

NSF-IRES Orientation to South Africa 2010

Science, conservation, and social conflict in South Africa

The University of Connecticut Academic Plan “emphasizes the need to build on our strengths in human rights, education, and environmental research and to prepare our students for work and personal success as participants in an internationalized economy and an increasingly diverse society.” A faculty/student study group focused on the relationships between conservation and human rights in South Africa will serve these needs particularly well. The natural biological communities of the Western Cape region of South Africa are as diverse as those of tropical rainforests, but they face threats from climate change and economic development. The legacy of apartheid has left the equally diverse human society of South Africa with great inequality, which can lead to conflicts between conservation and human rights.

“At Greenmarket Square in the center of [Cape Town], an old man exclaimed: “They are very quick to put out the fire when the mountain is burning, but when our shacks burn you never see them. They care about the birds and the tortoises and the antelopes more than they care about human beings.” Two flower sellers in voluminous Cape Malay robes quickly admonished him, “They’ve got to protect our proteas, old man!”” (Zakes Mda, “South Africa’s Fire Kingdom”, *New York Times*, 29 November 2009; <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/29/opinion/29mda.html>)

Purpose

The study group will explore how efforts to conserve biodiversity in South Africa intersect with efforts to promote human rights and economic development. Its purpose is to introduce students to South Africa as a case study in the intersection of scientific, conservation, and human rights issues. Its conservation focus will be on plants and habitats, reflecting the ecological expertise of the faculty involved. Its human rights focus will focus on the social and political development of South Africa from the Anglo-Boer war at the turn of the 20th century to the present.

Materials and schedule

Week 1 – Week 7: Film series with discussions: The social/political history of South Africa will be explored through a weekly film series lasting eight weeks. We will include brief historical background notes and references for each film, as well as highlight items for discussion. Some films may be edited to keep within 2 hours viewing time and allow for discussion. [The film **Zulu** will be optional for viewing on one’s own. It provides an historical account of the conflicts between the Europeans and Black Africans in the Anglo-Zulu Wars of the 1800s focusing on the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift.]

1. **Breaker Morant.** This film provides an account of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, the second South African civil war between the English and the Afrikaners, and a testing ground for World War I.
2. **Power of One.** This film provides an account of the rise of South African apartheid in the late 1930’s to late 1940’s. It highlights the continued conflict between the English and the Afrikaner in South Africa during World War II, and leading up to the apartheid government elected in 1948.

3. **Cry Freedom** is the story of the English South African newspaper editor, Donald Woods, and his growing connections and sympathies for the Black South Africans suffering under apartheid in the 1970's. It highlights Woods' early connections with Steve Biko and the persecution that the Woods family suffered under the apartheid government for their African sympathies.
4. **Bopha!** This is the story of apartheid told from the black, "middle class", South African perspective, about 1980.
5. **Red Dust.** This film focuses on South Africa in the years immediately after the abolition of apartheid and describes activities associated with the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in the late 1990's.
6. **Tsotsi.** This provides insight into contemporary life in South African Townships today. It won the Academy award for best foreign film in 2005.
7. **Disgrace** is a 2009 dramatization of J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel, which is a Booker Prize winner. Coetzee won the Nobel prize for literature in 2003. *Disgrace* focuses on the social travails of academia, society, family, race, and crime; some claim that it allegorizes South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. We may also include excerpts from one of the rare interviews of Coetzee (2000 at Cape Town) in this showing. The interview is in Dutch and Afrikaans, with Coetzee responding in English.

OR: we will view the acclaimed 2009 film **Invictus** a biographical drama film based on Nelson Mandela's life during the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa, as well as the lingering racial tensions immediately after the end of apartheid and Mandela's masterful handling of the issues of these times.

Week 8: We will read and discuss one book by a South African writer that provides added perspective on life in South Africa. We will select one book among several possible titles, including: *Boyhood: Scenes from a Provincial Life* (1997), or *Dusklands: The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* (1974) – by J. M. Coetzee; OR: *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1985), or *Dog Heart: A Memoir* (1999)– by Breyten Breytenbach; OR: *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979), or *A walk in the Night and Other Stories* (1962)– by Alex la Guma; OR: *The Country of My Skull* (2000) – by Antjie Krog; OR: *A Human Being Died That Night* (2004) – by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela.

Week 9 – Week 11: We will read and discuss scientific papers on: climate and climate change; landforms; biomes; patterns of animal and plant diversity.

Week 12 – Week 14: We will read and discuss papers on current approaches to biodiversity conservation in South Africa, focusing on examples that illustrate the sometimes competing demands of human development and conservation.