty, the most demanding faculty of all time.”—Wes Jackson

Course Description and Instructional Format: This course serves as a comprehensive introduction to the study of religion/nature/culture interactions, where this serves as an entryway into the environmental humanities and also the study of sustainability. Classes will largely be based on a seminar format, meaning we will spend a majority of most classes discussing the assigned readings. This discussion will occur in small groups and amongst the class as a larger whole. Students should not expect structured daily lectures, but rather should expect to be called upon to vocalize their thoughts about the readings and are expected to be able to articulate key points in the readings.
Course Goals and Objectives: Specific goals of the course are as follows:

1. To introduce the student to the field of Religion and Nature/Ecology, specifically, and the environmental humanities, broadly
2. To explore how an interdisciplinary approach to human-nature issues, including insights from environmental ethics, evolutionary biology, ecology, and environmental and sustainability studies may impact the study of religion, and in turn how they may be impacted by the study of religion
3. To explore how religion/s shape/s human relations to the environment and how the environments in which humans live influence religion/s and worldviews (aka “biocultural evolution”)
4. To explore possible answers to, and barriers of success to, the questions from Ingold from above.

“Every creature is better alive than dead, human and moose and pine-trees, and they who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it...It is the living spirit of the tree, not its spirit of turpentine, with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts. It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still.”—Henry David Thoreau

Specific objectives of the course are as follows:

1. To facilitate the development of critical thinking skills regarding religion, nature, and ethics issues by having in-depth discussions about assigned readings and contemporary events
2. To cultivate a nuanced understanding of sustainability
3. To engage in personal reflection about one’s own sense of self and life goals and how these can contribute to sustainability
4. To be able to understand contemporary responses from various cultures and areas of the planet to the emerging ecocrisis, especially where religion plays a prominent role in such responses
5. To investigate moral prescriptions, especially religious ones, that surround human-nature relations; and of these, how might they be embedded in a religious cosmology
6. To become familiar with the terms and concepts of sustainability, ecofeminism, bioregionalism, traditional ecological knowledge, radical environmentalism, dark green religion, resilience, and ecology
7. To develop interdisciplinary acumen in regards to understanding human-nature interactions
8. To develop comfort in working with small groups and in participating in class discussions by requiring active engagement in both forms of discussion during every class meeting
9. “to begin drawing lines of connecting thought and understanding from point to destructive point of our culture’s behavior”—Derrick Jensen

This course satisfies the General Education Student Learning Outcomes:

1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted, and valued in various expressions of human culture
   a. Assessed on analysis of Spiritual Activism.
2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments
   a. Assessed on analysis of *Spiritual Activism*.

Requirements, Expectations, and Resources:

1) Assignments: Your grade will be determined based on the performance you exhibit for the following—no late work will be accepted on any of these, but work can be emailed by the start of class *only if* you are missing class that day:

1. Class participation—This includes attendance; how often and how well you contribute to class discussions and small group discussions; and performance on reading questions (plus the option of sharing ecoreligion related imagery, poetry, songs and/or rituals at the beginning of class). *20% of grade.*

2. All students are to keep a personal reflection journal. A list of prompts will be provided in class and also on OAKS (especially for the Derrick Jensen book). Students are to respond to these prompts in class/before reading to the best of their ability. These journals are confidential, so only you will see the answers, although some prompts will become the basis of class discussion and sharing. At the end of the semester you will undertake a self-evaluation of your effort on the journal and grade yourself. *24% of grade.*

3. Analysis of *Spiritual Activism*—to be discussed in class. *10% of grade, SLO assignment.*

4. Summary papers—You will be required to write a summary and analysis of 7 major theoretical pieces that we will read over the course of the semester. These are to be double-spaced, with *word count provided for each section*, and turned in by the *beginning* of the class for which they are due. The following format must be observed for these summaries:
   The first section must be approximately 350 words, written in the format of an abstract for a published journal article, and provide:
   (1) a catchy title that captures the gestalt of the reading
   (2) in your own words, a one to three sentence summary and repackaging of the main argument/s and point/s of the article;
   (3) an explanation, in your own words, of why these points are important to the author (i.e. why does the argument matter)
   (4) a brief summary and exploration of the evidence presented by the author
   (5) a list of 4 keywords
   (6) and brief mention of what other authors/articles the reading is in dialogue with, and why/how.
   (7) Two key quotes that best capture the spirit of the article (argument/why matters)
   The second section must be approximately 200 words and provide your own analysis, response, and/or opinion about the reading. Here you may want to relate how the reading fits into course goals/objectives.

