The wide range of departments exploring environmental issues reflects a strength of the liberal arts: the ability to bring many perspectives and varied insights together in addressing complex topics.

It’s a philosophy that fits well at Hope. The consensus among faculty at the college is that addressing the world’s environmental issues will require contributions from multiple disciplines. The challenges, they say, are too big and too complex for a single field to handle alone.

Appropriately, Hope students can explore environmental questions from many perspectives, with courses available in every academic division. Some are even team taught by faculty from different programs, a cooperative approach also taken by a variety of faculty-student research efforts in the natural and physical sciences.

What makes Hope work well as a venue in which to study environmental issues, though, lies at the heart of the institution academically. A liberal arts college since its earliest days, Hope makes a multi-disciplinary approach to knowledge a fundamental assumption, and the big-picture perspective that informs the way that environmental issues are taught serves Hope students well no matter what their interest. Other topics are pursued with the same mind-set, the goal being to produce graduates that are well prepared for the 360-degree, interconnected world beyond college. It’s not just a degree, it’s a way of life.

Dr. John Lunn, who is the Robert W. Haack Professor of Economics, team teaches “Environmental Public Policy” with Dr. Jack Holmes of political science and Dr. Jon Peterson ’84 of the geological and environmental sciences. He sees lessons beyond any specific topic students might choose to study.

“There are too many significant issues out there to take classes in all of them,” he said.

“One of the things I hope students get out of Hope, regardless of what they major in, is an ability to critically read claims that are made, especially in newspapers and magazines and so forth,” he said. “That’s why science is important. They have to know how science works—and the same with economics.”

“A student who never took anything about environmental issues would still be able to read materials, explore issues and have the ability to find answers or at least be able to reject simplistic answers that would be provided by people,” Dr. Lunn said.

Integrative learning is at the heart of the GEMS (general education mathematics and science) course focused on climate change that Dr. Joanne Stewart of the chemistry faculty developed through support she received as one of only 21 college-level faculty members nationwide...
A growing relationship with the Mohonk Preserve in New York is leading to new research opportunities for counterparts at the Mohonk Preserve in New York. Dr. Jon Peterson '84, a geologist, is working with the Mohonk Preserve in New York to explore environmental issues that are not solved by one standpoint. It's important for students to see that environmental issues are not resolved by one person, he said. "Collaboration is important. I am in the GES department, and my research student is in biology." Dr. Peterson's ongoing interest in ground water is currently focusing on the microbicide insect collembola, comparing the DNA of collembola in Holland's groundwater to counterparts at the Mohonk Preserve in New York, with which Hope has been developing a student-teacher and research relationship. He has been working on research with Dr. Terrence Sullivan and senior Austin Dreyer of Holland, Mich., who are both in the laboratory of biologist Dr. Thomas Balkman '78, including spending several weeks at the preserve early in the summer. "Research so far has definitely been interesting enough that I could see myself doing it for a while," Dreyer said. "And I think going to the preserve was a great opportunity." Down the hall, Dr. Graham Peaslee is managing a variety of projects of his own. Since the late 1990s, he has conducted research on the local Macatawa watershed, work for which he received the "Stakeholder of the Year" award from the Macatawa Watershed Project in 2005. He appreciates the chance to contribute to the community. "I feel like I'm doing something applied with my science. I feel like I'm giving back to my community," Dr. Peaslee said. "It's better than the 'Me Generation.' It's the 'Us Generation' and that fits with Hope's mission." Peaslee hopes students can make the study of environmental issues a formal part of their degree program through two different initiatives. Offered for about 10 years, the college's environmental science minor is designed for science students and corresponds to an intense science emphasis and requires a major in another area in order to participate. It turns out to be a practical combination. Dr. Peterson, who directs the minor, noted that graduates of the environmental science program have found themselves in high demand. "Every spring, I'm made aware of more job opportunities than we have students to fill them," he said. "More recently, the environmental science minor is open to all students but geared especially toward those not majoring in the natural or physical sciences, and includes a mix of courses from departments including English and religion as well as the GEMS and interdisciplinary studies programs.

Awards & Honors

For many years, students took a focused look at an ongoing battle over a specific plan to divert water from the wilderness area where the course takes place. They even contributed to the dialogue themselves. "The students actually did some of the research that helped point the environmental community and others to what needed to be further researched," Dr. Holmes said. "After nearly 20 years that particular conflict was resolved in favor of the preservationists, but the general issues remain. Dr. Holmes also sees an opportunity for the students to learn more broadly from the experience. Indeed, offered as one of the college's Senior Seminar options, the course "Wilderness Politics" is "...an attempt to consider the human dimensions of wilderness management." "They write their life view and then apply it to how they would address an issue like this," he said.

In contrast to the long history of "Wilderness Politics," the course "Managing for Environmental Sustainability" taught by Professor Vicke Ilan Hakun '73 debuted this past year. An associate professor of management, she sees the topic of environment only growing in importance. "Business is seeing the environment as one of the 'major' issues," she said, which she noted ranks the topic alongside globalization, technology and work-force diversity. "Our major, in order to enter into the world of business, need to be aware of it." The course examines leading companies in the area of environmental sustainability, exploring practices that they are implementing successfully. "Too often business and the environment are seen at odds with each other," Professor Ilan Hakun said. "I don't think they need to be." Senior defra prediger of the religion faculty, developed it to "...help them make connections, and then gather and analyze data collected at the site to national databases and understanding. One goal is to contribute to the dialogue themselves. "Wilderness Politics" course for some three decades. Students stay in a cabin in the Holy Cross wilderness in Colorado and learn about how environmental issues and the local, state and federal governments interact. "The big issue in Colorado is the water," Dr. Holmes said. "There's just not enough of it out there." Located near the Lake Michigan coast just southwest of Holland, the site has hosted some individual research projects, but members of the faculty see much greater potential, not only for faculty and students but for Hope as an institution to play an enlarged role in contributing to environmental understanding. The vision includes integrating the site more effectively into the curriculum and the life of the college, including, potentially, through construction of a small classroom/research center for a variety of uses. "We'd like to see more people across campus use it, and we'd like to have the facilities and instrumentation on site to enhance our research and program," Dr. Winnett-Murray said. "Such improvements would also give Hope a new way to contribute on a national and even international level to scientific inquiry and understanding. One goal is to continue data collected at the site to national databases to enhance understanding overall concerning phenomena and events ranging from global climate change to the migration of birds. "The more data you have from a variety of geographic sites, the better you can document patterns and major changes," Dr. Winnett-Murray said. "We foresee huge potential to use the site to do that." Time together in the wilds of Colorado (Photo courtesy of Dr. Jack Holmes.)