



S F S THE SCHOOL
FOR FIELD STUDIES

Political Ecology of Peru

SFS 3840

Syllabus
4 credits

The School for Field Studies (SFS)
Center for Amazon Studies (CAS)
Tarapoto, Peru

This syllabus may develop or change over time based on local conditions, learning opportunities, and faculty expertise. Course content may vary from semester to semester.

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COURSE CONTENT SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Please note that this is a copy of a recent syllabus. A final syllabus will be provided to students on the first day of academic programming.

SFS programs are different from other travel or study abroad programs. Each iteration of a program is unique and often cannot be implemented exactly as planned for a variety of reasons. There are factors which, although monitored closely, are beyond our control. For example:

- Changes in access to or expiration or change in terms of permits to the highly regulated and sensitive environments in which we work;
- Changes in social/political conditions or tenuous weather situations/natural disasters may require changes to sites or plans, often with little notice;
- Some aspects of programs depend on the current faculty team as well as the goodwill and generosity of individuals, communities, and institutions which lend support.

Please be advised that these or other variables may require changes before or during the program. Part of the SFS experience is adapting to changing conditions and overcoming the obstacles that they may present. In other words, this is a field program, and the field can change.

Course Overview

The course in political ecology (PE) revises concepts and research approaches, allowing students to explain and understand environmental problems within a historical, sociocultural, and political context. Political ecology is not a discipline per se, but an interdisciplinary field that enhances our understanding of complex environmental situations. PE in recent years has become a relevant strategy to include politics in an apolitical context. PE seeks to address the root causes of environmental issues by challenging power imbalances and uncovering inequities in resource distribution and decision-making. By advocating for marginalized voices and integrating social justice principles, PE aims to reduce inequality and promote more equitable relationships between people and the environment.

This course will revisit concepts and debates about Amazon conservation and power inequality, environmental justice, knowledge valorization and conservation narratives. Additionally, this course will provide an overview of the most common methods in anthropology used by political ecologists. The course will complement its content and learning objectives from other courses dictated during the semester, such as Tropical Ecology, Conservation Science, and Culture and Language.

The overarching question we address in the Political Ecology curriculum is:

How do historical and contemporary conservation paradigms, politics and power dynamics influence the effectiveness and equity outcomes of conservation in the Peruvian Amazon?

To address this broad question, we will examine three specific components:

1. Introduction to Political Ecology

This section includes an interactive historical review of Political Ecology as an interdisciplinary field while learning about the Peruvian amazon's political and ecological history. We will review concepts such as political and apolitical ecology and briefly examine Marxism and elements of post-structuralism. We will review main topics and terms associated with political ecology (such as the "tragedy" of the commons and common property). Last, we will practice with common PE participatory data collection methods. In class case studies and field visits aim to enhance understanding of the dynamic and changing landscape of Political Ecology in general and specifically in the Peruvian Amazon.

2. The development and contested nature of conservation narratives

Historically, conservation efforts by governments and (I)NGOS (in the Amazon and elsewhere) were dominated by protectionist paradigms. This approach has gradually shifted towards more inclusive, community-based conservation models that strive to balance ecological sustainability with social justice and local empowerment. However, at the same time global and private interests in the Amazon (often framed as 'the lungs of the world') and neoliberal climate and conservation solutions (such as the carbon sequestration market) have mixed conservation and justice outcomes at local level.

In this section we will review different conservation paradigms, discourses and narratives that have emerged and transformed over time and across various levels of governance (from local to international scales). We will examine who's knowledge is valued and how knowledge and power are constructed to understand how environmental issues are framed.

3. Contemporary political ecology issues

This section focuses on the intricate intersections of environmental and climate justice, indigenous rights, ecofeminism, and socio-ecological conflicts in the Amazon. Students will explore the concepts of intersectionality and environmental- and climate justice, to understand how marginalized communities, particularly indigenous peoples and women, bear the brunt of environmental degradation and climate change. Through the lens of indigenous rights and ecofeminism, students will examine the struggles and successes of Amazonian indigenous communities, and especially indigenous women, in protecting their lands and livelihoods against deforestation, resource extraction, and external encroachments. We will briefly look at the global (indigenous) movements advocating for equitable climate solutions.

