

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE



PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS

VU Amsterdam Summer School

20-24 July 2026

Any general questions for the Summer
School support team? Contact
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Course Details

Title	Environmental Justice in Theory and Practice
Coordinator(s)	Marije Schaafsma, Ina Lehmann
Other lecturers	See below
Form(s) of tuition	On campus, excursion
Approximate contact hours	23.5 including group work
Approximate self-study hours	26.5

Teaching staff (in order of appearance)

TBD

Course description

Across the world, the most vulnerable people are most severely affected by the detrimental consequences of global environmental change. Policies and practices for mitigation of and adaptation to global environmental change impact people in highly uneven ways. These impacts are exacerbated by a lack of voice and agency, as well as a lack of recognition of diverse worldviews and practices among more vulnerable groups. Such injustices hamper achieving SDGs 14 and 15 (life below water and life on land) as well as SDG 1 (zero poverty) and SDG 10 (reduce inequalities). Scholars, environmental activists and policy makers are increasingly sensitive to these patterns, and calls for environmental justice abound. But how to achieve a more just and sustainable future?

Some people support just environmental policies and practices because they are convinced that treating each other justly is inherently the right thing to do – there is a moral imperative. Research also shows that environmental policies that are perceived as “just” can more effective because people are more likely to comply with them. However, it is far less clear what environmental justice really is, and what it demands in practice. Moreover, ideas of justice differ across people and contexts.

This summer course will introduce students to environmental justice from a variety of perspectives. We will engage with philosophical attempts to identify normative standards for what can be considered a just allocation of the benefits and burdens of environmental action. This includes questions such as: Should everybody have equal access to vital ecosystem services? Should rich countries pay for climate change adaptation in poorer countries? If so to what extent? But we will also critically scrutinize the value of philosophical reasoning as an

approach to environmental justice. Does philosophy provide us with much needed impartial principles to guide our actions or is it too much of an armchair discipline, removed from what is going on in the 'real world'? Is listening to stakeholders' claims and the demands of environmental justice movements and activists a more practically relevant way to make sense of environmental justice? What are their objectives and strategies and how successful are they?

We will also engage with environmental justice aspects of the assessment of impacts of conservation and other environmental policies and interventions. The Intergovernmental Platform of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has well laid out that people hold diverse values for nature, linked to the way they engage with nature and their worldviews. Then how to best assess such values? What are the advantages of expressing such values in monetary terms, and what are the counterarguments? What is the role of environmental economics and socio-cultural studies in assessing values of nature? How can the process of valuation be organized in a such a way that the resulting outcomes are supported by the people whose values are at stake?

In discussing different approaches, we will link these to concrete case studies and examples of struggles for environmental justice. These will come from different environmental issue areas such as climate change (SDG 13), terrestrial ecosystem conservation (SDG 15), and ocean protection (SDG 14). Environmental justice plays out differently in these settings due to different spatial and temporal scales; whereas in some cases the impacts are felt nearby and immediately (e.g. forest conversion), other issues such as climate change span vast areas and multiple generations. This may lead to different approaches to reduce injustices.

The course will be highly interactive. Lecturers will provide input on key concepts, methods and empirical trends in the field of environmental justice, and guest lectures by practitioners will demonstrate how these concepts are operationalized, feeding into discussions of theory versus practice. Students will be given considerable room to work with these inputs and apply them to cases of environmental injustice or environmental justice movements that they themselves choose to work on. The teachers for this course will come from different backgrounds and departments and have expertise in different environmental issue areas, making this a truly interdisciplinary learning experience. As environmental justice also plays out in urban design, we will include one local guided walk discussing environmental justice issues at city level.

Learning objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- 1) understand different approaches to environmental (in)justice
- 2) apply environmental justice theories and approaches to case studies

- 3) assess and evaluate situations of potential environmental (in)justice
- 4) explore policy options for enhancing environmental justice
- 5) work as a team on questions involving personal (normative) judgement.

Assignments and Assessment

Assignment 1: Group presentation (40% of course grade)

Small groups of ~3 students will choose a method and concept of environmental justice and apply this to a case study of environmental policies or practice. They can either assess the case from a normative point of view, asking whether or to what extent environmental justice is realized in their chosen case. Or they can take a more analytical approach, asking how issues around environmental justice are debated or contested in their case. Other approaches are also possible in agreement with the course coordinators. Participants are suggested to work with case cases presented in the first session on Monday, explore the [EJAtlas](#) or suggest own ideas, in agreement with the course coordinators. The final assignment will be a 15 minutes presentation of the group work on the final day of the course. This assignment tests all learning objectives and a minimum of 5.5 points will be required to pass.

