

PLASTICS, PETROCHEMICALS, & LIFE

SEP 1990

University of Vermont, Summer Academy

June 30th – July 25th 2025

6/30 – 7/11 MTWR 9:00am-3:30pm (lunch 12-1:30pm daily)

James M Jeffords Hall 110

7/12-7/25 Remote

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Course Description

In this course, students will learn the biophysical and social sciences of plastics, including impacts related to climate change, ecosystems, and human and animal health. Plastics are petrochemicals; they are made from oil and natural gas. Therefore, plastics are inextricably linked to global fossil fuel regimes, colonialism, capitalism, and the worldwide consumer industry. Learning outcomes of this class include being able to identify and articulate these critical connections. Plastics are an environmental justice issue, and leaders from the global movement for a strong United Nations global plastics treaty will share their stories with the class. These complex issues—and the inescapability of plastic in everyday life—can evoke overwhelm, dread, guilt, and anxiety. Students will learn how to harness and channel these emotions into coalition building and creative solutions. The final project of the class centers hope and action. Students will work on a solution to a specific plastics-related topic of their choice.

Learning Outcomes

1. Understand the complexity of plastics in terms of their social, ecological, and health dimensions.
2. Connect plastics to colonialism, global fossil fuel regimes, environmental justice, capitalism, and the global consumer industry.
3. Explore the benefits and drawbacks of different spheres of influence such as personal action and systemic change, including how they overlap.
4. Foster hope, connection, and even joy by taking action to make environmental and social change.

Required Texts

There are 4 required texts in this course; all are available at the UVM Bookstore. Please buy from the UVM bookstore, the publisher, or from a locally owned bookstore to give the largest amount of compensation to the author and the publishing infrastructure that supports them. A used copy is also great. If cost is an issue, please let me know and I will get you the texts.

1. *Plastic Unlimited*, Alice Mah, Polity Press, 2022. ISBN-13: 9781509549467, \$19.95
2. *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne marie brown, AK Press, 2017. ISBN-13: 9781849352604, \$19.00
3. *Pollution is Colonialism*, Max Liboiron, Duke University Press, 2021. ISBN-13: 9781478014133, \$25.95
4. *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety*, Sarah Jaquette Ray, University of California Press, 2020. ISBN-13: 9780520343306, \$16.95

Required Software

Course Brightspace page

Assessment Methods

Your final grade will be based on:

- 20% Reading & content quizzes
 - 30% Participation
 - 20% A few short, written assignments
 - 30% A final independent project (paper or creative medium such as a short film, podcast, etc.)
- Rubrics and more information will be provided.*

Course Calendar

Week 1: Plastics & Petrochemicals, 9:00am-3:30pm, James M Jeffords Hall 110

Learning Outcome 1: Understand the complexity of plastics in terms of their social, ecological, and health dimensions.

Day 1, M 6/30: What are plastics, petrochemicals, and fossil fuels?

Day 2, Tu 7/1: Social dimensions of plastics

Day 3, W 7/2: Ecological dimensions of plastics

Day 4, Th 7/3: Health dimensions of plastics

Week 2: Problems, 9:00am-3:30pm, James M Jeffords Hall 110

Learning Outcome 2: Connect plastics to colonialism, global fossil fuel regimes, environmental justice, capitalism, and the global consumer industry.

Day 5, M 7/7: What is environmental justice?

Day 6, Tu 7/8: Plastic & land relations

Day 7, W 7/9: Plastic, consumption, & stuff

Day 8, Th 7/10: Plastic & human rights

Week 3: Solutions, Remote

Learning Outcome 3: Explore the benefits and drawbacks of different spheres of influence such as personal action and systemic change, including how they overlap.

Day 9, M 7/14: Solutions to environmental problems: What are they and how do we build them?

Day 10, Tu 7/15: Spheres of influence

Day 11, W 7/16: Plastic waste: a case study in (non)solutions

Day 12, Th 7/17: United Nations Global Plastics Treaty

Day 13, F 7/18: Introduce final project

Week 4: Joy, Remote

Learning Outcome 4: Foster hope, connection, and even joy by taking action to make environmental and social change.

Day 14, M 7/21: Centering joy and hope in environmental problem solving

Day 15, Tu 7/22: Emergent strategy

Day 16, W 7/23: Solution building

Day 17, Th 7/24: Final project work time

Day 18, F 7/25: Final Project Due, 3:30pm EST.