

## USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM SYLLABUS

### **Journalism 440 – Environmental Journalism**

Spring 2008

**Instructor:** Larry Pryor, Associate Professor

#### **COURSE INFORMATION**

Class Number: 21298 Meets 2-5:20 p.m., Thursdays, ASC 236 4 Units

#### **COURSE IMPORTANCE, OBJECTIVES AND DESCRIPTION**

**Importance:** Environmental journalists and their colleagues – science and health writers – in many ways create the public agenda about the environment. They report on and expose issues that they believe need visibility. It's a hard task, requiring the journalist to rely on complex, interwoven and often uncertain disciplines, ranging from political science, economics and law to toxicology, climatology, biology and epidemiology. Accurate reporting in the field is often difficult. Anecdotal evidence can be misleading, government data is increasingly unreliable or absent and polluters tend to obfuscate from behind corporate walls.

This advanced reporting seminar can help you overcome obstacles to finding the truth about what many scientists believe is a global ecological decline. It will provide you the skills and understanding to find and develop interdisciplinary stories about the environment. The emphasis will be upon recognizing the special problems associated with educating the public about science and risk management. This requires a knowledgeable, nuanced and balanced approach to story presentation. (We will keep our eyes on that tricky word "balance" throughout the semester.)

Given the constraints of mass media formats and traditions, environment writers are seeking new platforms, especially on the Internet, to reach the public on long-term issues that do not lend themselves to daily news coverage. We will explore those opportunities, as well as changes that are taking place in some mass media newsrooms that now allow more extensive and penetrating coverage of environmental issues.

Writing capably and accurately about the environment can be enormously rewarding for a journalist. It's a chance to cover some of the most important and fascinating topics of our times. And surveys show that readers have a great interest in this coverage.

#### **Objectives:**

The goals of this course are to give you:

- The analytical tools to deal with complex, multidisciplinary topics

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- An understanding of the ethical issues, as well as the political, economic and professional constraints that confront environmental journalists
  - The skills and background you need to write and produce a competent multimedia story package about the environment

While the main focus of the course will be on mass media journalism, we will also look at other career opportunities for environmental journalists. This will include new media outlets, but we will also consider freelance work, science journals, niche publications and jobs with non-profit organizations.

**Description:**

This course is based on topics – the essential elements that constitute our environment, especially in Southern California. They include:

- Air quality
- Water and wastewater
- Energy use
- Food and health
- Mobility
- Floods and stormwater
- Shelter, building standards and land use
- Fire
- Climate
- Food and health

Each topic will be broken down in class discussion into their sub-topics and interrelationships.

We will meet in class most weeks for discussion and to view Internet and multimedia materials. Some classes will be conducted in the field or at the *Los Angeles Times*. We will meet people involved in the environment. We will walk the Los Angeles River, our laboratory, and meet journalists who cover environmental topics.

The writing assignments will be in three types. First will be story pitches of one page. Second will be charts, tables and text blocks based on Fact Quests. Third will be a major project, due at the end of the semester, based on some aspect of the L.A. River.

Fact Quests will be an important part, the reporting element, of the class. They have two purposes, to familiarize you with environmental reporting techniques and to surface content that will lead to discussion of issues and possibly to stories outside of the syllabus that could be published by you.

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## **READINGS**

There is no assigned text for this course. I have included citations and links to readings in the course calendar and will supply additional materials each week at class. I will also be posting additional readings and links each week on Blackboard.

You are encouraged to bring clippings or Web links to class each week on stories and other materials that have appeared during the week or that you have discovered. You are expected to be aware of the major environmental stories of the day, as well as issues that might affect environmental journalists.

I strongly recommend that you join the Society of Environmental Journalists. (SEJ). Student memberships cost \$35 and the daily e-mail list of hot stories alone is worth the money. It has many other benefits. (See <http://www.sej.org/join/index.htm> and judge for yourself.)

You should already have the AP Stylebook. The dictionary is Merriam-Webster, [www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)

**Recommended** (Available from me on loan):

“Writing Nature; An ecological reader for writers,” Carolyn Ross, St.Martin’s Press, Inc., 1995 ISBN: 0-312-10391

“Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere,” Robert Cox, Sage Publications, Ltd., 2006 ISBN: 0-7619-3050-7

“The Natural Step for Communities; How cities and towns can change to sustainable practices,” Sarah James and Torbjörn Lahti, New Society Publishers, ISBN: 0-86571-491-6

“Future Forms and Designs for Sustainable Cities,” Mike Jenks and Nicola Dempsey, Elsevier Ltd., 2005 ISBN-10: 0-7506-6309-x

“Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed,” Jared Diamond, Viking, 2004 ISBN: 0670033375

A number of excellent Web sites cover the environment. I will provide you with a list of links. The essential blog, which you should visit each day, is Dot Earth, managed by Andrew Revkin, environment writer at *The New York Times*:

<http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/>

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About Dot Earth: “ Supported in part by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, Mr. Revkin tracks relevant news from suburbia to Siberia, and conducts an interactive exploration of trends and ideas with readers and experts.”