Additionally, throughout the course and especially in field trip assignment. We will explore and practice with political ecology methodologies and tools.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion, the students will be able to:

1. Apply political ecology's concepts and research approaches
2. Explain and understand conservation processes and outcomes as a product of historical, environmental, social, and cultural power dynamics at multiple scales (from local to global)
3. Understand how environmental and climate justice relate to Indigenous rights, and ecofeminism in the Amazon
4. Write, speak and communicate to different audiences clearly and confidently about the politics of conservation

Assessment

Assessment Item	Value (%)
Participation	10
Field Exercise (FEX) 1	20
Literature question bank	10
Field Exercise (FEX) 2	25
Field trip debrief and integrated discussion	5
Final Exam	30
TOTAL	100

Participation (10%)

This item is essential, as this is a particular program with great emphasis on in-person involvement. Missing one class will significantly impact your grade. Furthermore, your participation is expected to be attentive and engaged, showing initiative, and bringing the necessary tools to the field exercises and class activities. It is expected of students to pay attention to their peers, guest lecturers, and instructors. It is expected students to be proactive during class, especially since during classes we will have working groups assigned with short exercises to strength critical thinking, and debate.

Field Exercises (45%, 25% each)

During the course there will be two FEXs, which will consist of participatory data collection and interpretation. The objective will be for the students to become familiar with ethnographic and anthropological research methods: design, collection, and analysis. We will use different Participatory Rural appraisal (PRA) tools to investigate socio-environmental problems and conservation initiatives.

FEX 1 (20%)

Subject: The native community El Naranjal: livelihoods, knowledge and resources: reflection on the experience

Methods: Applying PRA techniques in the field and STARR reflection

FEX 2 (25%)

Subject: Analysis of power and power relations

Methods: Mapping of power relations between stakeholders of Piuray Lake - Cusco

Additional detail on the assignment and grading structure will be provided on each FEX handout prior to the activity.

Literature question bank (10%)

For each assigned article, students will participate in a Question Bank Rotation. Before class, each student must submit one genuine, open-ended question about the reading and vote on their peers' questions, using a Miro board. Based on the voting, the designated student pair selects one question to introduce and facilitate a brief (5-minute) discussion at the start of class. The grade for this activity is based both on active participation on the Miro board and, when assigned, on the quality of discussion facilitation.

Field trip debrief and discussion (5%)

Context: Interdisciplinarity is important to incorporate levels of cultural and societal context to ecological or biological findings and vice versa. By combining multiple perspectives, the interdisciplinary process creates an integrative idea of a specific study case, instead of a narrow conclusion based on a single discipline. The effects of anthropogenic climate change are driven by a complex web of ecological, social, and political dynamics, so reducing the scope of conservation study to any one of these aspects excludes the important context needed to address the issues.

Students will: a) analyze a case study based on different perspectives (Tropical ecology, Political ecology and Conservation science), and b) plan and lead the discussion related to topics learned during fieldtrips.

Methods: Students will split into 3 groups. Each group is going to oversee leading a discussion during some fieldtrip debriefing sessions. Professors will provide general topics that students need to survey during the field trip to have enough information for organizing the discussion and provide conclusions.

Final Exam (30%)

A written exam will be given based on material covered in lectures, readings, and field experiences. The exam will be open-note and a combination of short essay and essay questions. Grade corrections in any of the above items should be requested in writing within 24 hours after assignments are returned. No corrections will be considered afterward.

Grading Scheme

A	95.00 - 100.00%	B+	86.00 - 89.99%	C+	76.00 - 79.99%	D	60.00 - 69.99%
A-	90.00 - 94.99%	B	83.00 - 85.99%	C	73.00 - 75.99%	F	0.00 - 59.99%
		B-	80.00 - 82.99%	C-	70.00 - 72.99%		

General Reminders

Honor Code/Plagiarism – SFS places high expectations on their students and we hold students accountable for their behaviors. SFS students are held to the honor code below. SFS has a zero-tolerance policy towards student cheating, plagiarism, data falsification, and any other form of dishonest academic and/or research practice or behavior. Using the ideas or material of others without giving due credit is cheating and will not be tolerated. Any SFS student found to have engaged in or facilitated academic and/or research dishonesty will receive no credit (0%) for that activity.

"I approach coursework, fieldwork, and research with integrity and commit to full participation. I do my own work with honesty and give credit where it's due. I use tools and technology responsibly and only as permitted. I speak up when something conflicts with our shared values. I respect the communities we learn from and commit to ethical, non-extractive research that keeps knowledge connected to the places and people who share it with us."

Deadlines – Deadlines for written and oral assignments are instated to promote equity among students and to allow faculty ample time to review and return assignments before others are due. As such, deadlines are firm; extensions will only be considered under extreme circumstances. Late assignments will incur a penalty of 10% of your grade for each day you are late. After two days past the deadline, assignments will no longer be accepted. Assignments will be handed back to students after a one-week grading period. Grade corrections for any assessment item should be requested in writing within 24 hours of assignments being returned. No corrections will be considered afterwards.