Grading rubric: group presentation

Criteria	Points
<i>Introduction</i> The problem that motivates your presentation is clearly identified and the selection of a specific method and concept well justified.	1
<i>Summary of method and concept</i> The chosen method and concept are succinctly summarised and there is a clear explanation how they will be applied to the case study.	1
<i>Application to case study</i> The analysis clearly applies the method and concept to the chosen case. Relevant and accurate evidence that supports the analysis is presented. The presentation relies on appropriate literature and/or primary sources.	3
<i>Conclusion</i> The conclusion summarizes the main results, reflects on their implications for the generalisability of theory/concept, and spells out areas for future research.	1
<i>Presentation – Structure and style</i> The presentation is logically and clearly organised. Signposting is effective. Technical terms or unusual words are clarified. The presentation does not last longer than 15 minutes.	1,5
<i>Presentation – Speech and slides</i>	2

Articulation is clear throughout, speed of talking is adequate, slides are clear and neat with appropriate amount of text and clear visuals where appropriate.	
<i>Referencing</i> The presentation is complemented by a complete and consistent list of references, which meets academic standards.	0,5

Assignment 2: Individual reflection paper (60% of course grade)

After the course, students will write an individual reflection paper based on one of the sessions of the summer school. The paper should briefly summarize the key arguments and supporting evidence presented in the lecture. In a second step, these arguments and evidence should be set in relation to the readings assigned for the chosen lecture. For instance, students can show how the lecture supported or contradicted the readings, or how the readings and the lecture addressed different aspects of the broader topic and how these could be combined to create a more comprehensive picture. In a third step, the student should elaborate on wider implications of the lecture and readings for environmental justice theory and practice. Which research gaps are still open and how (e.g., through which methods and case studies) could they be closed? What would be practical strategies to enhance environmental justice: what needs to change concretely and through which steps could these changes be realized?

The paper should have ~ 1000 words (+/- 10%) and will have to be submitted online two weeks after the end of the course, i.e. by 8 August. An extension of one week can be granted in case of illness or other personal circumstances, and after discussion with the course coordinators. This assignment primarily tests learning objectives 1, 3, and 4, and a minimum of 5.5 points will be required to pass.

Grading rubric: individual reflection paper

Criteria	Points
<i>Summary of lecture</i> The key argument of the lecture and supporting evidence are correctly and concisely summarized.	2
<i>Contextualization</i> There is a clear and succinct explanation how the core arguments of the assigned readings support, complement or contradict the lecture.	4
<i>Own reflection</i> Potential implications of the lecture and assigned readings for environmental theory and practice are clearly named and key steps forward are outlined logically and concisely.	4

Attendance of classes is not graded, but it is expected that students attend all classes.

Provisional reading list

NOTE: This is the reading list from previous years –we may still adjust this slightly

These are the reading materials that will be discussed during the morning lectures, ordered by the day in which they are included in the schedule. We strongly recommend that all participants read these materials before the lecture. All reading materials are provided as pdf files on the course canvas page.

There is one reading per lecture. Readings are in the order of the lectures for which they will be relevant.

Monday:

- Walker, G. (2012). Environmental justice: concepts, evidence and politics. Abingdon. Ch 3: Making claims: Justice, evidence and process, 40-76. *Focus on the section on justice dimensions*
- Pascual, U., Balvanera, P., Anderson, C. B., et al. (2023). Diverse values of nature for sustainability. *Nature*, 620(7975), 813-823

Tuesday:

- Venier Cambron, C., Helm, L., Malek, Z., Verburg, P. (2024) Representing Justice in Spatial Land-Use Scenarios Can Align Biodiversity Benefits with Protection from Land Grabbing. *One Earth*, 7, 896-907.
- Boelens, R., Escobar, A., Bakker, K. et al. (2022) Riverhood: political ecologies of socionature commoning and translocal struggles for water justice. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 50(3), 1125-1156.
- Bixler, R.P., Dell'Angelo, J., Mfune, O., Roba, H. (2015). Political ecology of participatory conservation. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 22, 164-182.

