**Some of the best questions posed by students in preparation for the BIOL 510 2022 course seminars (students’ choice of best three listed first)**

1. We often live our lives through the excitement of future events. Thinking about the future allows us to forget about our self-impermanence anxiety. It allows us to block out the problems of the present. Our inner Windigo drives us away from the gratitude for what we already have and makes us believe that we could be better off in the future after requiring more resources. The corporations that surround us enable us to do this without thinking of the consequences. As Dr. Kimmerer mentions in *Defeating Windigo*, “The market system artificially creates scarcity by blocking the flow between the source and the consumer”. Through our discussions and studies of interconnectedness and impermanence, we have been able to realize the importance of present moments and gratitude. Could becoming more present and reciprocal, allow us to open our eyes to a more sustainable way of living?
2. In *Windigo Footprints*, Kimmerer reflects on the Windigo, an Anishinaabe monster who is consumed by consumption. Kimmerer then goes on to compare the Windigo to Western culture and the way North Americans consume. I think it is interesting that Western children are taught to be afraid of the boogeyman, or the monster who hides under our bed, whereas Anishinaabe children are afraid of a monster who can be viewed as a representation of overconsumption. What does this say about Western culture? Could the fact that Western myths aren’t based in reality reflect how we do not see real world problems as something that should be feared? Can this lack of cultural fear be connected to the Western faith in technology solving our problems?
3. The word ‘home’ is synonymous with refuge, retreat, and place of rest. It fosters a sense of belonging and safety and is something we look forward to going back to whenever we feel lost or out of touch with the world. Home is a place that is curated with careful attention and tended to regularly. If we do not have a home to tend to how will we ever learn to take care of something? Therefore, how might learning to take care of a home instill values in us that enforce us to become environmentally sustainable?

1. The Mazzocchi paper mentions the potential issues with dialogue and misinterpretations regarding communication between western and non-western groups in a polycentric laboratory of sustainability. How can a lab like this prepare to handle these issues? Bringing this back to our class discussion last week, would this mean that solutions for issues will be put again at the “lowest common denominator?” How would this polycentric laboratory really make the impacts that it was designed to make?
2. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer says “becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your children’s future mattered,” (Kimmerer, page 9). A similar definition exists for sustainability itself. As biologists, we know that females invest more energy into eggs than males do in sperm which often leads to females being the parental caregiver of the offspring. How does female investment in offspring-that will rely on the world passed down to them-affect the way females perceive sustainability compared to males? *(Note from Paul: females also invest a large amount of energy and time during gestation, and during post-natal care)*
3. In the Bible, Earth is referred to as the womb that bore all life and can sometimes be conveyed as our “mother” while God is conveyed as our “father”. The idea then follows that once we pass we leave the womb and are promised an eternity in Heaven. This idea insinuates that our time on Earth is finite, and its resources are disposable. We subconsciously understand that we leave Earth (and its environmental issues), so it is not necessary to restore or replenish the gifts it has given us. Because we have a common understanding in society that mothers behave in a nurturing and forgiving fashion this may explain why we associate Mother Earth as nurturing and forgiving. This ideology that has been formed through Western language and culture gives off the idea that Mother Earth will prosper no matter what is thrown at her. Do you think that the idea that ‘Mother Earth is resilient like the flesh of the womb’ has innately caused the destruction of our planet? And if yes, how do you change this ideology without erasing a whole religion?
4. In relation to the seminar focal question, we notice that the concept of ‘woman’ is spread throughout Indigenous teachings: Sky*woman* and *Mother* Nature, for example. As Dr Kimmerer mentions, a relationship with nature requires deep emotional connections, which are considered very feminine. Given that ‘man’ in Western society tends to put himself above women and other genders, could the femininity engrained in care and emotion regarding our environment be the reason Western culture sees so little value in these? If yes, what might it take to bring femininity back into the conversation regarding environmental protection? If no, what else might have resulted in the disconnect between Western culture and nature, as discussed in the previous lecture (Sept 26)?
5. Golden rods and asters can be perceived as an example of the long-term benefits arising from reciprocity, and Kimmerer illustrates this as an emotional connection. Changing our **metaphysics** to less of a **rational** point of view may be the key to straying away from simply a self-beneficial sense of sustainability. Growing *together* allows for mutual benefit in this example; how could an emotional point of view support an increase in desire for a **person-environment mutualistic relationship** where many species could *thrive* together?
