Communicating the Environment:
Discourses on Science and Policy in the Public Sphere
EVPP 490-002

Class time and location:  
Thursdays, 4:30-7:10 p.m.  
Science & Technology II,  
Room 012

Office hours:  
3-4:15 p.m. Thursdays  
Jazzman’s Café, bottom floor  
of Johnson Center

Instructor:  
Karen Akerlof, M.S.  
Doctoral student, EVPP  
kakerlof@gmu.edu  
(703) 282-1289 – cell

How we communicate about the environment underscores the meanings that it holds for us, as evident in public debates, policy decisions, media coverage and advertising. Through channels of communication we learn the parameters of scientific knowledge, identify environmental risks to ourselves and society, and discern what is possible – and desirable – to accomplish through policy. The discourses that we engage in shape our understanding of environmental issues and their solutions, our attitudes, and even our behaviors.

This course will present the central Western environmental narrative discourses over the past forty years as delineated in John Dryzek’s book “The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses,” address the roles of different stakeholders and media channels in contributing to the ways that environmental messages develop, and survey the challenges in conveying complex and uncertain scientific information. The presumption in this course will be that the importance of environmental discourses lies in their ability to influence how we relate to and impact the natural world. As such, we will investigate the social science research basis for believing that communication plays a role in these processes.

Surveys of the general public are used to include citizen opinion into policy processes; to inform the development of communication efforts by governments, business and non-profit organizations; and to execute research to better understand the relationship of individuals and groups of people to their environment. Understanding how surveys are constructed, conducted and analyzed is therefore a useful skill that can be applied to many fields including, and beyond, environmental communication. Conducting and writing up original research will also allow any of the students in this course who so wish to submit papers or presentations to academic environmental or communication conferences, though this is not a requirement of the course.
During the course, we conduct a survey on biodiversity attitudes among George Mason University undergraduate students as a means of exploring one aspect of environmental communication and research in this area.

The goals of the course will be to:

- develop an analytical framework for critically thinking about the ways that individuals and organizations use communication to express their attitudes and beliefs about the environment, influence those of others, convey scientific information, change behaviors, break through conflict over resource decisions, and achieve policy goals;
- and develop and apply basic research skills.

Two books will form the foundation for the class, supplemented by other book chapters and journal articles to be made available in PDF format. The texts are as follows:


**Student participation**

The class will be conducted primarily as a seminar organized around discussion of the assigned readings, with only a portion of the class dedicated to instructor lectures. As such, class participation is extremely important and counts toward 10% of each student’s grade. For students who cannot attend a class, please email me beforehand. Use of cell phones or Internet is also deleterious to the class experience, and as such will not be allowed.

**Blackboard, e.g. “My Mason Portal” postings**

In order to assist the class in preparing for the weekly discussions, students will be expected to participate in postings on the required course readings five times during the semester. Students should sign up on MyMasonPortal to select which weeks they wish to post on the readings. Please see the rubric for more information. *The posts to MyMasonPortal must be submitted by Wednesday at 7 p.m. each week so that they can be read by the instructor and other students for class the following day.*
**Student presentation readings**

Two additional “student presentation readings” – as designated on the reading list -- will be assigned to students each session. The student for that week will write a brief summary of the reading, critique it, and evaluate it in relation to other ideas that have been discussed in class. They will then present on it for 10 minutes to the class (no Powerpoint), and lead approximately 10 minutes of class discussion. *Please see the handout on MyMasonPortal for more details.*

**Final project/presentation**

The final component of the course will be a final project and presentation. There are two possible alternatives that you may select.

1. Choose an example of communication on an environmental issue and analyze it within one of the theoretical frameworks presented during the course, such as Dryzek’s typology of environmental discourses or “balance as bias” in media science reporting. The material you select for your analysis should include more than one document – unless it is particularly notable and/or long – and be based on a rationale for its importance to the environmental issue you’ve chosen.

2. Alternately, students can also choose to write up a short scholarly paper based upon the biodiversity survey research.

The paper should be 10 pages and include a minimum of 10 scholarly references from other sources beyond the course readings. You will present your final project to the class in one of two sessions at the end of the term.

Handouts on the format and content of these papers will be available later in the course.
Grading

Your grade will consist of the components described above broken down into the following percentages:

- Class participation: 10%
- Blackboard discussion: 10%
- Student presentation reading (1): 10%
- Student presentation reading (2): 10%
- Survey activities: 20%
- Final project class presentation: 10%
- Final project: 30%

George Mason University’s typical grading scale, as noted below, will be used.

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<td>F</td>
<td>59 or less</td>
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Week 1  
Course introduction:  
What is environmental communication?  

9/1  
Biodiversity communication  

*Instructor overview of:*  
Cox, Introduction, “Speaking for and About the Environment”  
Cox, Ch. 1, “Studying Environmental Communication”  


Other sources on biodiversity and biodiversity communication available on https://sites.google.com/site/learnresearchnetwork  

![Survey activity in class – Why a biodiversity survey? Collaborating across universities](image)

Week 2  
How do socio-cultural discourses shape the way we understand the environment?  

