

**Environmental Journalism
Spring 2015 Syllabus
JOU 4930-1F72
MMC 6936-148H (Graduate)**

Mondays, Periods 4, 5, and 6 (10:40-1:40)

10:40 to 11:30 in FLG 0230

11:45 to 1:40 in MCCA 2186

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Environmental Journalism, the challenge: Living in what some scientists term the Anthropocene Era (*anthropo*: man, and *cene*: new), in which human activities have ever-more serious impacts on our local regions and the planet, it is increasingly important to report on and improve public understanding of climate change; freshwater scarcity; the decline of our oceans, fish, and wildlife; environmental health; sustainable energy, agriculture, and food systems; and more. But complex science, uncertainty & risk, well-funded counter-narratives, zealous stakeholders, and what can (incorrectly) appear a lack of news hook for stories playing out slowly in the decades of a comp plan or two centuries worth of CO2 emissions make Environmental Journalism one of the most challenging specializations in our craft.

Environmental Journalism, the course: This course will introduce you to Environmental Journalism; help you find the most accurate, credible, and timeliest information on science and issues; and ground you in the essentials of environmental reporting – discerning uncompromised expert sources, using descriptive storytelling to relate real-world impact, and tapping the primary databases and other tools commonly used by environmental reporters. You will publish your work on our CoJC website devoted to Environmental Journalism, and have the opportunity to publish it in larger markets through a Creative Commons license. By April, you'll have a significant, compelling, accurate work of environmental reporting that is relevant for your audiences – and, I hope, an excellent story clip and byline for you.

Each weekly class will be divided into two parts. During the first hour, shared with a larger Survey of Environmental Journalism & Communications course, we'll discuss a major theme in EJ, the underlying science, policy, and/or political issues, and the journalistic challenge, often with a guest speaker. The next two hours, we'll move to **MCCA 2186** for our class story meeting – a practical session devoted to the craft and challenges involved in Environmental Journalism, developing your assignments, and figuring out how we help the public care. Much of your work will be read not only by me, but by your peers in class. This is a crucial step. The best writers have a “brain trust” to share ideas and gut-check copy before sending it into the editorial ether.

Course readings, assignments and grades:

Readings: Undergraduates are not required to buy any books. Please read the assigned works of journalism related to our topic each week before class. Graduate students are required to pick up Dan Fagin's *Toms River: A Story of Science and Salvation*, winner of the 2014 Pulitzer for nonfiction. **Graduate students only: A 500-word book review on Toms River is due by March 23rd, the day we'll discuss reporting on chemicals.** For all students, our weekly assigned articles and essays are available free online, or through UF's electronic databases. Finding them is part of the EJ skill set, but if any turn out to be hard to track down, I'll link to them in our class blog. All are also expected to keep up with the Environmental Journalism of the day. This is best accomplished by checking the Society of Environmental Journalists' "EJ Today," a well-chosen collection of top headlines from the beat updated every weekday morning. You do not have to be a member of SEJ to access the daily links, here: <http://www.sej.org/headlines/list>. You may want to join (\$25 for students) if you are considering EJ as a career.

Assignments: Each student will critique one work of Environmental Journalism over the semester. When it's your turn to do so, you will email your classmates copies of the work ahead of time, turn in a 300-word critique of the piece at the start of class, and lead an informal discussion of its strengths and weaknesses during our class story meeting.

The primary assignment for the course is a long-form (1,500 to 2000 words) environmental story that we'll work on through the semester. A 300-word story pitch/plan for the piece is due week 3. Your other writing assignments – a 500-word environmental biography or work of nature writing; a 750-word environmental news story; and a 500-word critique of a corporate press release or green campaign – may tie in to your long-form story, especially if they help to deepen your final piece and build your specialization.

