Scholarship of Sustainability
Spring 2016
Thursdays 4:00 to 5:20 p.m.

Each spring, this series of presentations and discussions welcomes students, staff and the general public to explore the cultural contexts of contemporary environmental problems. For the 2016 series eight sessions are scheduled for 4 to 5:20 p.m. Thursdays in Room 149 of the National Soybean Research Center, 1101 W. Peabody Drive, Urbana, beginning Feb. 4. The exact dates are set forth below. The series will not be held on Thursday, March 10; participants are invited on that date to attend, instead, the major campus lecture on climate change by the Hon. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and current UN Special Envoy for Climate Change. The series will also skip March 24 (spring break), and April 7, the date of the campus address by Garry Wills on the recent encyclical by Pope Francis. Ample metered parking is available nearby. The sessions are open to the public.

The series leader is Eric T. Freyfogle, Swanlund Chair and Professor of Law, who is assisted by Professor Robert McKim (Religion) and Dr. Robert Kanter (SESE). Sessions are cosponsored by the School of Earth, Society, and the Environment (SESE); the College of Law; and the School of Literatures, Cultures, and Linguistics. Three U of I courses are associated with the series: ESE 311, Environmental Issues Today; RLST 270, Religion, Ethics, Environment; and LAW 792JJ, Current Legal Problems.

The weekly topics are below. Each week will include a featured outside speaker or guest along with comments by faculty associated with the series and time for discussion. Some 300 pages of readings supplement the series. They can be purchased, in spiral bound form, at the College of Law bookstore for approximately $30. It is located in the SE corner of the basement of the law building, 504 E. Pennsylvania Ave., Champaign (due south of the Krannert Art Museum) and is open from 10 to 4 on Mondays and Wednesdays.

February 4. Beginning the Search. Environmental ills involve human misuses of nature. But how might we distinguish between legitimate use and misuse? How might we best think about the proper human role in nature? Is sustainability a useful measure, and what alternatives goals have been proposed? Ultimately, what are the root causes—cultural, cognitive, and material—of our misuses of nature?

February 11. The Challenges of Normative Thinking. It is commonly said that we should base environmental policy on sound science. But what is science, what are its proper roles, and how and why do we regularly misuse it? Science aside, how do we decide what is right and wrong, or even good and bad, about our interactions with nature? And how does our love of individual liberty make it difficult to engage collectively in normative policy discussions?

February 18. Fragmentation and Cultural Flaws. According to environmental historians a major driver in uses and misuses of nature has been the tendency to fragment landscapes and treat nature’s parts as market commodities. We’ll look at the issue of fragmentation—physically,
legally, and intellectually—and its resulting problems while also considering the limits on our knowledge and its implications.

February 25. Other Forms of Life. A critical modern assumption is that humans are the only species to possess moral value. Is this morally defensible? We’ll explore the considerable differences between animal-welfare and ecological modes of thought, while paying attention generally to the many ways we benefit from other life forms and how we might best think about them. As we’ll see, our varied reasons for wanting to conserve other life forms can lead to widely differing policies and actions.

March 3. Otherworldly Religions. How have religious views affected our uses of nature, and how might religion today push us in good or bad directions? We’ll consider historian Lynn White’s famous argument and responses to it and also look at how we might evaluate religions—even individual congregations—based on environmental factors.

March 10. Climate Justice: A Public Address by the Honorable Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and UN Special Envoy on Climate Change, 4 p.m., iHotel Illinois Ballroom.

March 17. Seeing and Valuing Nature. Our dealings with nature are significantly shaped by the ways we perceive it and value it. Better ways of living in nature will likely require us to see nature in new, more ecological ways and to appreciate the value of its countless living components and their complex interdependencies. Perhaps the most lyrical and persuasive proponent of a new view of nature was Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), viewed by many as our nation’s most thoughtful and far-sited conservationist. This session will introduce this thought.

March 31. The Role of Ecological Restoration. What are the aims of ecological restoration, and how might restoration help promote more sound ways of living in nature? Does nature provide sufficient guidance for the work of restoration or are humans largely left to set the goals on their own?

April 7. A Presentation by Garry Wills relating to the Pope’s Encyclical, Laudate Si’

April 14. Concluding Session. This session will consider the environmental critique of capitalism and calls for a new, green industrial revolution. It will also consider new directions for conservation, including ideas for a revitalized citizen-led movement to bring about needed major changes and some of the challenges that such a movement would face.