6. As humans, we tend to develop deeper connections to topics that we are interested in or have a passion for. As discussed in previous classes, we can connect on a deeper level to topics after hearing stories involving the topic as this gives us a different perception (allows us to think differently). In the chapter “Asters and Goldenrod”, Dr. Kimmerer describes how humans and bees perceive colour differently, yet we both are attracted to flowers (colour for beauty vs. pollination). Would understanding sustainability from a different perspective help us connect with the earth again?
7. In the chapter “A Mother’s Work”, Kimmerer’s children wish for their new house to have a pond for swimming. The pond on their new property was full of algae and quickly growing plant-life unsuitable for swimming. However, wanting to do anything for her children, Kimmerer scrapes out the algae and realizes that in creating a “habitat” suitable for her children, she is damaging someone else’s habitat. In this example, Kimmerer’s parental instincts outweighed her instincts as an ecologist to protect nature. At what point did Kimmerer prioritize being a mother over other aspects of her identity? How do we ensure sustainability is integrated into every aspect of our own identities?
8. In *Braiding Sweetgrass,* Kimmerer shares the story of her relationship with their neighbour Hazel through the eyes of her daughter. It is clear that although Hazel does not share blood with Kimmerer’s family and is therefore not direct biological kin, Kimmerer and her daughters view her as family. Is there a link between the lack of feeling of interconnectedness in Western culture and the biological predisposition to prioritize kin and how does this impact sustainability?
9. In ‘*the Consolation of Water Lilies,’* Kimmerer reflects on the needs of her pets, children, plants, and farm animals to be fed, and in this way reflects on her role as a mother to many different things in her life, all of whom she treats with equal respect. She even later reminisces that the family pets and farm animals have passed away, so she has no ‘greeting committee’ to come home to. Similar to Kimmerer, in Western Societies, can and should this idea of mothering extend beyond just human children or pets? Relating to our field trip and the themes of interconnectedness we touched on, could this equal treatment and love of all kinds of life in our everyday lives help foster more sustainable mindsets and behaviours?
10. An overarching theme in *Braiding Sweetgrass* is reciprocity, particularly, the importance of reciprocity between humans and the natural world. As stated by Dr. Kimmerer, in many Indigenous cultures this idea of reciprocity is encompassed by the idea of the ‘Honourable Harvest’. However, this idea of reciprocity is found globally in almost every culture: in Hinduism reciprocity is encompassed in the idea of karma, in the Western world it is expressed by the phrase “an eye for an eye”, and some African communities use the phrase “what comes around goes around” to describe reciprocity. How can these differing views of reciprocity impact our relationship with the environment and our personal sustainability? Would a shift in our view of reciprocity to something more positive -- like the one shared by many Indigenous cultures -- be impactful to our personal relationship with the natural world?
11. In *Epiphany in the Beans*, Kimmer asks her class full of writers if the earth loves them back and they were all quiet. She then proceeded to ask what would happen hypothetically if the earth loved them back and the class flourished with ideas. This made me think that if individuals had a possible answer for her first question, a fear of judgement by their classmates scared them into not speaking.  What do you think would happen on an industry-wide scale if large-waste companies decided to hypothesize about being more sustainable? (That is, if companies decided to have more hypothetical discussions of what they can do.) How do you think a fear of judgement hinders one’s personal way of living sustainable? Do you think these hypotheses will help eliminate old un-sustainable practices and foster new ideas?
12. Robin Kimmerer beautifully conveys the connection between the Three Sisters, speaking to the way they leave space for each other, and share important resources. It is part of both human and animal nature to compete, usually at the cost of someone else. It takes great wisdom to recognize that sharing benefits all, and the favor will be returned in some way. This understanding is key to Indigenous ways of living, but Western culture places a large emphasis on the individual’s strive for success. Where should we make the largest changes in our lives to highlight reciprocity? The education system often places students against each other, instead of with one another. -How could it become a place for reciprocity and sharing to spiral out from?
13. In the fourteenth chapter of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, *Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket*, Dr. Kimmerer discusses the lesson of the three rows: ecological well-being, material welfare and reciprocity and their connectedness in sustaining the future of humanity. Considering the circle of human activities, resources, wastes and increased ‘awareness’ Paul explained in lecture (pictured below), how does the lesson of the three rows fit into this concept? In what ways can we apply the lesson of the three rows to sustainability to change the thickness of this circle, as Paul described? Is the incorporation of these lessons together realistic considering how the general public is living today? Why or why not?
14. Diagram

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15. Our consumerist lifestyles are heavily influenced by social media and its impact on trend cycles. We see items that quickly become ‘trendy’ or ‘in style’ online and are then considered ‘outdated’ in the span of months, leading people to buy and get rid of clothes at an extremely fast rate and therefore increase our consumerism. How could incorporating gratitude into our lives help us slow down these specific cycles? Understanding and being grateful for where resources come from and their lifecycles is impactful, but is it enough to really change this trajectory when social media is so rampant in the western world?