Content Statement – Every student comes to SFS with unique life experiences, which contribute to the way various information is processed. Some of the content in this course may be intellectually or emotionally challenging but has been intentionally selected to achieve certain learning goals and/or showcase the complexity of many modern issues. If you anticipate a challenge engaging with a certain topic or find that you are struggling with certain discussions, we encourage you to talk about it with faculty, friends, family, the HWM, or access available mental health resources.

Participation – Since we offer a program that is likely more intensive than you might be used to at your home institution, missing even one lecture can have a proportionally greater effect on your final grade simply because there is little room to make up for lost time. Participation in all components of the course is mandatory, it is important that you are prompt for all activities, bring the necessary equipment for field exercises and class activities, and simply get involved.

AI Usage for Assignments – SFS acknowledges the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in education and professional settings. While AI can be a valuable resource for learning and productivity,

its use must align with the learning goals and integrity of each assignment. For this reason, students are encouraged to discuss the acceptable uses of AI for each assignment with the instructor. If you wish to use AI for any part of an assignment, consult with the instructor beforehand to ensure that its use adheres to the academic expectations of the course. Let's work together to navigate this evolving landscape responsibly!

Course Content

Type: **D:** Discussion, **FL:** Field Lecture, **GL:** Guest Lecture, **L:** Lecture, **O:** Orientation, **WS:** Workshop, **FEX:** Field Experience

No	Topics Covered	Hours	Type	Required Readings
Part 1: Introduction to Political Ecology				
01	Course Orientation During this session we will unpack the content of the course. We will review and discuss class dynamics, expectations, assignments, opportunities, and challenges.	1.0	O	
02	Introduction to Political Ecology 1 Why is ecology political? What is Political Ecology? What is apolitical ecology? Watch and discuss documentary Unnatural Histories: The Amazon (BBC).	2.0	L	Robbins (2012) Chapter 1.
03	Introduction to Political Ecology 2 PE theses and thinking.	2.0	L; D	Roberts (2023).
04	PE Preparation Iquitos Field Visit: The Struggle of the Maijuna and Environmental Justice Q&A with Prof. M. Gilmore. Preparation FEX 1.	2.0	L; D; O	
05	Preparation FEX 1 – PRA Tools Talk by Luis Romero, Waman Wasi. Preparation for guest lecture Amazon Watch.	2.0	GL	Sontakki, et al. (2019) pp. 1-4.
06	Guest Lecture Amazon Watch – Threats to the Amazon and Indigenous Strategies of Resistance Introduction to Question Bank Rotation.	2.0	GL	Guzmán (2025).
07	Field Visit / FEX 1: Native Community El Naranjal	3.0	FEX; FL	
08	Debrief Field Visit and FEX 1	1.0	L; D	
09	Visit to Rubber Boom Museum: How Are Historic and Current Indigenous Struggles Linked?	1.0	FL	
10	Field Exercise: Maijuna Indigenous Group – The Struggle for Survival	2.0	FEX; FL	

No	Topics Covered	Hours	Type	Required Readings
Part 2: The Development and Contested Nature of Conservation Narratives				
11	PA Management Without People? Guest lecture by Miguel V. about the creation and management of regional conservation area Cordillera Escalera.	2.0	L; D	Valderrama Zevallos (2023). Merino (2022).
12	Convivial Conservation 1: Video and Discussion, Preparation Q&A	2.0	L; D	Büscher and Fletcher (2019).
13	Convivial Conservation 2 – Q&A with Bram Büscher Evening: Watch and discuss documentary 'When Two Worlds Collide.'	2.0	GL	
14	Climate Justice, Carbon Markets and Carbon Colonialism	2.0	L	Espinosa-Flor (2022).
15	Preparation Field Visit Nuwas / Santa Elena: Ecofeminism and Ecotourism	2.0	L; O	Jamal and Stronza (2008). <i>Optional:</i> <i>Perini (2023).</i>
16	Field Visit: Nuwas Forest and Santa Elena Indigenous ecofeminism. Ecotourism – an engaged experience?	3.0	FL	
17	Presentation SERNANP and Conservation International Alto Mayo PA management and carbon credits.	2.0	FL	
18	Power Relations The importance of power relations, how to analyze power relations and participation in conservation processes. Gaventa's power cube. Preparation Cusco visit. Payment for Ecosystem Services in watersheds, introduction FEX 2.	3.0	L; O	Gustafsson and Schilling-Vacaflor (2022). <i>Optional:</i> <i>Gaventa (2019).</i>
19	Narratives and Discourses Conservation narratives over time. Discussion on how change happens. Prepare Chirikyacu visit.	2.0	L	Zinngrebe (2016).
Part 3: Contemporary Political Ecology Issues				
20	Biocultural Heritage Watch documentary The Potato Guardians and discussion on biocultural systems. Prepare Q&A of PE22.	1.0	L; WS	Swiderska (2022) Chapter 4.
21	Indigenous Biocultural Heritage and Seed Systems – Parque de la Papa	3.0	FL	

