NRE 539: Landscape Ecology

Instructor: Bill Currie. Email: wcurrie@umich.edu

Fall 2017 A, 2 credit hours

Class meets Tuesday and Thursday 4:00 – 5:30 pm, Sept 5th – Oct 19th (Dana 1046)

Description

Landscape ecology is a question-driven discipline in which the central question is ‘how does landscape structure affect ecological processes?’ This includes ecological processes at the population, community, and ecosystem levels. At the population level, we might ask whether landscape structure affects reproduction or dispersal. At the community level we might ask whether landscape structure affects predator-prey interactions or the success of invasive species. At the ecosystem level we might ask whether landscape structure affects NPP (net primary productivity), evapotranspiration, or carbon sequestration.

This course takes an approach that is inquiry-based, evidence- and applied research-oriented, as opposed to theory-driven. We consider the questions that landscape ecology addresses and we analyze studies in the primary literature that have addressed these questions. We examine papers that focus on a variety of ecological systems and habitats including wetlands, grasslands, forests, and human-
dominated, multiple-use landscapes. Assigned readings emphasize current literature while lectures and class discussion will cover topics from some additional foundational papers and texts. Although theory is not the focus of the course, we will introduce and discuss some theoretical concepts as needed in order to convey the fundamental principles in the field.

This course has these main areas of focus:

1. Does landscape structure, including variability in both space and time, affect ecological processes? We consider ecological processes at the population, community, and ecosystem levels.
2. What are the characteristics of landscape structure that are used to address question #1? These include patch sizes and distances, the nature of edge-influenced area and patch-interior area, the nature of the landscape matrix as it affects different species, and other topics.
3. What are the causes of landscape structure and heterogeneity, both natural and human-caused? Natural causes include physiographic variability and disturbance regimes. Human causes include resource extraction, land use / land cover change, habitat fragmentation, and others.

Learning goals, approaches and outcomes
By the end of this course you will have learned to recognize and to formulate the types of questions that are asked in landscape ecology and describe some of the methods used to address them effectively. You will have learned to understand many of the key concepts in landscape ecology and how to apply them correctly to current questions and issues in the field. You will improve your ability to read and critically evaluate papers in the primary ecological literature. You will come away with a new understanding of scale, environmental heterogeneity, and how these interact with ecological processes at levels of organization from population, to community, to ecosystem processes.

You will improve your ability to communicate questions and articulate concepts in class discussion. You will improve your skill to communicate effectively through presentations by conducting critical peer evaluations of other students, by giving your own presentation, and by receiving peer feedback.

Two primary approaches are used: question-driven learning, and the use of case studies from the primary literature. We will see how the questions of landscape ecology are addressed through the range of methods used by practitioners, including empirical studies and modeling studies. In some weeks there is an assigned reading and assigned critical review that presents a case study of an investigation into a question in landscape ecology. You will write a brief critical analysis of the paper before class, then the instructor will present the key points from the assigned paper as well as illustrations from other case studies that addressed similar questions. In your presentations and peer evaluation of other students’ presentations, you will further engage with question-driven case studies of research in landscape ecology.

You are encouraged to ask questions and make comparisons in class. As we discuss research case studies, various theories will be presented and discussed as they arise. Students will see the role of theory as an effort to generalize from empirical and modeling studies and synthesize understanding so it can be used in applied problems. You will be assessed in your ability to draw on fundamental principles, key concepts, and to understand landscape ecology questions and approaches in your critical analyses, class presentations, and on the exam.
Assignment: 4 review summaries of assigned readings
Students will complete brief review summaries of 4 assigned readings that present case studies of current research in landscape ecology. Where these are assigned, give yourself enough time to read, fully understand, and reflect on the reading. Write a 300 to 450 word review summary of the assigned reading and upload this as an assignment in Canvas at least two hours before the class it was assigned for. The purpose of this assignment is to develop a brief but thoughtful summary of the paper and to suggest questions or criticisms that could be discussed in class. In your summary, address these points: What question in landscape ecology does the paper address? What methods did the authors use? How does the authors’ design of the research or interpretation of results draw on key concepts in the field? In your summary, explicitly and correctly use at least three key terms or concepts from our key-concepts handout. Write these reviews using your highest level of insight. State some questions or criticisms that you have, after reading this paper, that could be used as inroads for class discussion (thus the need to submit the analyses at least 2 hours prior to class.) These will be graded in Canvas each week to provide immediate feedback.