Excellent environmental coverage can be found at the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times* and just about all of the papers published in London. The BBC, Independent and Guardian Web sites are a good way to keep track of that coverage. You should try to be aware of what’s being published in *Science* and *Nature*, the leading research publications for environment writers.

I can loan you books on a wide variety of environmental topics. Just ask.

### **INSTRUCTOR’S BIOGRAPHY**

I have a background as a reporter, writer, editor and photographer, first at the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and later at the *Los Angeles Times*. At those publications, I covered the environment and became an assistant metropolitan editor with responsibility for topics involving science, medicine, urban affairs and the environment. Then I knocked around in politics – a presidential campaign and an L.A. City Council race – and published a pot-boiler novel. I went back to the *L.A. Times* and got involved in new media there in the 1980s, when it was getting off the ground. I ended up being editor of *latimes.com*, before moving to USC in 1997 to head the Online Journalism and Communications Program. In addition to teaching, I conduct research on new media topics and am working on a book on visual media and the impact of perspectives on public discourse. I am a member of SEJ and this summer participated in SEJ’s annual conference, which was held at Stanford.

### **ATTENDANCE POLICY**

Class attendance is mandatory. Illness and family emergencies will be the only permitted reasons for absences.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS, FINAL PROJECT**

You will be given weekly assignments, both readings and writing and reporting projects. We will also be meeting with a variety of environmental sources and I expect you to ask good questions.

Weekly assignments will involve researching and writing one-page story pitches. In addition, you will be assigned Fact Quests, which will give you experience in researching environmental topics and skills in digging out data.

Story pitches should take this form:

### **MEMORANDUM**

**TO: Larry Pryor**  
**FROM: Your Name**  
**DATE: (Date memo is due or turned in)**  
**SUBJECT: Government control of thermostats in homes and office buildings**

These memos should be single-spaced, but, like stories, they have to be coherent, organized and follow the rules of grammar, spelling and style. Such memos are shared by many editors and it is a chance to show them your writing ability and professionalism.

I will provide examples of pitches. They should raise a topic you have come across that has news value. It should have some sort of time peg and good reason to be covering it now. Some background material and context should be provided. You must indicate the sources you plan to contact and the reporting methods you plan to use.

AP Style will prevail in all assignments, including charts and graphs. Accuracy, thoroughness and fairness will still be the standard for all of your work. Copy preparation will be the same as in the Core Curriculum print classes.

Meeting deadlines and maintaining contact with me will be important throughout the semester. E-mail will be our best way to stay in touch, but seeing me at office hours or calling me at the office or at home will also work. You can schedule an office conference by e-mailing, calling me or arranging the visit after a class.

The main challenge of the course will be to produce an in-depth story or multimedia environmental news package based on some aspect of the L.A. River by the end of the semester. The class schedule allows you considerable time in the second half of the semester to devote to this project.

The Final Project, which takes the place of the final exam, will proceed in stages. You will be expected to begin researching topic options by Week 9, March 20. A detailed story pitch and research and reporting agenda will be due on Week 12, April 3. This will take the place of a mid-term exam. You will present a draft version of the project at the last class. The final version will be due by the scheduled time for the final exam, 4 p.m., May 8.

Your major project on the Los Angeles River can have a larger scope, such as river revivals or wastewater reclamation, but the L.A. River must be the main focus. It should have a central story, sidebars and graphics. It can be either for a print publication or presented as a multimedia Web package. This project must be developed in close coordination with me.

## **GRADING**

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The weekly story pitches, Fact Quest assignments and graphics presentations will count for 40% of the grade. All assignments are due in class on Thursdays. Late or incomplete work will be marked down.

Final grades will be calculated according to this scale:

Class Participation	10%
Weekly Assignments	40
Final Project	
Progress Report – Week 12	10
Class Presentation – Last Class	10
Final Version	<u>30</u>
TOTAL:	100%

Accuracy and clarity will be key characteristics for “A” work, as will context and completeness. I will also consider the creativity, originality and freshness that you bring to your work.

Stories will be graded on these criteria:

- An `A` assignment requires little editing because it is accurate, clear, comprehensive, well-written and has few, if any, mechanical flaws.
- A `B` assignment requires more editing work because it is incomplete, has spots where it is unclear or it has some minor mechanical or structural problems.
- `C` assignments are average student work, with much editing required for mechanical or structural problems, as well as matters of clarity, completeness or concision.

### **PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY**

"Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade in the course and will be dismissed as a major from the School of Journalism. There are no exceptions to this policy."

