

Honors Seminar: Extinctions (SS)

Dr. Tracey Heatherington
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Friday Morning 9:30-12:10, Spring 2008

Major texts*:

Stephen M. Meyer (2006) *The End of the Wild*. Boston Review of Books.
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) Reports.
Julie Cruikshank (2005) *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters & Social Imagination*. Univ. of British Columbia Press.
Anna Tsing (2005) *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton Univ. Press.
Paige West (2006) *Conservation is our Government Now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea*. Duke Univ. Press.

*Some additional short essays will be available on library reserve.

Description:

We are witnessing unprecedented losses of biodiversity today. According to estimates of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it is virtually certain that the rates of species loss will accelerate due to trends in anthropogenic “global warming”. While efforts in global environmental conservation are intensifying in response to the urgency of impending extinctions, their successes are equivocal. Unbridled development and resource extractions are motored by globalized corporate and political interests. Recently, conservation schemes themselves have sometimes been viewed as extensions of neoliberal power structures that continue to dispossess indigenous and ethnic minorities in the age of globalization. What is the relation between species extinctions and cultural extinctions? Is there an inherent interdependence, or an inherent conflict, between anthropocentric and ecocentric interests? How does the idea of “extinctions” condition our understanding of the “nature” of the problems we face?

This seminar explores the problem of extinctions from an ethnographic perspective, “from the bottom up”. It considers how both the problem of biodiversity loss and approaches to conservation are embedded in political economic systems and transnational discourses. By reading entire monographs, we will draw on the “thick description” of specific communities and places to question how globalization, environmentalism and governance structures are interwoven in complex ways. Perspectives from the Alaska-Yukon border, the Indonesian rainforest, and the lush tropics of Papua New Guinea offer windows into the making and remaking of “wild” frontiers. We will also read short papers to survey themes of current importance, such as bioprospecting, ecotourism and the genetic management of endangered species through new reproductive technologies such as gene banking and interspecies cloning.

Assessment:

Active participation in seminar discussions, presentations, workshops and in-class exercises will contribute 25% of the grade for this course; there will be a short (3-4pp) response paper required on each of three monographs we will read, worth 5% each. A research essay developed in three parts will contribute the remaining portion of the grade (10% proposal + peer review; 20% draft + formal presentation; 30% final draft).