

Sustainability and Environmental Action Seminar

ENVI-3000 (3 credits)

Australia: Sustainability and Environmental Action (Summer)

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course offers an interdisciplinary approach to sustainability and environmental issues, taking a global perspective while drawing on local and Indigenous knowledges. The goal of the course is give students the analytical and practical tools needed to advance sustainability transitions through strategic action at various levels of intervention – personal, social, economic, and political. Students will be exposed to a range of ecological philosophies, practices, and social movements, and will be invited to reflect critically on them as they develop their own understanding of sustainability during the semester. Through lectures, workshops, field trips, student-led activities, and excursions to various Australian cities and regions, the course offers an experiential education in contemporary environmental issues, with a focus on practical, solution-orientated action.

The seminar is structured into four sustainability modules, each focusing on separate but interrelated aspects of theory and practice. Module 1 focuses on an interdisciplinary analysis of global environmental issues, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and overconsumption, with the goal of empowering students to develop sophisticated solutions and responses to the range of contemporary challenges. Module 2 focuses on permaculture design and Indigenous wisdom, inviting students to consider holistic knowledge systems that can reframe the environmental predicament and open up new ‘solution spaces’ for progressive action. Module 3 focuses on policy and government, examining the ways that the structures within which we live shape human behavior, and how different structures could enable new ways of living and being. Module 4 focuses on the theory and practice of sustainability transitions, exploring how theoretically informed practice can advance social, economic, and political change to achieve a just and sustainable society. By integrating these modules, the course aims to cultivate and inspire a community of change-makers dedicated to promoting sustainable development and social equity within safe planetary boundaries.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Identify and describe major environmental challenges at global, national, and local scales
- Evaluate the concept of sustainability and understand the key metrics used in its assessment

- Compare and contrast various environmental philosophies, paradigms, and narratives
- Illustrate the connection between social equity, environmental justice, and human flourishing
- Articulate coherent, evidence-based responses to a range of critical sustainability issues
- Apply a sophisticated understanding sustainability to a specific area of personal interest and concern
- Envision a just and sustainable society and identify steps to achieve it

Module 1 – Global Environmental Issues: Principles and Frameworks

In this module, students examine the range of global environmental issues facing humanity in the 21st century, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and overconsumption. Attention is given to the problem of dominant economic models that assume the viability of limitless economic growth on a finite planet, and how mainstream environmentalism tends to privilege ‘technological fixes’ which can entrench business-as-usual. Various alternative frameworks are introduced, including circular economy, ‘doughnut economics’, localization, and steady-state models of production and consumption. There is also a one-day workshop on eco-psychology that recognizes the ‘inner dimension’ of environmental challenges, offering skills and strategies for how to remain resilient in turbulent and uncertain times.

Sample content:

- Seminars by Associate Professor Samuel Alexander on ‘Sustainable Consumption in an Age of Environmental Limits’ and ‘The Sufficiency Imperative: How Much is Enough?’
- Workshop on ‘Ecopsychology’ by Dr Eshana Bragg.
- Student-led discussion on Module 1.

Readings:

Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing), Ch. 1.

Lucas, C. and Read, R. (2025) ‘It’s Time for Climate Populism’ *The New Statesman* (7 February 2025).

Jackson, T. (2017) ‘The Myth of Decoupling’ in Jackson, T. *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow* (London: Routledge, 2017, 2nd ed.), Ch. 5.

Trainer, T. (2010) ‘The Global Predicament: The Way Out’ *Transforming Cultures* 5(1): 185-192.

Bragg, E. (2015). “What if...?": Climate Change as Ally. *Ecopsychology*. 7 (4), 231-237. doi: 10.1089/eco.2015.0022

Module 2 – Permaculture, Sustainability, and Indigenous Knowledge

This module explores Australian sustainability perspectives drawing on the concept of permaculture and local Indigenous wisdom traditions. This component of the course enables students to explore frameworks and pathways of sustainability that lie beyond the dominant paradigm of consumerism and the growth economy, and gives insight into entirely different ways of looking at land, nature, and social and ecological prosperity. There will be excursions

to 'best practice' permaculture sites and field trips with local Aboriginal elders who offer insight into the history, culture, and sustainability perspectives of Indigenous Australians.

