

RS 370: Religion and Ecology

Ecological Footprint Journal (EFJ) Assignments

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Purpose

The purpose of EFJ assignments is to help students connect with course material by reflecting on their own ecological practices and the place of environmental sustainability in their own lives. Class discussions surrounding EFJ assignments have helped my students identify eco-friendly habits and values that they have always embraced, but have not previously identified within the realm of “environmentalism.” I have found that class discussions are especially rich when I complete the assignments and share my results as well. Students often think that I am the ideal model of an environmentalist, but comparison of our EFJ results help them see that their lifestyles tend to be much more sustainable than my own!

Task Overview

EFJ assignments require students to complete simple tasks such as calculating their carbon footprints or tracking all of the garbage they produce for a day. Then they reflect on their experiences in a journal entry.

I generally assign three EFJs per semester, shifting the assignments to align with course material and class discussions. The content of EFJ assignments can easily be adapted to align with the needs of each class. For example, when we read about river pollution in India, students completed an EFJ dealing with their own use of water. Another semester, several students indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the environmental crisis and felt they could not make a difference. I developed an EFJ assignment using the online video [The Story of Change](#), produced by the [Story of Stuff Project](#), to help students think about how they can contribute to environmental solutions.

Assignment Details

Here are a few examples of EFJ assignments that I have used in the past. The basic framework can be adapted to reflect the content in your own courses.

Example #1: The Great Pacific Garbage Patch

A recent report found that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch – a pile of rubbish floating in the Pacific Ocean – has grown so to FOUR TIMES the size of the state of California. In this exercise we are going to learn about the problem of waste, and our own relationship to that global ecological problem.

Architect William McDonough is fond of gesturing to an image of the globe and requesting that his audience point to away in the picture. The point, of course, is that there is no “away” when it comes to our wastes. When we throw things “away” they end up in specific places and affect particular people.

This exercise awakens us to the inequalities that mark our environmental lives. First, you will read the NYT article, “The ‘Great Pacific Garbage Patch’ Is Ballooning, 87,000 Tons of Plastic and Counting.” You can access the article through the link below, or find the PDF on Canvas: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/climate/great-pacific-garbage-patch.html>

Then you will think about the waste that you produce. To do this, please keep a running list of every piece of trash that you produce over a two-day period. Divide your list into different categories – landfill, compost, recycling. At the end of the two-day period, analyze your list.

Finally, write a 1-2 page journal entry in which you reflect on your experiences in this exercise. Examine your list of trash. What do you have the most of? And the least? How could you make changes in your lifestyle to reduce the amount of waste you produce? Then, begin to think more globally as you reflect on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. What is your role in contributing to this problem, and how might you contribute to solutions, both personally and in your own community?

Example #2: Where Does it Flow?

In this exercise we are going to think about our personal water usage, how it relates to the worldwide water crisis, and how we can take individual and collective steps to address this pressing global issues. Please complete the following steps:

1. Watch *Flow: For Love of Water* [note to instructors: this was screened in class.]
2. Visit the “Take Action” segment of Flow’s website, and consider steps you might take. <http://www.flowthefilm.com/takeaction>
3. Complete the online quiz, How Much Water do you Use? <http://www.home-water-works.org/calculator> Make note of the places where you use the most water in your life, and consider ways you can reduce your water consumption.
4. After completing steps 1-3, write a 1-2 page reflection about your experiences. Your reflection might address some of these questions:
 - a. What new insights or knowledge did you gain from this film and from taking the online quiz? How did these experiences make you think differently about your own consumption habits?
 - b. What are the advantages and disadvantages of water privatization?
 - c. How would you feel about adding Article 31 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

- d. What are your main water-related “sins”? How might we overcome pressing water issues as individuals, as a CSUN campus community and as a larger society?

Example #3: My Carbon Footprint

In this exercise we are going to think about our personal carbon footprint, how our choices determine its size and how it compares to the carbon footprint of others in the class and those living in other parts of the world. We also will think about how our personal carbon footprint relates to global environmental issues such as greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, and consumer waste.

First, please go to the Nature Conservancy’s carbon calculator and use the calculator to estimate your personal carbon footprint.

<http://www.nature.org/greenliving/carboncalculator/index.htm>

Next write a reflection considering these questions:

1. What is your carbon footprint? How does this compare to the US and world average?
2. Why do you think your carbon footprint is higher/lower than the US average?
3. What are some reasons the world average is higher/lower than your footprint?
4. Which one thing accounts for the largest contribution to your carbon footprint?

Think about what you expect your life to be like 5 years from now; you may be living in a different part of the US or different part of the world, what kind of job might you be working in, will you be married, have children, live in a house or apartment?

1. Do you expect your carbon footprint to be larger or smaller 5 years from now?
2. What changes in your life in the next 5 years might make your carbon footprint larger?
3. What could you do to make your carbon footprint smaller or keep it small?
4. What does your carbon footprint, or the nation’s carbon footprint, have to do with sustainability? In other words, what’s the link between carbon and sustainability?

Example #4: My Food Consumption

In this exercise we are going to think about our personal food choices and how those choices connect to sustainability.

Please complete the following steps:

1. Watch the film *Fresh*. [Note to instructors – this was screened during class.]
2. Monitor your food consumption for a day. Write down everything you eat, including their ingredients, and try to find out:
 - a. Where the food came from and how much it had to travel to get to you
 - b. How the people in farms/factories were treated in the making of the food product (this one may not be possible in all cases, but do your best)
 - c. How the crops and animals that made your food were grown /raised (organically? With pesticides? In factory farms? Small farms? Etc.)
3. After completing these steps, write a reflection in which you do the following:
 - a. Explain the risks and consequences of conventional agriculture – to the environment, to your health and to the community?
 - b. Explain why organic food is so expensive.
 - c. Think about how YOU are connected to that food system based on your choices of what to eat
 - d. Reflect on some ways that you might “green” your own diet and effect change on a larger scale.