Assignment: Student presentation of an applied paper in landscape ecology
Each student will present to the class an applied paper in landscape ecology and lead a subsequent discussion. Students may select any paper from the course reading list with an asterisk (*) or use a different paper with prior instructor approval. The presentation must run 13 to 15 minutes (to be followed by questions, depending on the time available). Then answer audience questions about your paper for 2-4 minutes. In your presentation, use PowerPoint slides and provide an introduction, a methods section, results, and your interpretation and analysis. What landscape-ecology questions does the paper address? What level of organization does it focus on? In your presentation, link to theories and concepts we have covered in the course; explicitly and correctly use at least three concepts from our key-concepts handout. This may seem like a lot to squeeze in, but it is important to BE BRIEF and very economical with your words. These are not “informal” presentations. Use your best professional presentation skills and keep to the time period allotted. (See the rubric that will be used by the instructor and your peers to assess these presentations.)

Note: bring your presentation on a flash drive before the start of class so they can all be loaded onto the instructor’s computer in advance. Please include your last name in the filename.

Assignment: Peer evaluation of presentations
The ability to make a clear and effective presentation is an important communication skill for both academics and professionals. We will spend some class time learning and discussing effective presentation skills. Students will anonymously peer-evaluate one another’s presentations using a rubric provided by the instructor. Evaluate the evidence you saw concerning how well the presenter understood the paper, evaluate the quality of the analysis presented and the clarity and effectiveness of the presentation skills. Peer evaluations will be turned into the instructor. Put your name at the bottom of the evaluation rubric; the instructor will remove these names and pass all of the evaluations to the presenter, together with the instructor’s comments and evaluation. Your evaluations will be graded based on your level of engagement and usefulness of the observations and feedback you provide to the other students in your comments.
Exam
There will be one exam, given in class on the last day of class. Its purpose is to assess the learning of fundamental concepts and principles from lectures and readings; the understanding of how concepts and theory are applied to study problems and issues in landscape ecology, as covered in readings, lectures, class discussion, and student presentations; and the ability to correctly articulate questions and apply key concepts in the critical analysis of ecological issues and questions in landscapes. It will include multiple choice, short answer questions, and a short essay.

Grading
Grade will be based on 4 critical reviews of assigned readings (100 points), presentation of an applied paper and answering questions (125 points), one exam (125 points) and class participation (50 points). This totals 400 points.

Class participation: Learning requires a willingness to examine one’s own pre-conceived notions or assumptions and to expand one’s foundation or framework to build the conceptual structure for new knowledge. This is demanding. It requires energy, effort, and focus. It requires an interest in engaging with a topic, grappling with new ideas, questioning and challenging others, and striving to think in new ways. Students are expected to show a high level of engagement and participation in the learning process. Ask questions during lecture and discussions. Respond to questions posed by the instructor. Follow up or respond to questions posed by other students. Instead of being passive onlookers, actively challenge one another.

Each week, listed on the syllabus is a discussion question. We will discuss these questions as a class on the second class meeting of the week; depending on the timing of other class activities these discussions may range from 15 minutes to 45 minutes. Prepare thoughtfully in advance for these discussions.

Currie office hours
2017 Fall A: Tues & Weds 10:00 to 11:30 am.

Syllabus and Schedule
Note that “week 1” is a Wednesday-Monday because class starts on a Wednesday; then “week 2” is a Wednesday – Wednesday because of the break for Martin Luther King day; beginning in “week 3” each week follows a Monday-Wednesday pattern.

