

NRES 385
INDIA: CONSERVATION AND CULTURE
FALL 2025

Travel Dates: Jan 1, 2026 – Jan 17, 2026

Pre-departure course meetings: Second eight weeks; **W 7:00 – 7:50 pm**; October 22, 29, November 5, 12, 19, December 3 (if needed)

Pre-departure & Course Instructors: Dr. Suneeti Jog (jog@illinois.edu), 518-878-3589 and Dr. Jason Bried (bried@illinois.edu), 518-698-1257

Credit: 2 hours

Location: North and west central India (New Delhi, Agra, Aurangabad, Pune, Ekolé)

India Coordinator: Mr. Samrat Urval (samrat@iexp360.com), WhatsApp # +91 98205 26111

Credits: 2 credits for NRES 385 Field experience

Course Description:

This course will introduce students to sustainable practices in conservation in the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot in India. Students will get an immersive experience in the rich tapestry of ancient traditions, cultures, monuments, food, performing arts, and religious festivals. Students will visit nationally important forests and get firsthand experience with forest conservation practices in a tropical, developing nation. Agro-forestry, invasive species management, sustainable livelihood and ethical harvesting, organic waste management, climate change mitigation, and socio-economic impact to local resource-based communities will be emphasized in a two-week hands-on immersive experience spanning different ecosystem complexes in north and west central India.

Student Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this course students will:

1. Discuss the concept of sustainability in a biological, historical, and cultural context
2. Explore conservation practices in the tropics with respect to ecosystem specific threats
3. Learn about forest conservation practices in a heavily natural resource-dependent society
4. Relate conservation practices to societal pressures of overpopulation, invasive species, and climate change in the Western Ghats of India
5. Understand and appreciate societal and environmental challenges of a developing nation and gain insight into how culture and natural resources are intertwined
6. Acquire hands-on training with local village community members, researchers, farmers, and outreach staff from partner institutions
7. Acquire a broad understanding of the rich cultural heritage of India

Learning Outcome Assessment Methods:

1. Completion of pre-departure assignments (**20** points)
2. Participation in weekly discussions involving assigned readings during the on-campus portion of the course (**10** points).
3. Participation and engagement in guest lectures from speakers during the on-campus and local lectures during in-field portions of the course (8X10 points each = **80** points).
4. Participation in in-field activities and interactions with local community members (**100** points).

5. Presentation (**200** points) of summative review (PowerPoint presentation) on conservation and cultural issues at the end of the in-field portion of the course.
4. Ability to work collaboratively in pairs or groups and work through cross-cultural and communication barriers (**20** points). Students' ability to work cohesively in groups will be assessed here.
5. Field journal OR photo documentation (**70** points)

Total points = 500

Grading Scale: Evaluation of your academic performance will be based on several factors. Grades will be determined upon TOTAL points accumulated during the semester.

A 90 - 100% (90-93.0 A-, 93.1-97 A, 97.1-100 A+)
B 80 - 89.9% (80-83.0 B-, 83.1-87 B, 87.1-89.9 B+)
C 70 - 79.9% (70-73.0 C-, 73.1-77 C, 77.1-79.9 C+)
D 60 - 69.9% (60-63.0 D-, 63.1-67 D, 67.1-69.9 D+)
F =< 59.9 %

Packing list:

A suggested packing list along with useful tips for travel will be provided during class, as well as uploaded on Canvas.

Readings:

Students will be assigned weekly readings from peer-reviewed journals, popular science articles, excerpts from books and websites, and these will be posted on the course Canvas page.

Pre-Departure Assignments (all need to be done by Dec 31, 2025)

1. Documentaries (Please watch these)

Sugar's Dark Secrets: India's Sugar Plantation Workers Forced into Surgery

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FP_2acPF6c

The Caste System in India

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8idvu5zJ8c>

2. TED talk on dancing bears

https://www.ted.com/talks/kartick_satyanarayan_how_we_rescued_the_dancing_bears?subtitle=en

3. Popular articles (Please read; available on Canvas)

New York Times article: The Brutality of Sugar: Debt, Child Marriage and Hysterectomies

New York Times article: How a Sugar Industry Stamp of Approval Hid Coerced Hysterectomies

New York Times article: We Spent Months With India's Sugar Cutters. Here's What We Found