9/8  
*Required reading:*  
Cox, Ch. 2, “Social/Symbolic Constructions of ‘Environment’”  
Dryzek, Ch. 1, “Making Sense of Earth’s Politics: A Discourse Approach”  

![Required survey activity due by start of class](image)  
Complete training for Human Subjects Review Board. Please email me a copy of your completion certificate to kakerlof@gmu.edu. See instructions on Blackboard titled “HSRB Training Instructions.”  

*Instructor overview of:*  

![Survey activity in class – Creating surveys, incorporating theory](image)
### Week 3
**Dryzek’s typology of discourses: Survivalism, Prometheanism, and environmental problem-solving**

9/15

**Required reading:**
- Dryzek, Part II, “Global Limits and Their Denial”
- Dryzek, Part III, “Solving Environmental Problems”

**Student presentation reading:**

**Survey activity in class – Distribute survey**

### Week 4
**Dryzek’s typology of discourses, cont.: Sustainable development and Green radicalism**

9/22

**Required reading:**
- Dryzek, Part IV, “The Quest for Sustainability”
- Dryzek, Part V, “Green Radicalism”

**Due in class:**
- Short description of which paper option you will do, and if selecting the first option, what your topic will be. For both options, please include what sources you plan on using – either academic journal references or otherwise (e.g. what is the material you are analyzing).

**Student presentation reading:**

**Survey activity in class – Distribute survey**

### Week 5
**How are social attitudes, values and beliefs related to pro-environmental behaviors and policy?**

9/29
Required reading:
Corbett, Ch. 3, “The Links Between Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors”

Student presentation reading:

Survey activity in class – Data preparation

Invited speaker – TBA

Week 6  What is the role of public participation in environmental decisionmaking?

10/6  Required reading:
Cox, Ch. 3, “Public Participation in Environmental Decisions”

Student presentation reading:

Survey activity in class – Data analysis

Week 7  What is the function of collaborations in managing environmental conflict?

10/13  Required reading:
Cox, Ch. 4, “Conflict Resolution and Collaboration in Environmental Disputes”
Island Press. (Ch. 1)

**Due in class:**
First three pages of your final project.

**Student presentation reading:**

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**Survey activity in class – TBA**

**Week 8**

**What difficulties can arise when scientific knowledge is communicated to lay audiences?**

10/20

**Required reading:**
Cox, Ch. 9, “Science Communication and Environmental Controversies”

**Student presentation reading:**

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**Survey activity in class – TBA**

**Week 9**

**What dynamics make communicating about environmental risks challenging?**

10/27

**Required reading:**
Cox, Ch. 6, “Risk Communication: Environmental Dangers and the Public”

**Student presentation reading:**

**Survey activity in class – TBA**

**Week 10**  
What does our communication about animals say about their social meaning?

**11/3**  
*Required reading:*
Corbett, Ch. 7, “Communicating the meaning of animals”

*Student presentation reading:*

**Survey activity in class – TBA**

**Week 11**  
What factors influence how media depict the environment?

**11/10**  
*Required reading:*
Cox, Ch. 5, “Media and the Environment Online”

*Student presentation reading:*

**Survey activity in class – TBA**

*Invited speaker – David Fahrenthold, The Washington Post*

**IF HE CAN MAKE IT IN PERSON, WE WILL HAVE DINNER WITH HIM ON CAMPUS**
Week 11  How do businesses and corporations communicate about the environment?

11/17  Required reading:
Corbett, Ch. 6, “Faint-green: Advertising and the natural world”
Cox, Ch. 10, “Green Marketing and Corporate Advocacy”

Student presentation reading:

Invited speaker – Chris Baumgartner

DINNER WITH CHRIS. DELIVER PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF SURVEY.

Next week is Thanksgiving!! No class.

Week 13  IN CLASS – CREATE SURVEY REPORT

12/1

Week 14  Invited speaker – Prof. Thomas Lovejoy

12/8  CLASS PRESENTATIONS

Week 15  FINAL PAPER PROJECTS DUE BY MIDNIGHT, 12/15
PLEASE EMAIL ME PAPERS TO KAKERLOF@GMU.EDU IN WORD DOC FORMAT (SO I CAN MAKE COMMENTS DIRECTLY ON THE WORD DOCS)

Other course information:

Honor Code
In accordance with George Mason University’s Honor Code (see http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/), all students’ work must be their own. Any material that is taken from another source must be appropriately cited. If you have any questions regarding how to cite materials please contact me. As a general rule of thumb, do not use more than 5 words of someone else’s text without citing them and placing the content in quotations. Per the Honor Code, please generally refrain from cheating, stealing, lying and plagiarism in matters related to your academic work at Mason.

Accommodation for disabilities
Any student who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully participating in the course should notify me by the second session of the class so that I may make appropriate accommodations, and make arrangements with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474. Their website is http://ods.gmu.edu/.

Harassment and non-discrimination policies
Students will be treated equally regardless of individual characteristics, such as gender, religion, age, national origin, ethnicity, or race. Sexual harassment of a student, faculty or staff is not tolerated. The university’s policies (and corresponding compliance information) are located at: Non-discrimination, http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/1203gen.html; Sexual harassment, http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/1202gen.html.