Grades: Your final grade is made up of your journalistic assignments, two exams based on our weekly lectures, and class participation in person and on-line, as follows:

- 300-word critique and informal class presentation on a published work of environmental journalism. **(50 points)**
- 300-word story pitch/plan for your long-form environmental story. **(50 points)**
- 500-word environmental biography or nature writing. **(100 points)**
- 750-word environmental news story. Chose between 1) a hard-news story spun off database reporting and/or scientific research and/or hearings on an environmental debate; or 2) a localized climate-change story. Find a state, regional, or local impact of global climate change, such as the impacts of sea-level rise to a coastal ecosystem or community, the human health impacts of higher temperatures, etc., and turn it into a multi-sourced story. **(100 points)**
- First draft of your long-form environmental story, minimum 1,500 maximum 2,000 words. (Consider this your midterm. **Hint: the better it is on first draft, the easier on final draft!)** **(100 points)**

- 500-word critique and class presentation on a corporate press release or green campaign. **(100 points)**
- Final (publishable) draft of your long-form environmental story, minimum 1,500 maximum 2,000 words. **(200 points)**
- Two quizzes based on weekly lectures & readings **(100 points each for 200 possible points)**
- Class attendance and engagement including online in the form of at least two posts to our class Environmental Journalism blog (EJ@UF) over the course of the semester. **(100 points)**

Hint: We have only 13 class sessions together, so please do your best to attend. (Official UF attendance, grading, and other policies are listed at the end of this syllabus.) If you come to class and post to our EJ@UF blog at least twice, you will earn all 100 points for participation.

Twitter posts are not required, but you are encouraged to engage in this vigorous platform for Environmental Journalism. I will Tweet about our lectures and readings using the hashtag #EJ@UF and I encourage you to do the same. For a good overview of Environmental Journalism on Twitter, follow the Society of Environmental Journalists Feed at @SEJORG.

TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE: 1,000

GRADING SCALE:

930-1,000 points: A

900-929: A-

880-899: B+

830-879: B

800-829: B-

780-799: C+

730-779: C

700-729: C-

680-699: D+

630-679: D

600-629: D-

599 or below: E

Course schedule and weekly content:

Week 1, January 12th: Course intro, philosophy, and history of EJ: Modern EJ has roots in the seventeenth century, when John Evelyn writes “[Fumifugium, or the Inconvenience of the Aer and Smoake of London Dissipated](#)” (1661), proposing remedies for London’s choking black air: *The immoderate use of, and indulgence to, sea-coale in the city of London exposes it to one of the fowlest inconveniences and reproaches that can possibly befall so noble and otherwise incomparable City. Whilst they are belching it forth their sooty jaws, the City of London resembles ... the suburbs of Hell [rather] than an assembly of rational creatures.*

Class story meeting: Introductions, environmental interests, begin to discuss ideas for your long-form environmental story, discuss and assign dates for environmental-journalism critiques.

January 19th: No class, MLK Day

Week 2, January 26th Coasts & oceans: Sea stories are among the best read in Environmental Journalism because audiences often already care about beaches. Metrics for coastal quality include beach closings by Department of Health and mammal deaths. Discuss covering harmful algal blooms (red tides) and other controversial pollution issues, and the big ocean story – acidification. **Guest speaker: Dr. Karl Havens, Director, Florida Sea Grant.**

Read ahead for class: 1) “Sea Change: The Pacific’s Perilous Turn,” 2013 *Seattle Times* series on the global impacts of ocean acidification, by reporter Craig Welch and photographer Steve Ringman. Be sure to read all seven stories online at the *Seattle Times*’s main link to the project <http://apps.seattletimes.com/reports/sea-change/> so that you can view the videos and interactive graphics. 2) Dinah Voyles Pulver’s five-part series in the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, “Troubled Water: The Indian River Lagoon in Peril.” <http://creative.news-journalonline.com/troubledwater/>

Class story meeting: Begin informal class presentations on critiques. Brainstorm long-form environmental story ideas, pitches and outlines.

Week 3, February 2nd: Freshwaters: Reporting on freshwater encompasses both quality – nitrates and other pollutants; and quantity, which involves the sustainability of water extraction for human use and equity among different users from ag to utilities (us) – and ecosystems. **Guest speaker: Award-winning environmental reporter Craig Pittman** of the *Tampa Bay Times*. Craig will talk to our class about EJ, and at noon we’ll join him for more entertaining stories during a community brown-bag lunch.