16. Is the way that we receive information problematic in fuelling our overconsumption? Traditionally, Indigenous individuals learn most of their information through the art of storytelling, incorporating a sense of humility and emotion into all teachings that are passed down throughout generations. Does this lack of a connection, and the ways Western culture pass on information further influence a disconnect between emotion and consumerism?
17. The word ‘home’ is synonymous with refuge, retreat, and place of rest. It fosters a sense of belonging and safety and is something we look forward to going back to whenever we feel lost or out of touch with the world. Home is a place that is curated with careful attention and tended to regularly. If we do not have a home to tend to how will we ever learn to take care of something? Therefore, how might learning to take care of a home instill values in us that enforce us to become environmentally sustainable?
18. In the chapter, *In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to* Place, Kimmer describes the teachings of the White Man’s Footstep and the meaning behind becoming naturalized to a place. In what ways has today’s society impacted the way we feel naturalized, and thus the way we respect the land we live on? Do you think industrialization has created a barrier between our connection with the land that is irreversible? Relating back to the movie; Surviving Progress, how can we use our human tendencies to innovate into caring for the land and practicing naturalization?
19. We talk a lot in our class about the lack of connection Western society and people have to nature and the Earth, and the separation that allows us to take from the land without feelings of guilt or sadness. Although most people have an understanding of impermanence relating to other species like plants and animals, we rarely look inwards to ourselves with that same view. Is an awareness of impermanence of our own lives and cultures critical to being more connected to the rest of nature? Will this allow and push us to see ourselves as one with nature rather than above or separate from it?
20. I believe that an increased awareness of connectedness between humans and the rest of nature leads us in a direction in which we understand the underlying theme of universal impermanence. Though we have discussed in seminar that universal impermanence could assist us in developing a sense of equality with nature, could the theme of *individual insignificance* that comes alongside *impermanence* drive a mindset where individual sustainability is not deemed as important? As I am impermanent, so are my actions.
21. The notion of moving on in a form greater than oneself after life on Earth might impact western societies' ability to be aware of their current balance with sustainability. Has western society fed too much into their inner Windigo? As Dr. Kimmerer quotes from writer Steve Pitt in *Windigo Footprints*: “Windigo was human whose selfishness has overpowered their self-control to the point that satisfaction is no longer possible”. This made me think of one of the course seminars when we talked about taking only what you need. Have we, as a western society, become so attached to the thought of a possible afterlife that our greed has taken over our subconscious pushing us away from sustainable living through reciprocity?
22. In *Witness to the Rain*, Dr. Kimmerer discusses her sensual experiences in a way very few people do when speaking about nature. Experiencing nature and sensations that come along with it can lead one to have a greater appreciation for nature and all that it provides. Relating this to your seminar question, many cultures believe that to have a good afterlife, you must live a good first life, and I think appreciation for nature and treating it with great respect is one quantitative way of ‘living a good life’. Is a good life contingent (at least, in part) on how one treats things in their environment, both sentient and non-sentient, both alive and not? Especially considering most North American Indigenous cultures do believe in an afterlife, is there a true link between belief in an afterlife and sustainability? What about individuals who do not believe in an afterlife at all? How can we foster an environment where respecting nature and living environmentally and socially sustainable is a cornerstone of a ‘good life’, if at all? In what ways can we enhance awareness of the need to respect all aspects of nature and the environment around us that allows us to foster a culture that deeply understands its dependence on nature?
23. Consumerism is commonly used by *Homo sapiens* in both western and eastern cultures as a way of leisure, used to distract the mind from the knowledge of our eventual mortality. The effect that “distraction” from this inevitable truth seems to numb the fear and almost mentally refute the acceptance that we are just another species. This consumerist distraction seems to do more harm than good regarding our population wide sustainability. If we are such a smart species, and we can understand death, mortality, and senescence, why aren’t we doing our best to change our ways to help the environment, which in turn, is impermanent as well?
24. The eighth fire, to me, speaks as a form of sharing and interconnectedness. As these themes have been abundant in this course, they still remain underrepresented as a fundamental principle regarding sustainability. The act of cleaving connection, whether it’s human-human, or human-environment, is harmful and creates problematic hierarchies and hence a form of thoughtlessness. We see the harm done by separating humans from nature, and hence the benefits from reconnecting them; could reconnecting humans to *each other* actually be beneficial for the environment as well?