Sample content:

- Visit Zaytuna Farm for a workshop on 'Permaculture: Principles and Practices'
- Tour Dr David Holmgren's permaculture property, Melliodora, to receive instruction on permaculture design for sustainable building and food production.
- Attend workshops with local Indigenous elders on 'Aboriginal History, Culture, and Knowledge', run by Country as Teacher.
- Student-led discussion on Module 2.

Readings (excerpts from):

Holmgren, D. (2018). *Retrosuburbia: The Downshifter's Guide to a Resilient Future* (Hepburn: Melliodora Publishing).

Leahy, T. (2021). 'What is Permaculture? Three Perspectives' in Leahy, T. (2021) *The Politics of Permaculture* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 1-45.

Holmgren, D. (2002). *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (Hepburn: Holmgren Design Services).

Yunkaporta, T. (2019). *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Wisdom Can Save the World* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company).

Module 3 – Environmental Politics and Policy

In this module, students are invited to examine sustainability through the lens of environmental politics and politics. The goal is to highlight how the structures and built environment within which we live shape human behavior, and how progressive environmental politics and a bold policy agenda could enable new ways of living and being.

Sample content:

- Presentation by Member of Parliament, Katherine Copsey (Greens Party), followed by discussion.
- Seminars by Associate Professor Samuel Alexander on 'Examining Structure: Willing Consumers or Locked In?' and 'Beyond GDP: Policies for a Post-Growth Economy'.
- Student-led discussion on Module 3.

Readings include:

Pickett, K., Wilkenson, R., and Priya Sahni-Nicholas (2024). 'Executive Summary' of *The Spirit Level at 15: The Enduring Impact of Inequality* (London: Equality Trust), pp. 4-8.

Alexander, S. (2016). Policies for a Post-Growth Economy. *Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute* (Issues Paper No. 6), pp. 1-14.

Alexander, S. (2015). Degrowth implies Voluntary Simplicity: Overcoming Barriers to Sustainable Consumption, in Alexander, S. (2015) *Prosperous Descent: Crisis as Opportunity in an Age of Limits* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute), Ch. 4.

Module 4 – Transition Pathways to a Sustainable World

Focusing on theories of change and future scenarios, this module builds upon the previous three to develop a deeper understanding the ways in which sustainability outcomes can be achieved through strategic social, economic, and political action. Students will be exposed to ideas, perspectives, social movements, industry leaders and practitioners that highlight mechanisms for societal change, showing how the levers of personal, community, and political power can be used to advance humanity toward a just and sustainable society.

Sample content:

- Workshop on 'Social Change: Theory and Practice' by Dr Eshana Bragg.
- Presentation by localization expert and strategist, Helena Norberg-Hodge.
- Seminar on climate leadership facilitated by The Climate Reality Project.

Readings include (excerpts from):

Hes, D. and du Plessis, C. 2015. *Designing for Hope: Pathways to Regenerative Sustainability* (London: Routledge).

Hopkins, R. (2008). Understanding the Psychology of Change. In R. Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: Creating Local Sustainable Communities Beyond Oil Dependency*. Sydney: Finch.

Lockyer, Joshua. 2017. "Community, Commons, and Degrowth at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage." *Journal of Political Ecology* 24(1): 519–542.

Norberg-Hodge, H. 2019. *Local is Our Future: Steps to an Economics of Happiness*. Byron Bay: Local Futures.

Course Schedule

Students will be provided with a detailed course schedule during orientation on the program. Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs. The program is based in Byron Bay but includes excursions in the broader region, as well as field trips in and around the city of Melbourne. Each week the course covers major themes via classroom seminars, workshops, field trips, and class discussion. Guided by SIT faculty, the discussion sessions are facilitated by students.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English, but students will be exposed to vocabulary related to course content as well as the nuances of sustainability and environmental discourse through in-country expert lectures and field visits in a wide range of venues and regional locales.