This statement needs amplification. What is plagiarism? Basically it is presenting as one's own work the work of another. This includes words, ideas, information, data and evidence. It also includes paraphrasing or summarizing without acknowledgement, submitting the work of another student's as one's own. Failure to indicate the extent or nature of one's reliance on other sources is also plagiarism.

It's your responsibility to understand the legitimate use of sources and the appropriate ways of acknowledging them. In journalism, writers do this through attribution – citing sources directly and accurately. This also gives the reader the option of deciding if this

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source is reliable. In general, journalists today do not cite anonymous sources, unless that procedure has been cleared by an editor and the reason for the anonymity is stated.

### **USC STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty.

### **DISABILITY SERVICES AND PROGRAMS**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301. Its phone number is 213-740-0776.

### **CLASS SCHEDULE**

*Note: This schedule is subject to change.*

#### **WEEK 1, Jan. 17**

##### **Class Topic: The Semester Ahead – Goals and Outcomes; Basic Definitions**

- Review syllabus and discuss the semester ahead
- What is environmental journalism? How do we define the environment? What is ecology?
- Environment, Science and Health/Medicine writing: How do these specialties differ?
- Problems unique to environmental journalism
- Geographic scope and focus of assignments

**Assignment:** Two story pitches of *one page each*. Pitch #1: Thermostat controls; Pitch #2: The Urban Forest

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See: <http://www.laweekly.com/news/features/its-not-easy-being-green/5528>

**Readings:**

- “The Death of Environmentalism” by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus  
<http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/>
- “Don’t Fear the Reapers, A special series on the alleged ‘Death of Environmentalism’”  
<http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/>
- “Forget Nature; Even Eden Is Engineered,” Andrew Revkin, *The New York Times*  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9403E4DF113DF933A1575BC0A9649C8B63&scp=2&sq=Revkin+Forget+Nature>
- Locating Sources, from “Green Ink,” by Michael Frome
- “Covering Key Environmental Issues,” RTNDA Foundation
- “Environmental Reporting; Exploring the Beat,” Nieman Foundation, Winter 2002

**WEEK 2, Jan. 24**

**Class Topic: The Environmental Ethic**

- The growth of “Green Consciousness” and concepts of sustainability
- Splits in the environmental movement: Is It Dead?
- The US and the EU: Ways of looking at carbon emissions
- Digging out environmental stories: how to separate science from rants
- Dealing with sources: Who can you trust? Can they trust you?
- Discussion: Thermostats, The Urban Forest

**Assignment:** Fact Quest #1. How much fuel is burned in the landing of a jetliner? How much carbon does that release? How can it be reduced and by how much?

- **Readings:** “State’s Air Is Among Nation’s Most Toxic,” Marla Cone; *Los Angeles Times*; March 22, 2006
- “Los Angeles Again Tops Air Pollution List,” The Associated Press, April 30, 2007
- Air Quality, The South Coast Air Quality Management District,  
<http://aqmd.gov/smog/>
- “Environmental Groups Sue EPA Over Air Quality Decisions,” Bob Egelko, SFGate.com
- Metropolitan Area Pollution Rankings, American Lung Assn.,  
<http://www.lungusa.org>
- “ZAP – This is a blower free zone,” <http://www.zapla.org>

**WEEK 3, Jan. 31**

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**Class Topic: Air and Pollution Sources**

**Assignment:** Write a one-page story pitch on leaf blowers.

**Readings:**

- “Turning Rain Into a Resource – Tree people helps create model for watershed management,” White Paper, see link at <http://www.stormwaterauthority.org>
- “Urban Runoff Management; Back to the past then into the future,” Neal Shapiro, Environmental Programs Division, City of Santa Monica (handout)
- Padre Dam Municipal Water District, Fact Sheet, <http://www.PadreDam.org>
- The City of San Diego, Recycled Water, FAQ, <http://sandiego.gov/water/recycled/faq.shtml>
- “Recycling Water for Drinking,” TreeHugger, <http://www.treehugger.com>
- “Drought-stricken Australia considers drinking recycled sewage,” July 24, 2007, <http://breitbart.com>
- Orange County Water District, Water Factory 21 <http://www.ocwd.com/-html/wf21.htm>

**WEEK 4, Feb. 7**

**Class Topic: Water and Wastewater**

**Assignment:** Fact Quest #2. How much air-conditioning is expended in a 1-mile by 1-mile quadrant that has Tommy Trojan as its center point? Plot the data over one week in May and one week in January.