Read ahead for class: 1) Proof that a small newspaper (and journalism students!) can influence law and policy, this 2011 series of fracking articles in the *Denton (Texas) Record-Chronicle*, co-reported with students at the University of North Texas Mayborn School of Journalism, led the Texas Legislature to adopt new rules requiring public disclosure of fracking chemicals and water use. Read all five parts of “Citizens of the Shale.” <http://www.dentonrc.com/local-news/special-projects/gas-well-drilling-headlines/20120706-citizens-of-the-shale.ece> 2) On quantity/groundwater overpumping, read “Groundwater Wake-up” by Cynthia Barnett, *Ensis* magazine, 2013, and “A Water Ethic for Florida,” by Cynthia Barnett, Collins Center for Public Policy, 2011. 3) Read Pittman’s interactive investigative series Vanishing Wetlands in the *Tampa Bay Times*, here: <http://www.sptimes.com/2006/webspecials06/wetlands/>. Please read some of Pittman’s stories of your own choosing.

Class story meeting: Attend Pittman’s brown-bag lunch, then we’ll have a brief discussion of nature writing/environmental biography assignment. **DUE: 300-word pitch for your environmental story idea.**

Week 4, February 9th: Literary journalism/environmental biography/nature writing:

Environmental journalists are journalists working to cover the environment and not environmentalists trying to practice journalism. Still, nature writing can have its place in EJ. Lyrical descriptions of sea or forest, personal narratives, sense of place, or what we might think of as the opposite of sense of place – adventure and wanderlust a-la Darwin’s *Voyage* or Captain Cook’s – can draw many more readers to environmental stories.

Read ahead for class: 1) Rachel Carson, “The Shape of Ancient Seas,” from *The Sea Around Us*, 1950; 2) Janisse Ray, “Child of Pine” excerpt from *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, 2000; and 3) Aldo Leopold, “Thinking like a mountain,” essay from *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949.

Class story meeting: Bring ideas for your nature writing/environmental biography assignment. Think about a powerful place you’d like to describe (the power could come from its beauty or its loss); or a personal ecological narrative in the vein of Leopold’s wolf experience.

Week 5, February 16th: The Big Story: Climate Change. We’ll talk about the basic science, the IPCC, how to stay up to date, finding the best experts and research, dealing with skeptics and contrarians, reporting on mitigation and adaptation, and finding relevance for the daily lives and the regions of our audiences.

Read ahead for class: 1) “Good-bye Miami,” by Jeff Goodell, *Rolling Stone*, June 20th 2013; 2) “The 45th Parallel: Warming Where We Live, By Beth Daley, *The Boston Globe*, http://www.boston.com/news/specials/climate_change/ and 3) “Hot Politics,” written by Peter Bull of the Center for Investigative Reporting and aired on PBS Frontline (video and transcript both online), 2007.

Class story meeting: DUE: Nature writing/environmental biography. Read your favorite parts aloud if you are willing. Discuss challenges, triumphs reporting long-form environmental story.

Week 6, February 23rd: Wildlife & biodiversity. Earth is losing species 100 to 1,000 times faster than natural extinction, a rate that has not occurred since the dinosaurs and many other species disappeared 65 million years ago. Scientists say habitat degradation is the main cause. What are some ways to report on the biodiversity crisis, and make endangerment of Florida’s frosted flatwoods salamander as interesting as our charismatic Florida panther? **Guest Speaker: Tom Hctor, UF Center for Landscape Planning**, on Florida Wildlife corridors, and efforts to predict and mitigate the effects of sea-level rise and land-use changes on Florida’s imperiled species.

Read ahead for class: 1) “The Sixth Extinction: A Conversation With Elizabeth Kolbert,” by Robert Kunzig, *National Geographic*, February 18th 2014. 2) View on-line interactive report,

“Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition,” by photographer Carlton Ward Jr. and National Geographic, <http://www.floridawildlifecorridor.org/geostory/>.

Class story meeting: **DUE: First draft, long-form environmental story.** Discuss possible localized climate story for your 750-word piece. Read any more nature essays if you’d like to. Finish any last environmental journalism critiques.

SPRING BREAK!

Week 7, March 9th: Energy. Coverage blends the old-fashioned skill of following the money and the newer challenge of reporting on the sustainability of our energy choices and sources.

Guest speaker: Award-winning energy reporter Ivan Penn of the *Tampa Bay Times*. Penn is on the business desk; his grasp of economics has helped him stay on top of Duke Energy’s nuclear power plant debacles in Florida, where customers are on the hook for nearly \$3 billion for one shuttered plant and the cancellation of reactors in Levy County – money that won’t buy one kilowatt of electricity. Penn has also covered the gutting of energy-efficiency and solar energy projects by the Florida Public Service Commission at the behest of big utilities.