New York Times article: Why Politicians Ignore Abuses in India's Sugar Industry: They Run It

New York Times article: On the Hands of India's Brides, Reminders of a Stark Wealth Divide

BBC article: The Ancient stepwells helping to curb India's water crisis

4. Short video (Please watch)

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000009363281/sugar-industry-exploitation-of-women.html?pgtype=Article&action=click&module=RelatedLinks>

5. Peer reviewed articles, review papers, and excerpts (read if useful for final presentation)

Dancing bears in India: a sloth bear status report [Ursus, 22\(2\)](https://doi.org/10.2192/URSUS-D-10-00033.1):99-105(2011).
<https://doi.org/10.2192/URSUS-D-10-00033.1>

Taj Mahal DOI: [10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1_3510-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1_3510-1)

The Volcanic Geoheritage of the Ajanta and Ellora Caves, Central Deccan Traps, India
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12371-023-00809-w>

6. Websites

Western Ghats <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1342/>
Wildlife SOS Center <https://wildlifesos.org/>

Other articles will be posted on Canvas for recommended reading.

Summative Review Presentation

Summative Review

Each student pair will record a summative review presentation (12 to 15 minutes, PowerPoint Slides) on their topic of choice. Each student should spend at least 6 but no more than 8 minutes on a portion of the talk. This should follow the general format for a review paper (Topic, Introduction, Supporting studies, Synthesis, Discussion/Conclusions). Think of the presentation as a conference talk.

The “W’s” (who, what, when, where, why) are an effective way to organize the elements of your summative.

- In the introductory section, describe what you are studying, why it is important, and why you picked the topic.
- In the data and methods section, list when, where, who, and how the data were collected, and how many cases were involved.
- In the results section, present what you found.
- Tell a story that is interesting to the audience; avoid unnecessary jargon and simplify the topic.
- Conclude by returning to the original question/idea and talk about future directions and programs or policies related to the issue.
- Presentations should be made in PowerPoint and use a minimum of 18-point format for text (preferably 24 point or more). Minimize words, use bullet points, and photos or videos in your presentation slides.
- Speak clearly and explain each slide. Instructions for recording will be made available via Canvas.
- Upload your recorded presentation on Canvas by January 12noon on January 27th, 2026

Field Journal and Photo Documentation

Maintain a journal or notebook with activities from the day; note unique experiences and practices that are unique to conservation methods in South Asia; note culturally unique practices that are beneficial or harmful to the environment. Take photos and make notes about those photos in your notebook at the end of each day. Note that you will need to use these photos for your summative review presentation.

Student Responsibilities:

On campus:

1. Students should come to class on time and attendance is expected for the on-campus and in-field portions of the course (missed class due to illness will be excused).
2. Students will be expected to interact maturely and responsibly with their course instructors, fellow classmates, and guest speakers.
3. Regular completion of assigned readings and participation in discussions is required for the on-campus portion of this course.

In-field:

1. Students should come prepared with a notebook to take notes in the field. Photo and video documentation for the purpose of learning and presentations is highly encouraged, except at Government facilities in India, where it is prohibited. Students will be informed when photography is prohibited. A PhotoCircle account will be set up to upload AT LEAST 60 photos per student. These photos should have relevant captions and not be duplicates or multiple photos of the same thing. Note that in the event that multiple photos are uploaded, only unique photos will be given credit.
2. Students should wear close-toed shoes (where needed), long pants, and outdoor appropriate clothing.
3. Students must comply with safety precautions and course policies concerning travel abroad and during the in-field portion of the course.
4. Students are prohibited from engaging in activities that endanger themselves or others while traveling abroad, including drug use, underage drinking (legal drinking age is 21 in New Delhi and 25 in Maharashtra, India), and excessive consumption of alcohol.
5. Students should avoid walking around alone at night and women must be accompanied by instructors or male classmates whenever possible. Local customs of dress and conduct should be adhered to per guidelines (in other words, please be respectful and mindful of local culture).
6. Motion sickness is possible due to travel along uneven and winding roads in hilly terrain; students who are predisposed to motion sickness are advised to manage their condition as per health guidelines.