***Each summary worth 3% of grade and reflection worth 1% (3+1=4 each, x 7 due=28) for 28%.—Please observe that late summaries will not be accepted, even if you have a documented excuse for missing class.***

5. “Final Exam”—a prompt will be provided that will require reflecting upon the course reading and discussions and your personal journal. 5 pages, due during final exam meeting. *18% of grade.*

6. Extra Credit—There will be options for extra credit as the semester develops. Most likely these will include attending guest lectures or watching documentaries and then turning in a 1 to 2 page analysis of the
Applying for and receiving ECollective funds for an on-campus project will receive 1.5 points for all involved. There will also be chances to volunteer in the community, and a day-trip to Springbank Ecospirituality Retreat Center in Kingstree, SC. Points awarded for each event depend on the event in question, ranging from 1 to 2 points. Each student may earn a total of 3 possible extra credit points that are added onto their final score. The final day to turn in extra credit work is Monday, 12/3. Any student with perfect attendance will automatically receive .5 points on their final grade (documented excuses count as an absence against this point).

“Let go of the place that holds, let go of the place that flinches, let go of the place that controls, let go of the place that fears. Just let the ground support me...Walking in the dark night is a way to practice faith, a way to build confidence in the unknown...I learn to practice courage in the vastness of what I can’t see.”-Stephanie Kaza

Grading Scale: A: 93-100; A-: 90-92; B+: 88-89; B: 83-87; B-: 80-82; C+: 78-79; C: 73-77; C-: 70-72; D+: 68-69; D: 63-67; D-: 61-62; F: 60.49 or below (all grades ending in .5 or higher are rounded up to the next point)
**College of Charleston Honor Code and Academic Integrity**  Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when identified, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XXF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration—working together without permission—is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment, quiz and/or test, no collaboration during the completion of the assignment is permitted. Research conducted and/or papers written for other classes cannot be used in whole or in part for any assignment in this class without obtaining prior permission from the instructor. The complete course policy can be found on OAKS under “news item.” Students can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the Student Handbook at [http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php](http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php)

**Academic Support Services—The Center for Student Learning**  The CSL, located on the first floor of the library, offers a wide variety of tutoring and other academic resources that support many courses offered at the College. Services include walk-in tutoring, by appointment tutoring, study strategies appointments, Peer Academic Coaching (PAC), and Supplemental Instruction (SI). All services are described and all lab schedules are posted on the CSL website [http://csl.cofc.edu/](http://csl.cofc.edu/), or call 843.953.5635 for information.

**Accommodations**  The College will make reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. Students should apply for services at the Center for Disability Services/SNAP located on the first floor of the Lightsey Center, Suite 104. Students approved for accommodations are responsible for notifying me as soon as possible and for contacting me one week before accommodation is needed.

**Writing Lab**  I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Lab in the Center for Student Learning (Addlestone Library, first floor). Trained writing consultants can help with writing for all courses; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. For more information, please call 843.953.5635 or visit [http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/](http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/).

**Counseling Services**  [http://counseling.cofc.edu/](http://counseling.cofc.edu/)  843.953.5640

**Required Texts:**  Available at the CofC and University bookstores (and most likely used copies on-line):
1) Derrick Jensen *A Language Older Than Words*
2) Alastair McIntosh and Matt Carmichael *Spiritual Activism: Leadership as Service*

***Recommended: Lori Robinson, Editor *Saving Wild: Inspiration from 50 Leading Conservationists* (available for purchase at the bookstore as well)***

There will also be **required readings** that will be made available online on OAKS. These readings are to be **printed out** and brought to class for discussion. You should bring all assigned readings (book, course packet, or online) to class for they day they are assigned, as this is when you should raise questions about any content you did not understand.

