Over the course of the semester we have called attention to the various ways scholars have characterized nature and, especially, the metaphors they have relied upon. Among these metaphors are: “balance of nature,” “dynamic equilibrium,” “biodiversity,” the “biotic community”; we have also encountered the seemingly contradictory assumptions that nature is efficient (everything has a purpose and is fitted neatly into its proper niche) and that nature is extravagant (there are many redundancies and much wastefulness).

Throughout the semester, we have asked you to pay attention to the different rhetorical ploys that authors have used to make their claims. These variations on themes invite comparison and reflection on the nature of these claims. E.O. Wilson and Jared Diamond (“The Island Dilemma”) are in agreement but are they equally persuasive? Were Ruddiman and Robert Lindsen on a panel together, it is likely that they would agree more than not. Who is more credible? Hansen and Lindsen would clearly not agree, but whom would you tend to believe? Leopold and Speth are equally dismayed (though separated by 60 years) by “business as usual.” Which of the two is most compelling and why?

These authors have presented information to you in a variety of different formats. How does the type of publication influence its impact? Is a book aimed at a non-specialist audience (Wilson or Ruddiman) more compelling than an article in the scientific literature (Diamond or Hansen)? Do the author’s credentials matter? As the experts, were Eldridge and Gould or Alvarez more compelling than Quammen who reported the results of others? Was Diamond more persuasive as an expert (“The Island Dilemma”) or as a writer outside of his field of expertise (“Guns Germs and Steel”)? Think about these pairings and make more of your own. Is there a pattern or a consistent thread in your response to the pairs?

In an essay that does not exceed 8 pages explore the ways in which the metaphors we use to describe nature or our relationship to nature affect your understanding of our relationship with the natural environment. In exploring these ideas, think about who you find to be most persuasive and why (authority, writing style, something else)? Be sure to ground your essay in the readings with which you choose to work. This means paying close attention to how authors present their claims. The class discussion of Leopold’s description of cogs and wheels provides a good example of how metaphor affects our understanding of nature.

Your essays are due by 10 AM, Friday May 15. There will be a box in the Geology Department Office (open Mon-Fri 8:30-12:00 and 1:00-3:45) where you can hand in your papers. (Non-Amherst graduating seniors must hand in papers by Friday May 8.) For those students who must leave campus early, you may email us your paper (pdf file ONLY) by 9 AM Thursday May 14.