

## HONORS 382

The Cat: Biology & Social Construction of a Domesticated Species  
Spring 2016 TR 2:10- 3:25 pm Harbor Walk West 305

### Instructors:

Dr. Melissa Hughes, Biology  
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### Course description:

What is a cat? Is it independent and solitary, or social? A nonnative predator or part of natural ecosystems? How do we know? How do our social and symbolic perceptions align with scientific data? To what extent is the collection of scientific data predicated on assumptions derived from social perceptions? And how does all of this relate to relevant policy-making and program development?

This course investigates the construction of knowledge from both biological and social perspectives to better understand what we know and how we know it. Cats are a particularly useful model for this exploration for several reasons. First, as a popular pet, they are an animal about which we all have many, and often conflicting, perceptions. Second, cats are unusual among domesticated animals in many behavioral respects, and being less genetically divergent from their ancestors than many other domesticated animals, even their status as “domesticated” remains the subject of some debate. Third, they present specific ecological problems – as related to feral populations, impact on songbirds, etc. – whose management requires understanding of both relevant biology and social perceptions. Finally, as many conservation issues similarly require an integration of scientific and social factors, cats serve as a useful starting point for larger discussions of important wildlife management issues such as specific species control, eradication and reintroduction, ecosystem “re-wilding,” etc.

Why do we need both biological and social perspectives?

“Many real animals have a mythical one that stands beside them in our imagination. The real animal is a product of natural selection; the mythical is a product of our yearnings and fears. The real one can teach us about nature; the mythical one can teach us about human nature. As long as we can stay clear about the difference, each can teach us a lot. But if we confuse myth and reality, the more we learn the less we will understand about either the world or ourselves” (Lott, D. F. 2002. *American Bison: A Natural History*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 104)

**Course learning outcomes:**

1. Understand scientific method, including the relationship between data and interpretations and/or conclusions drawn from them. Particular focus will be given to behavioral, ecological, evolutionary and phylogenetic data.
2. Read and interpret primary social and cultural literature, including basic social science theory, concepts, debates, and methods, with particular emphasis on epistemological issues.
3. Apply evolutionary and ecological concepts to the understanding of human-dominated environments.
4. Understand definitions and properties of culture as related to social perspectives on cats and other species
5. Understand the biology of domestication, including evolutionary, behavioral and ecological concepts.
6. Understand the role of social context in the development, understanding, and use of scientific research
7. Synthesize ecological, behavioral, evolutionary and cultural data with respect to focal species, *Felis catus*.

**Readings:** All required readings will be available electronically at the course Oaks site. Please contact us or the Helpdesk ([Helpdesk@cofc.edu](mailto:Helpdesk@cofc.edu), 843 953-5457) with any questions regarding access. You are expected to read selections **prior** to class periods for which they are assigned (see course schedule below). Announcements regarding reading updates, revisions, and other relevant topics will be made in class and via email.

**Additional course materials:** Links to additional online course materials (reports, news articles, videos, etc.) will be posted on Oaks prior to class periods for which they are assigned.

**Grade scale:**

A 92-100%; A- 90-91; B+ 88-89; B 82-87; B- 80-81; C+ 78-79; C 72-77; C- 70-71; D+ 68-69; D 62-67; D- 60-61; F 59 or below.

**Grading:**

Discussion preparation assignments: 30%

2 Take-home exams: 30% (15% each)

Final Project (including prospectus, oral presentation and final): 25%

Discussion leadership: 10% (5% each)

Participation: 5%

**Special needs:** If you have a documented disability and have been approved to receive accommodations through SNAP Services (<http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/>), please feel free to discuss related issues with me at any time during office hours or by appointment.

**Course structure and requirements:** While there will be some instructor lectures and viewing of videos and internet materials, this course is primarily a seminar, and as such will require active participation from all students. Typically, one or both instructors will provide lecture and other material on Thursdays, and student-led discussions of primary literature and/or other sources will take place on Tuesdays. Readings for the student-led discussions will be related to and/or build on the lecture material from the previous Thursday.

**Student requirements consist of:**

Discussion papers (~weekly): Each week, 2-3 students will be responsible for leading class discussion on articles from the primary literature and/or other sources. For each student-led discussion period, *all students* will complete a short discussion preparation assignment (1-2 pages, due on Oaks before the start of class) in which they both summarize the primary results and interpretations of the source and connect the source to on-going discussions in class. This assignment will both strengthen fluency and critical skills in reading and interpreting literature from a variety of sources and perspectives, and ensure appropriate preparation for class discussion.

Take-home exams (due 3/4 and 4/12): For each exam, students will be provided questions, data, and debated issues which will require synthetic analyses of course materials to be effectively addressed. Exams will be graded for not only content but also for organization and clarity.

Final project: Students will integrate biological and social science materials to either explore a specific policy implication or to propose a novel and significant research project. The final project will be completed in stages, including: prospectus and 5 potential references (due 3/18), oral presentation to class (4/14-19) and a final essay (due 4/26).

Class participation: Class attendance, engagement, and participation are essential for success in this course, as much of the material on exams will stem directly from lectures, films, and class discussion. You are (obviously) expected to attend **all** classes and are responsible for all information disseminated in the course. If you must miss a class, obtain notes from classmates and feel free to meet with us to discuss them prior to the relevant exam. We will not provide lecture notes, although we will post assignment guides and other course materials on the course Oaks site.

For absences that require documentation (i.e., missed exams or assignment due dates, or extended absences related to health, personal or emergency situations), you must complete and turn in the appropriate forms to the Absence Memo Office at 67 George St. (more information and downloadable forms at <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/about/services/absence.php>).

**Honor code:** Violations of the honor code will be taken seriously. If you need reminding, you can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the Student Handbook at <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php> As plagiarism is a common (and sometimes unintentional) infraction, we recommend that you watch the “You quote it, you note it” tutorial video (<http://library.acadiu.ca/tutorials/plagiarism/>) and/or read the material from the Purdue Online Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/1/>).

**Please note: Patch-writing = plagiarism.** Changing a few words is not writing; copying and changing a few words does not make text your own any more than stealing a car and painting it pink makes it your car. Write from your brain, not your sources.

## COURSE OUTLINE

*(Subject to revision. Assigned readings, links and other course resources will be posted on Oaks)*

1/7	Introduction to course
1/12	Why cats?
1/14, 19*	Epistemology
1/21, 26*	Theory: Biology & Culture
1/28, 2/2*	Classification of nonhuman animals
2/4, 9*	What is a cat?
2/11, 16*	Cat behavior: personality & communication
2/18, 23*	Cat social behavior
2/25, 3/1*	Historical and cross-cultural cats
3/3*	Symbolic cats

*Note: First Take-Home Exam Due on Oaks Friday, 3/4*

3/8, 10	<b>Spring Break</b>
3/15	What do we know so far?
3/17, 22*	Ethics & animals as individuals: welfare vs rights

*Note: Individual Project Prospectus Due on Oaks Friday, 3/18*

3/24, 29*	Ethics & animal populations: conservation & management
3/31, 4/5*	Ecological consequences
4/7	Topic TBA / What else should we discuss?

*Note: Second Take-Home Exam Due on Oaks Tuesday, 4/11*

4/12	Oral Presentations of Individual Projects
4/14, 19	Oral Presentations of Individual Projects

*Note: Presentation Files Due on Oaks by Noon on Day of Presentation*

4/26 4-7 pm **Final exam period: Final Individual Projects Due on Oaks**

**\* Tuesday = student-led discussion**