No	Topics Covered	Hours	Type	Required Readings
22	FEX 2: Power Relations Payment for water related ecosystem services: Piuray lake. Justice or injustice?	3.0	FEX	
23	Agroecology Guest lecture Alejandra Arce.	1.0	GL	
24	Q&A with Krystyna Swiderska About Biocultural Heritage; Debrief FEX 2	2.0	D	
25	Alternative Economies	2.0	L; D	Kommandeur, et al. (2025).
26	Environmental Justice Role Play	2.0	L; D	
27	False or Real Solutions? Cross the Line Exercise; Course Wrap Up / Exam Preparation	2.0	WS; L; D	Friends of the Earth (2023).
28	Exam Review	1.0		
	Total	55		
	UMN Instructional Hours*	66		

**UMN defines an instructional hour as a 50-minute block. SFS syllabi are written in full 60-minute hours for programming purposes. Therefore 50 full hours = 60 UMN instructional hours (for four credit courses) and 25 full hours = 30 UMN instructional hours (for two credit courses).*

Reading List

1. Büscher, B. and Fletcher, R. (2019). Towards convivial conservation. *Conservation and Society*, 17(3), 283-296.
2. Espinosa-Flor, S.I. (2022). A right to pollute versus a duty to mitigate: on the basis of emissions trading and carbon markets. *Climate Policy*, 22(7), 950-960.
3. Friends of the Earth (2023). *Pathways to System Change: Transforming a world in crisis to a sustainable and just future*.
4. Gaventa, J. (2019). Applying power analysis: using the 'powercube' to explore forms, levels and spaces. In *Power, empowerment and social change* (pp. 117-138). Routledge.
5. Gustafsson, M. T., & Schilling-Vacaflor, A. (2022). Indigenous Peoples and multiscalar environmental governance: The opening and closure of participatory spaces. *Global Environmental Politics*, 22(2), 70-94.
6. Guzmán León, A. (2025). *Endangered Amazonia*. Coordinator of the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA).
7. Jamal, T., & Stronza, A. (2008). *Dwelling with ecotourism in the Peruvian Amazon: Cultural relationships in*

local—global spaces. *Tourist Studies*, 8(3), 313-335.

8. Kommandeur, Q., Alenda-Demoutiez, J., Kaufmann, M. and Visseren-Hamakers, I. (2025). Varieties of Anticapitalism: A systematic study of transformation strategies in alternative economic discourses. *Ecological Economics*, 227, 108423.
9. Merino, R. (2022). Conflicting sovereignties: Global conservation, protected areas, and Indigenous nations in the Peruvian Amazon. *Global Environmental Politics*, 22(2), 95-116.
10. Perini (2023), L. Indigenous Women Activists in Latin America Against Colonialism, Capitalism and Patriarchy: Voices for a 'New World'. *Rivista di Studi Politici* 19 (3), 1/2023, 87-110
11. Robbins, P. (2012). *Political Ecology: a critical introduction* (Second, Issue December). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
12. Roberts, Jason. (2020) 2023. "Political ecology". In *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein. Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*.
13. Sontakki, B., Venkatesan, P., & Rao, V. K. J. (2019). *Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): Tools & Techniques. A Training Manual for the IFS probationers* published by ICAR and ICAR-NAARM, Hyderabad.
14. Swiderska, K. and Argumedo, A. (2022). Indigenous seed systems and biocultural heritage: The Andean Potato Park's approach to seed governance. In *Seeds for diversity and inclusion* (pp. 57-77). Springer.
15. Valderrama Zevallos M. (2023). Conservation Without Indigenous Peoples. The case of Kichwa territories in Cordillera Escalera and Cordillera Azul in San Martin, Peru.
16. Zinngrebe, Y. M. (2016) Conservation narratives in Peru: envisioning biodiversity in sustainable development. *Ecology and Society* 21 (2):35.