Read ahead for class: 1) Read Penn’s coverage of Duke Energy’s nuclear power plant closings and cost overruns in Florida, along with his coverage of the PSC. I’ll post some stories on our blog before his visit. 2) Read “Can Coal Ever Be Clean?” By Michelle Nijhuis, *National Geographic*, April 2014. 3) “The Dilbit Disaster: Inside the biggest oil spill you’ve never heard of.” This series by the five-year-old online publication InsideClimate News won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting for its cautionary tale preceding policy debate for TransCanada Corporation’s proposed Keystone XL pipeline, <http://www.pulitzer.org/works/2013-National-Reporting>

Class story meeting: Following the money in environmental stories; tracking campaign contributions; what are the financial angles of your long-form environmental story?

Week 8, March 16th: Agriculture and food. A large and complex beat covering everything from pollution and water/land use to genetically modified crops and the question of how to feed the world. Americans’ renewed interest in organic food and urban farming, and their perpetual interest in healthful eating, can make these some of the best-read stories on the environmental beat. How can environmental journalists accurately and fairly report big trade-offs like food vs. fuel, subsidies vs. groundwater extraction, the most productive corn region in the world vs. the Gulf of Mexico dead zone, etc? Also, the pros and cons of regulators as sources.

Read ahead for class: 1) “A Race to Save the Orange by Altering its DNA,” Amy Harmon, *The New York Times*, July 27th 2013. 2) “What’s Eating America,” by Michael Pollan, *Smithsonian*, June 15th, 2006. 3) “Agricultural Subsidies and the American Obesity Epidemic,” Caroline Franck etc. al, in the *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, September 2013. 4) “Downwind: Big Ag at Your Door,” by Clare Howard at the journalism start up 100 Reporters, February 14th 2012, won an SEJ award for its reporting on aerial spraying of agricultural chemicals.

Class story meeting: Discuss agriculture's impact on almost every EJ beat. Hands-on tutorial with farm subsidy database. Discuss 750-word environmental news piece.

Week 9, March 23rd: Chemicals. Understanding epidemiology & risk, and investigative reporting on the environmental beat. Chemical pollution lies at the major intersection of environmental, health, and science reporting. **Guest speaker: Joe Delfino, UF professor emeritus in chemical engineering** and a great source for helping laypersons understand chemicals and risk.

Read ahead for class: 1) "Cracking Open a Cancer Cluster," by Elizabeth Royte, *OnEarth* magazine, April 2014, a discussion of Fagin's epidemiological scholarship in *Toms River*, the story of chemical production and disposal in a small coastal town in New Jersey with scores of children diagnosed with leukemia and cancers of the central nervous system.

2) "Chemical Fallout," a 2007 series in the *Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal Sentinel* about endocrine-disrupting chemicals in household objects from baby's bottles to "microwave safe" containers. By journalists Susanne Rust, Cary Spivak, and Meg Kissinger, the series began to expose the problems of common chemicals that build up in our bodies, especially in children beginning in utero – as well as the epic industry effort to prevent regulation of bisphenol A (BPA). Read the original series and follow-up stories when FDA reversed its position on BPA as a result of the series: <http://www.jsonline.com/watchdog/34405049.html>.

3) [This excerpt](#) from Theo Colborn's *Our Stolen Future*, Chapter 6, "To the Ends of the Earth." And [this short biography](#) of Theo Colborn by environmental journalist Lizzie Grossman.

4) "Banned in Europe, Safe in the U.S.," by Lizzie Grossman, *Ensi* magazine, June 2014.

Class story meeting: Dr. Delfino will stick around as we discuss Rachel Carson's transition from nature-writing to hard-hitting chemical reporting, Fagin's work on *Toms River*, and more.

DUE: 750-word environmental news piece.

Week 10, April 6th: Spin. Is that new housing development really green? How much water will the proposed organic beef operation pump? Is phosphate feeding the world or depleting the Earth? Asking the questions and the follow-up questions... reporting with sophistication and fairness ... and recognizing greenwashing vs. effective sustainability programs.

