

Sean Downey
Assistant Professor
Department of Anthropology
University of Maryland

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Integrating Sustainability into ANTH 322 Ecological Anthropology

Human societies have grappled with achieving a sustainable existence since the evolution of cognition, language, and social organization thousands of centuries in the past. Only recently, in the past 150 years, have we begun to develop scientific theories to explain how to provide for the basic needs in the present without compromising the ability of those in the future to provide for themselves. While the question of global sustainability with world populations exceeding 8 billion remains to be determined, it turns out that many cultures throughout human history have had long periods where their behaviors were sustainable, in some cases for 1000s of years (for example, many foraging populations; and rice terrace farmers on the Indonesian island of Bali). In other cases, history provides cautionary tales of societal collapse from environmental overuse -- the classic case is the deforestation of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and the collapse of its once thriving population.

Anthropologists and scholars in other related disciplines like political science, economics, and geography have examined many such case studies and theorized general principles and conditions that are conducive for sustainability. My undergraduate course ANTH 322 Ecological Anthropology is designed to introduce upper-division Anthropology majors to a variety of engaging case studies that explore the human struggle with sustainability, and to some of the general principles and theories that scholars have derived from them. In particular, the course introduces cooperation, evolutionary game theory, resilience, and concepts related to complexity and emergence. The course uses lectures, ethnographic film, discussion, and interactive/online laboratory activities to provide students instruction and experience with course themes related to sustainability. The course has two learning objectives related to sustainability:

- (1) To be able to recognize and explain how individual actions can contribute to the emergence of sustainability at aggregate social levels, and the conditions necessary for this to occur.
- (2) To become familiar with examples of western and non-western cultures that have coped successfully (and unsuccessfully) with sustainability.

I assess how well students achieve these learning objectives using exams, lab activities, and a writing project in which they analyze a topic of theme related to the course themes described above.