Week 1. Landscape structure and the questions of landscape ecology
   Tues Sept 5
   Thurs Sept 7

   This week focuses on introductory material including landscape structure, metrics, and scale.

   Assigned reading: Skim, and begin to use the handout Currie 2014, Key concepts in Landscape Ecology. (Continue to refer to this throughout the course and eventually aim to read most of it.)

Week 2. Does landscape structure affect population processes?
   Tues Sept 12. Assigned reading: Mueller et al. 2014. (Review summary #1 due 2 hours before class.)
   Thurs Sept 14
Discussion question: In assessing the effects of landscape structure on population-level processes, do we need to study each species individually? Or is it possible to use “model” species?

Week 3. Does landscape structure affect community processes?

(Tues Sept 19: No class)

Thurs Sept 21. Assigned reading: Schippers et al. 2014. (Review summary #2 due 2 hours before class.)

Discussion question: How does one identify the “right” scale to study an ecological question?

Week 4. Does landscape structure affect ecosystem processes?

Tues Sept 26. Assigned reading: Scheller et al. 2012. (Review summary #3 due 2 hours before class.)

Thurs Sept 28

Discussion question: What does it mean to say that ecosystem-level processes are, or are not, affected by landscape structure?

Week 5. What drives spatial heterogeneity? The role of disturbance

Tues Oct 3. Assigned reading: Foster et al. 1998 (b), Ecosystems 1: 497-510. (Review summary #4 due 2 hours before class.)

Thurs Oct 5. Student presentations

Discussion question: If land use history and disturbance history are critically important, how does one design ecological studies to confront these factors?

Week 6. Human activities driving landscape ecological patterns and processes

Tues Oct 10. Assigned reading: DeFries et al. 2010 (b), Biological Conservation. (No review summary due this week.)

Thurs Oct 12. Student presentations

Discussion question: Does landscape structure affect human benefits or ecosystem services that drive human decision-making that then feed back to affect landscape structure?

Week 7. Exam

(October 16-17: Fall break)

Thurs Sept 19: Final exam given in class

Assigned and optional readings

These readings will be placed on the course Canvas site. Readings with an asterisk (*) may be used for student presentations of applied papers. Other papers may be used with instructor approval.


Additional Course Expectations

Computers and phones
1. Please do not use computers during class. This class has a lecture-discussion-presentation format. When you are looking at a laptop screen, the lack of eye contact makes it harder for you and the speaker to engage in question-driven active learning. Open screens tend to make students feel and act as though they are passive onlookers. Keyboard clicking is also distracting to others.
2. Phones should be silenced and put away at the start of class.

Attendance and due dates
Attendance in class is expected. Students are responsible for material covered and information given in class. Missed classes will be counted against class participation and the class exercises from that day.

Critical reviews of readings will not be accepted late. It is important for students to thoughtfully read these assigned papers and prepare these brief reviews prior to class; the instructor also needs time to see these reviews before class to prepare discussion points.

The exam can not be missed; a missed exam will be given a zero grade.

If a student misses class on the day he or she is scheduled to make a presentation, no make-up will be allowed and a zero grade will be given for the presentation.

Academic and professional integrity
Students are expected to understand and follow Rackham guidelines for academic and professional integrity. Take a few moments to familiarize yourself with these rules, outlined here: https://www.rackham.umich.edu/current-students/policies/academic-policies/section10

Students should pay particular attention to rules regarding plagiarism and original work. Students may work together on assignments, may ask for help from students or others outside the class, and may draw on any information in the library or on the internet. However, the assignment that you present and turn in must be your own individual work in your own words. You may not borrow from published work in any assignments without clearly attributing it to the authors. The way to attribute ideas or results in published work is to cite the source. If you copy a source word for word, cite the source and also put the text in quotation marks. Similarly, you may clearly cite work that you find on web pages (list the URL and the date as you would a citation), but you may not borrow text, figures, or other graphics from a web page without clearly attributing it to the source.