Academic Integrity

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign *Student Code* should also be considered as a part of this syllabus. Students should pay particular attention to Article 1, Part 4: Academic Integrity. Read the Code at the following URL: <http://studentcode.illinois.edu/>. Academic dishonesty may result in a failing grade. Every student is expected to review and abide by the Academic Integrity Policy: <http://studentcode.illinois.edu/>. Ignorance is not an excuse for any academic dishonesty. It is your responsibility to read this policy to avoid any misunderstanding. Do not hesitate to ask the instructor

if you are ever in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, cheating, or any other breach of academic integrity.

Students with Disabilities

To obtain disability-related academic adjustments and/or auxiliary aids, students with disabilities must contact the course instructor as soon as possible. To ensure that disability-related concerns are properly addressed from the beginning, students with disabilities who require assistance to participate in this class should contact Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) and see the instructor as soon as possible. If you need accommodations for any sort of disability, please speak to me after class, or make an appointment to see me, or see me during my office hours. DRES provides students with academic accommodations, access, and support services. To contact DRES you may visit 1207 S. Oak St., Champaign, call 333-4603 (V/TDD), or e-mail a message to disability@uiuc.edu. <http://www.disability.illinois.edu/>.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Any student who has suppressed their directory information pursuant to *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA) should self-identify to the instructor to ensure protection of the privacy of their attendance in this course. See <http://registrar.illinois.edu/ferpa> for more information on FERPA.

Emergency Response Recommendations

Emergency response recommendations can be found at the following website:

<http://police.illinois.edu/emergency/>. I encourage you to review this website and the campus building floor plans website within the first 10 days of class.
<http://police.illinois.edu/emergency/floorplans/>.

Sexual Misconduct Policy and Reporting

The University of Illinois is committed to combating sexual misconduct. Faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct to the University's Title IX and Disability Office. In turn, an individual with the Title IX and Disability Office will provide information about rights and options, including accommodations, support services, the campus disciplinary process, and law enforcement options.

A list of the designated University employees who, as counselors, confidential advisors, and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found here: wecare.illinois.edu/resources/students/#confidential. Other information about resources and reporting is available here: wecare.illinois.edu.

Course Format:

During the on-campus portion of the course, we will:

1. Introduce students of NRES and related majors to the concepts of sustainability and conservation, with emphasis on India.
2. Use the Wildlife SOS Rescue Center to explore and to talk about megafauna and their rescue, care and conservation from abusive tourism and poaching, with emphasis on Asian elephants and sloth bears.
3. Use the Western Ghats and natural resource-dependent rural communities and societies as a case study to explore a biodiversity hotspot for endemic flora and fauna.

4. Lead UIUC students to develop review projects within the context of sustainability, conservation, and culture to explore a natural or social challenge during the in-field portion of the course.

During the in-field portion of the course, students will:

1. Visit sites in the Western Ghats, sugarcane fields, rural dwellings, ancient caves and architectural wonders that are representative of different biological, cultural, social, or historical components of the region.
2. Interact with various researchers, instructors, village leaders, community members, forest watchers, and tribal members while learning about the biology, history, and culture of the region.
3. Gather materials in the form of interviews, field notes, and photos for summative review presentations on ecosystem threats, conservation practices, sustainability, and socio-economic pressures in a developing nation.
4. Visit sugarcane plantations to explore farming operations, threats faced by climate change, environmental pollution, and the complex social history of caste systems in India and how this legacy continues to influence present day natural and socio-economic outcomes.
5. Walk through the grounds of the Qutb Minar Complex, the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort (UNESCO World Heritage Sites) and immerse in the history, culture, architecture, and traditions of the Mughal Empire (12th-17th century CE).
6. Explore the ancient rock cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora (UNESCO World Heritage Sites) built from 2nd century BCE to 10th century CE to learn about the history, religions, culture, geology, and architecture of Indian heritage.
7. Fully integrate the knowledge, interests, and perspectives of students from different backgrounds along with local faculty and team leaders to enhance the learning experiences of all students.