Recommended websites (see Tucker and Grim pg. 208 for further resources):

  - [http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.htm](http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.htm)
- [http://fore.research.yale.edu/](http://fore.research.yale.edu/) The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology
- [http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/) The Earth Charter

Recommended Journals:

- *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*
- *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*
- *Orion*
- *Green Humanities*
- *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*

Online videos on Religion and Ecology:

“Piglet noticed that even though he had a very small heart, it could hold a rather large amount of gratitude.” —A.A. Milne

**SCHEDULE**

**Wed (W) 8/24:** get syllabus…

**Friday (F) 8/26:** start working on reading analysis 1

**Monday (M) 8/29:** OAKS: Freeman House, selections from *Totem Salmon*

*turn in for class participation a 2 page reflection on the reading—what ideas spoke to you? Why? What are key passages that made you think, and why?*
W 8/31: OAKS: “What on Earth is Environment?” J. Stan Rowe; summary #1 due
F 9/2: OAKS: Edward Abbey, “Theory of Anarchy,”--class participation: turn in a 1 page reflection on the reading—is he crazy? Does he make sense?

W 9/7: no reading
F 9/9: Derrick Jensen (DJ)—Preface; Silencing; Journal Prompts
M 9/12: DJ—Coyotes, Kittens, and Conversations; Taking a Life; Journal Prompts
W 9/14: DJ—Cultural Eyeglasses; Cranes; Journal Prompts
F 9/16: DJ—The Safety Metaphor; Journal Prompts

W 9/21: DJ—Claims to Virtue; Journal Prompts
F 9/23: DJ—Seeking a Third way; Journal Prompts
M 9/26: no reading
W 9/28: DJ—Breaking Out; Journal Prompts
F 9/30: DJ—Economics; Journal Prompts
M 10/3: no reading

F 10/7: Documentary Feed The Green

M 10/10: Wisdom from Ladakh and Sustainability in the Himalayas
W 10/12: DJ—The Goal is the Process; Heroes; Journal Prompts
F 10/14: DJ—Metamorphosis; Insatiability; Journal Prompts
M 10/17: DJ—Violence; Journal Prompts
W 10/19: DJ—The Parable of the Box; Violence Revisited; Journal Prompts
F 10/21: DJ—Coercion; Journal Prompts; OAKS: Paul Watson from ERN; summary #5 due
M 10/24: DJ—Honeybees; A Turning Over; A Life of My Own; Journal Prompts; Jane Goodall—visit this link and read her 5 reasons for hope, then for class participation write a reflection on her reasons for hope and your own thoughts on these reasons http://www.janegoodall.org/who-we-are/about-jane/reason-for-hope/#the-resilience-of-nature

W 10/26: DJ—Interconnection; The Plants Respond; Journal Prompts
F 10/28: no reading
M 10/31: OAKS: Survival and Sacrament; summary #6 due OAKS: Bioregionalism ERN entry
W 11/2: Spiritual Activism (SA) Intro and Chapter 1; Journal Prompts
F 11/4: SA, chapter 2; Journal Prompts
FALL BREAK! Celebrate and practice intersubjective eroticism with your habitat.
W 11/9: SA, chapter 3 and 4; summary # 7 due

F 11/11: SA, chapter 5; Journal Prompts
M 11/14: SA, chapter 6 and 7; Journal Prompts
W 11/16: SA, chapter 8; Journal Prompts
F 11/18: SA, chapter 9; Journal Prompts
M 11/21: SA, chapter 10; OAKS: I Vow Not To Burn Out; Journal Prompts
SLO due on OAKS Dropbox by Wednesday the 23rd, 10am (NO LATE work will be accepted)
TOFURKY Break
M 11/28: DJ—Death and Awakening; A Time of Sleeping; Journal Prompts
*class participation—find online critiques of DJ/his philosophy to share in class
W 11/30: DJ—Out of Mourning, Play; Trauma and Recovery; Journal Prompts
F 12/2: no reading
M 12/5: DJ—Connection and Cooperation; OAKS—David James Duncan; Journal Prompts

Final Exam: Monday 12/12 12pm-3pm Vegan/Vegetarian Potluck, Attendance is Mandatory or ½ off your final paper (no exceptions given)

“Be attentive; listen to what the planet is saying; it’s alive, all of it.”—Freeman House