Course Material and Texts

A course pack, including selections from the texts listed above, will be provided upon arrival in hardcopy. Students are not required to purchase these books; selected chapters and articles will also be available on the course website or provided in electronic form. Readings are selected from a range of academic and quality generalist literature, including refereed journal articles and selections from books. Beyond what is listed in the syllabus, supplementary articles are sometimes also distributed to students based on current events and relevancy. Other course resources include the SIT online resources library.

Pre-departure readings

All pre-departure readings and assignments can be found on the program's Virtual Library at <http://sit.libguides.com/ice>.

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

- 1) Reflective Blogs (30%):** Throughout the semester students will write five short blogs (500 words each) on a topic of interest and concern related to the content of that week. These are intended as 'reflective pieces' rather than research submissions, calling on students to think critically for themselves about the issues raised during the program. As well as posting short blogs on the forum provided, students are expected to thoughtfully and respectfully engage with the blogs of fellow students with questions and comments. Students will be assessed both on their five blogs (5% each) and their engagement in the forum (5%).
- 2) Essay (20%):** During the semester students are asked to produce a short research essay (1500-2000 words) on a topic of interest and concern related to the central themes of the program. Although this essay is short, there is an expectation that students do some independent research to deepen their understanding of the issues under consideration.
- 3) Group discussion and facilitation (10%):** There are four 90-minute group discussions scheduled throughout the semester, facilitated by students. These discussions are thematically related to the four modules, being i) Global Environmental Issues; ii) Permaculture and Indigenous Knowledge; iii) Environmental Politics and Policy; and iv) Transition Pathways to a Sustainable World. The quality of individual contributions to group discussion is worth 5% of this assessment, and 5% is based on the quality of each student's facilitation. Students should come to group discussions with their notes from the readings, lectures, workshops, and field trips, ready to engage. When facilitating, students should design and co-host a discussion that addresses the central issues of the module in a clear, knowledgeable, creative, and stimulating way. Each discussion should be designed to enable the group to reflect on course content, to integrate knowledge gained from various sources, to ask questions, and to share insights.
- 4) Exam (20%):** Toward the end of the semester there will be a closed book exam. This will comprise 20% of the grade for this seminar and be made up of various short-answer, multiple choice, and true/false questions. The questions are to be answered quickly to mimic how one might respond to a verbal question. The exam will assess the learning outcomes detailed in the syllabus, based on course content.
- 5) Final reflection (10%):** On the last day of semester there will be a final 'sharing circle' with the group. After that discussion, students will be asked to write a short reflective essay (1000 words) on their environmental philosophy and ethics, and how they might have changed or developed over the course of the semester. The goal is to challenge students to distil into writing some of their central learnings and insights gained throughout the program.

- 6) Participation (10%):** In this course, great emphasis is placed on the students' active participation in the program activities. This grade is allocated based on an assessment of the timely attendance and informed participation in all activities, including lectures and field trips, adherence to codes of conduct, and the general contribution to the maintenance of a positive learning environment throughout the semester. This includes displaying respect and having culturally appropriate interaction with hosts, SIT program staff, SIT lecturers and communities.

Late Assignments

SIT Study Abroad programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. The curriculum is designed to build on itself and progress to the culmination. It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program. Students may request a justified extension for one paper/assignment during the semester. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. If reason for request is accepted, an extension of up to one week may be granted at that time.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+
64-66%	D
below 64	F

Attendance and Participation

Due to the nature of SIT Study Abroad programs, and the importance of student and instructor contributions in each and every class session, attendance at all classes and for all program excursions is required. Criteria for evaluation of student performance include attendance and participation in program activities. Students must fully participate in all program components and courses. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the academic director or other designated staff. Unjustified absences impact academic performance, may impact grades, and could result in dismissal from the program.

Program Expectations

- Show up prepared. Be on time, have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Complying with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone.

- Have assignments completed on schedule and done accordingly to the specified requirements. This will help ensure that your assignments are returned in a timely manner.
- Ask questions in class. Engage the lecturers and presenters. These are often very busy academics and/or professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak.
- Comply with academic integrity policies (no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).
- Respect differences of opinion (classmates, lecturers, guest speakers, SIT staff, etc.). You are not expected to agree with everything you hear, but you are expected to listen across difference and consider other perspectives with respect.
- Personal Technology Use: Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.