Wednesday:

- Pearson, J., Jackson, G., McNamara, K. E. (2023). Climate-driven losses to knowledge systems and cultural heritage: A literature review exploring the impacts on Indigenous and local cultures. *The Anthropocene Review*, 10(2), 343-366.
- O'Connor, S., Kenter, J. O. (2019). Making intrinsic values work; integrating intrinsic values of the more-than-human world through the Life Framework of Values. *Sustainability Science*, 14(5), 1247-1265.

- Gurney, G., Adams, V., Alvarez-Romero, J., et al. (2023). Area-based conservation: Taking stock and looking ahead. *One Earth*. 6, 98-104.

Thursday:

- Hallegatte, S., Vogt-Schilb, A., Rozenberg, J., et al. (2020). From poverty to disaster and back: A review of the literature. *Economics of Disasters and Climate Change*, 4, 223-247.
 - Fowlie, M., Greenstone, M., Wolfram, C. (2015). Are the non-monetary costs of energy efficiency investments large? Understanding low take-up of a free energy efficiency program. *American Economic Review*, 105(5), 201-204.

Friday:

- Hebinck, A., Diercks, G., Wirth, T. von et al. (2022) An actionable framework for societal transitions: the x-curve framework. *Sustainability Science*. 17, 1009-1021.

Course Schedule

NOTE: This is the schedule from previous years – we may still make slight adjustments

Day	Hours	Teacher / Moderator	Topic
Monday 21 July <i>Concepts & methods of environmental justice</i>	10:00-12:00	Ina Lehmann, Marije Schaafsma	Introduction: Dimensions of environmental justice & values of nature
	13:00-15:00	NN (organization tbd)	Activist perspective on environmental justice; presentation of potential case studies for group work Start group work: Choose and explore topic (case studies on environmental in/justice)
	from 15:00		Summer School social program
Tuesday 22 July <i>Spatial aspects of environmental in/justice</i>	9:00-09:50	Camille Venier-Cambron	Justice in land use planning
	10:00-10:50	Heidi Mendoza	Living with(out) waters: Fight for recognition in the Philippines and Peru
	11:00-11:50	Mirja Schoderer	Participation = justice? Exploring the link between justice dimensions at the example of Mongolian water- and miningscapes
	14:00-16:30	Ina Lehmann	Excursion: Environmental in/justice in Amsterdam - De Ceutel - Noord
Wednesday 23 July	09:00-09:50	Joshua Nooij	Different forms of knowledge: the use case for Traditional Ecological Knowledge in climate change

<i>Biodiversity and Nature's Contributions to People</i>	10:00-10:50	Veerle Siegerink	Stakeholders' visions and values for land use change
	11:00-11:50	Ina Lehmann	Justice, protected areas and the Convention on Biological Diversity
	from 12:00		Summer School social program
Thursday 24 July <i>Global climate change</i>	09:00-09:50	Eszter Szedlacsek	In/justice in global climate governance
	10:00-10:50	Toon Haer	In/justice in climate change adaptation
	11:00-11:50	Madeline Werthschulte	In/justice in national climate policy: How to enable the participation of vulnerable groups in the energy transition?
	13:00-17:00	self-organized	Continue group work (case studies on environmental in/justice)
Friday 25 July Stock take and outlook	9:00-12:00	Ina Lehmann	Presentation and discussion of group work
	13:00-14:15	Ina Lehmann, Camille Venier Cambron	Pathways to just transformations
	14:30-15:00	Ina Lehmann	Course evaluation and wrap up

On Tuesday afternoon, we will have a tour of De Ceuvel and Amsterdam Noord .
This is what you can expect:

For a long time, to the north of the IJ there were mainly old Dutch fishing and farming villages. At the end of the 19th century, the construction of heavy industry and large shipyards in what is now called Amsterdam-Noord began. At the beginning of the 20th century, the first working-class neighborhoods followed in the form of the Van Der Pekbuurt and the Vogelwijk, later the

garden villages followed. 100 years later, Noord is undergoing a new transition. Buiksloterham is changing from an industrial business park into a city district focused on comfortable living and creative work. Amsterdam-Noord now ranks at the top of international lists of 'the hippest neighborhoods in the world'. The ambition is to turn this old industrial area into a circular and sustainable district. Meanwhile, new development is sprouting like mushrooms and you are now stumbling over the hip coffee shops and galleries. (<https://deceuvel.nl/tours/tour-of-noord-district-in-transition/?lang=en>)

We will have a guided tour, and you will be invited to ask critical questions about urban justice, green gentrification etc.

More details about the tour and how to get there from campus will be shared during the course.