Read ahead for class: "The slippery business of palm oil," by Fred Pearce, *The Guardian*, November 6th 2008, and "Greenwashing 2.0," by Eric L. Lane, *The Columbia Journal of Environmental Law*, 2013, pages 279-232. (Greenwashing has moved far beyond consumer products, cars and green housing developments; it is prevalent in major industrial and commercial green technologies whose sole purpose is to provide environmental benefits through clean-energy generation.)

Class story meeting: Brainstorm ideas for the corporate press release or green/sustainability campaign you'd like to critique. (You may feature a campaign that really is making a difference, or expose one that is greenwashing or pinkwashing, ie, pink-ribbon-promoting companies whose products are linked to increased risk of breast cancer, see thinkbeforeyoupink.org.)

Week 11, April 13th: Cities and the built environment. Virtually all of the world’s future population growth is predicted to take place in cities and their urban landscapes – a global increase from the current 2.9 billion people in cities today to 5 billion by 2030. Cities are some of the greatest drains on the environment, emitting 40 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, but many are also great centers of innovation, and full of amazing stories on the environmental beat from urban aquaculture to climate-change adaptation.

Read ahead for class: 1) “Envision 2050: The Future of Cities,” By Todd Reubold, *Ensisia*, June 16th 2014. 2) “Pollution, Poverty, People of Color,” Environmental Health News Network’s U.S. Environmental Justice Series, 2012, 10-day series at <http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2012/pollution-poverty-people-of-color-series-summary>.

Class story meeting: Race issues in environmental reporting; environmental justice. Case study local Plum Creek story: economic development/racial equity as counterpoint to opponents of sprawl and habitat loss. **DUE: 500-word critique of corporate press release** or green/sustainability campaign; begin informal class presentations of your critiques.

Week 12, April 13th: Waste and consumption. Many core issues on the environmental beat, from water to energy to food, circle back to over-consumption and waste. How do we communicate the impact of consumption without repelling audiences with guilt? How to quantify the impact of the waste of 8 billion human beings – including their sewage waste?

Read ahead for class: 1) “Drowning in plastic: The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is twice the size of France,” Richard Grant, *The Guardian*, April 24th, 2009; 2) View PBS Frontline video, “Ghana: Digital Dumping Ground.” 3) Read excerpt from Rose George’s book, *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why it Matters*.

Class story meeting: We’ll watch filmmaker Annie Leonard’s documentary “The Story of Stuff” in class. Discuss how to localize consumption issues. Continue press release critiques.

Week 13, April 20th: Sustainability and success stories. Humans have turned around major environmental crises, including acid rain at the global level; littering at the national level; the clean-ups of severely polluted water bodies from the Hudson River to Tampa Bay. Reporting on both steady progress and success is crucial to give our audiences a sense of solutions – and hope for the future.

Read ahead for class: 1) “Great Lakes, Great Peril: A roadmap to restoration,” by Dan Egan of the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Journal Sentinel*. After reporting on threats to the Great Lakes for six years, Egan decided to devote a series to the promise of restoration. 2) “Birds flock to Restored Wetlands Along Kissimmee River,” Tom Palmer, the *Lakeland Ledger*, February 23rd 2010; 3) “When Sewage is Not a Dirty Word,” by Melinda Burns, *The Pacific Standard*, April 3rd, 2010.

Class story meeting: DUE: Final draft, long-form environmental story. Getting Published, Promoting Your Work and Careers in Environmental Journalism. The good, the bad, and the ugly of making EJ a career. Also: pitching your story to professional outlets; building your brain trust; finding and keeping professional mentors; social media and how to promote your work without being insufferable.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST

Academic Honesty is expected at all times. As a University of Florida student, you have agreed to comply with the University Honor Code. Please make sure you understand the code and consequences, which are here: <https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>. Any violations of this code in Environmental Journalism class will be reported to the Dean of Students. You must also pay special attention to journalistic ethics and issues of plagiarism and copyright; please read and understand the UF College of Journalism and Communication statement on these matters:

<http://www.jou.ufl.edu/academics/bachelors/journalism/academic-honesty/>

Class attendance and make-up exams: Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with UF policies:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>

Students with disabilities: All reasonable accommodations will be made. Should you need them, please register first with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) and provide appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Please follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

Course and instructor evaluations: Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>.

Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to you at: <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>