Schedule:

On-campus (6 weeks, 1 hour each)

October 22, Week 1: Course overview, what to expect, details of each location and activity

October 29, Week 2: History and culture of India: Guest Lecture by Dr. Michael Fisher, Professor Emeritus of History, Oberlin College

November 5, Week 3: Geography and biodiversity conservation

November 12, Week 4: Orientation from Study Abroad office

November 19, Week 5: Discussion of presentation topics

December 3, Week 6: Travel orientation, cultural norms, code of conduct (if needed)

In-field (2 weeks)

Day 1 (Jan 1st): Meet at 5pm at Terminal 5, Chicago O'Hare Int. Airport. Fly from Chicago (ORD) to Dubai (DXB) by Emirates EK236 departing 7.45 pm. Flight duration = 13 hrs. 25 mins

Day 2 (Jan 2nd): Arrive at DXB 7.10 pm (layover for 2 hours, 40 minutes). Fly by EK512 to Delhi (DEL) at 9.50 pm. Flight duration = 3 hours, 10 minutes.

Day 3 (Jan 3rd): Arrive at New Delhi at 2.30 am, transfer to hotel; situate students at Bloom, in-country safety orientation, briefing on safety protocols, emergency procedures, and cultural etiquette in India. Cultural immersion - visit to 14th century Stepwell and Old Delhi (Chawri Bazaar, Chandni Chowk, Jama Masjid, Red Fort). ***Stay at Bloom Boutique, Connaught Place New Delhi***

Day 4 (Jan 4th): Visit stepwell and Qutb Minar, South Delhi; bus ride to Agra (4 hours), orientation.

Stay at Grand Mercure Agra

Day 5 (Jan 5th): Visit Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal: Guided tour exploring the history, architecture, and significance of the Taj Mahal. ***Stay at Grand Mercure Agra***

Day 6 (Jan 6th): Visit Wildlife SOS Mathura Centre and Agra Sloth Bear Rescue facility: Observing the rehabilitation of elephants and other wildlife. ***Stay at Grand Mercure Agra***

Day 7 (Jan 7th): Bus ride to New Delhi airport (3.5 hours). Fly to Aurangabad (IXU), Maharashtra: Evening flight and hotel check-in. ***Stay at Rama International, Aurangabad (MH)***

Day 8 (Jan 8th): Visit Ajanta Caves: Guided tour exploring the ancient Buddhist rock-cut caves and their historical, religious, and artistic significance. ***Stay at Rama International, Aurangabad (MH)***

Day 9 (Jan 9th): Visit Kalash Seeds in Jalna, meet with UIUC alumnus, visit sugarcane fields, interact with farmers; visit to handloom silk weaving facility. ***Stay at Rama International, Aurangabad (MH)***

Day 10 (Jan 10th): Visit Ellora Caves: Exploration of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain rock-cut temples and monasteries. Travel to Pune by Private Bus (~6 hours): Afternoon travel and hotel check-in. ***Stay at Ramee Grand Hotel Pune***

Day 11 (Jan 11th): Free day: Pune Orientation and optional visit to Singhagad Fort (14th century Maratha Fort); traditional Hindu wedding ceremony. ***Stay at Ramee Grand Hotel Pune***

Day 12 (Jan 12th): Visit to Wildlife Rescue Centre and volunteering activity. ***Stay at Ramee Grand Hotel Pune***

Day 13 (Jan 13th): Visit to Bhigwan Bird Sanctuary. ***Stay at Ramee Grand Hotel Pune***

Day 14 (Jan 14th): Trip to a Sacred Grove in the Western Ghats (2-hour drive). Guided hike focusing on the region's unique flora and fauna, conservation challenges, and biodiversity hotspots. Clean-up activity. Drive to Ekole campsite (1.5 hours). ***Stay at Gaia Ekole***

Day 15 (Jan 15th): Hike to Ghangad Fort (19th century Maratha Fort). Village visit and Rural Community Engagement: interaction with rural communities to learn about sustainable agricultural practices, water management, and traditional livelihoods. Reflection and discussions. ***Stay at Gaia Ekole***

Day 16 (Jan 16th): Drive to Mumbai (3 hours); guided historical tour of South Bombay, final leisure time, shopping, and celebratory dinner, leave for Mumbai Airport.

Day 17 (Jan 17th): Depart at 4.15 am EK501 Mumbai to Dubai (BOM to DXB). Arrive at Dubai Airport at 6.05am, Flight duration = 3 hours, 20 minutes. Layover in Dubai for 3 hours, 40 minutes. Depart at 9.45 am EK235 (DXB to ORD), flight duration 15 hours, 10 minutes; arrive in ORD Terminal 5 at 2.55 pm.