**Readings:**

- Excerpts from “Soft Energy Paths” by Amory Lovins; handouts
- Edison SmartConnect, Bettering Energy Efficiency and Power Sources, <http://sce.com>
- “The Renewable Energy Future,” Los Angeles Times, September 17, 2007

**WEEK 5, Feb. 14**

**Class Topic: Energy**

**Assignment:** Fact Quest #3 What is the value of agricultural crops in L.A. County? Where are the most valuable crops grown (by ZIP Code) and how valuable are they? Where are they sold?

**Readings:** “Threat Seen From Antibacterial Soap Chemicals,” Marla Cone; *Los Angeles Times*; May 10, 2006

### **WEEK 6, Feb. 21**

#### **Class Topic: Food and Health**

**Assignment: Fact Quest #4:** What percentage of the L.A. County population uses a bicycle on a daily basis? How does that figure compare or contrast with bicycle usage in the Bay Area and in Beijing?

**Readings:** TBA on Blackboard

### **WEEK 7, Feb. 28**

#### **Class Topic: Mobility**

**Assignment: Fact Quest #5.** How can the L.A. River be converted into a major wastewater reclamation project, while also benefiting wildlife and enhancing a variety of environmental values? Use data from government agencies and advocate groups.

#### **Readings:**

- “What Is Stormwater?” North Carolina Division of Water Quality, [http://h20.enr.state.nc/su/what\\_is\\_stormwater.htm](http://h20.enr.state.nc/su/what_is_stormwater.htm)
- “Stormwater, The Journal for Surface Water Quality Professionals,” <http://gradingandexcavating.com/sw/html>
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) <http://cfpub.epa.gov>
- “Dam Upgrades Will Double Flood Protection for Sacramento,” Stormwater Authority, <http://stormwaterauthority.org>
- “Guidelines for using recycled waste water for golf course irrigation,” Cornell University, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (handout)
- “Deal on Dams on Klamath Advances,” Felicity Barringer, *NYT*, Jan 16, 2008

### **WEEK 8, March 6**

#### **Class Topic: Floods and Stormwater**

**Assignment: Fact Quest #6.** How much money is budget for firefighting in Los Angeles County and San Diego County? Do a similar calculation including budgets of cities and special districts within the counties. Compare these figures with five years ago.

**Readings:** “Predicting Wildfires,” Patricia Andrews, et al, *Scientific American*, August, 2007

**WEEK 9, March 13**

**Class Topic: Fires, Forests and Suburban Development**

**Assignment:** Los Angeles River tour.

**Readings:** TBA on Blackboard

**WEEK 10, March 20**

SPRING BREAK!

**WEEK 11, March 27**

**Class Topic: Dwellings, Building Standards, Architecture and Climate Control**

**Assignment:** Field work at outlet of L.A. River, county beaches, Santa Monica

**Readings:**

- “Altered Oceans: A five-part series on the crisis in the seas,” by Kenneth R. Weiss and Usha Lee McFarling, Los Angeles Times, July 30 – August 3, 2006  
<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/oceans/la-oceans-series.0,7842752.special>
- USC Sea Grant Program <http://www.usc.edu/org/seagrant/> (Please explore this Web site)
- “The White House and the Whales,” Andrew C. Revkin, *NYT*, January 16, 2008

**WEEK 12, April 3**

**Class Topic: The Coastal Zone**

**Assignment:** Work on Final Project (Includes field work at L.A. River)

**Readings:** TBA on Blackboard

“Programs for a Green LA,” Los Angeles Department of Water & Power,  
<http://ladwp.com>

**WEEK 13, April 10**

**Class Topic: Sustainability and Urban Ecology**

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**Assignment:**

- Work on Final Project. (Includes field work at L.A. River)

**Reading:**

- “Report by EPA Leaves Out Data on Climate Change,” Andrew Revkin and Katherine A. Seelye, *The New York Times*
- “ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY: Whitman Leaves Science Legacy at EPA,” *Science*, May, 2003
- “Report Says Interior Official Overrode Work of Scientists,” Felicity Barringer, *The New York Times*, March 29, 2007
- “Congress: From Lukewarm to Hot?” *National Journal*, January 12, 2008

**April 11: Last day to drop the class with a mark of “W”**

**WEEK 14, April 17**

**Class Topic: Global Climate Change**

**Assignment:** Work on Final Project (Includes field work at L.A. River.)

**Reading:** TBA on Blackboard

**WEEK 15, April 24**

**Class Topic: Crafting the In-Depth Story – The Los Angeles River, River Revivals**

- From reporting to writing – how to organize notes, tapes, data
- Dealing with facts, data and trends
- Statistics and Graphics: Offloading numbers from texts of stories
- Infusing a story with context and human actors
- Translating science for the lay public

**Assignment:** Work on Final Project

**WEEK 16, May 1**

**Class Topics: Environmental Journalism Careers; Final Project Presentations**

**Assignment:** Finish Final Project

**FINAL EXAM (Final Project Is Due by 4 p.m. May 8)**