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Get to Know New Affiliated Faculty Rafi Youatt



Rafi Youatt, Assistant Professor of Politics at [The New School for Social Research](#) has recently become a [new Tishman Center Affiliated Faculty](#).

Learn more about him, his background, his interest in climate change and environment, and his latest projects!**Q: Based on your political science background, what caused you to become interested in the environment and climate change?**My environmental interests first came from a pair of 6-month long walks I took along the length of the United States in my 20s. Around the same time, I became aware of

the international politics surrounding the Earth Summit in Rio. Bridging these two sets of events – one apparently very proximate, one apparently quite distant, both very political and very ecological – was what brought me to study environmental issues. As someone who studies politics, I'm particularly interested in understanding what it means to start to understand ecological relations not just as a policy problem, though it is that, but also as a deeper challenge to our very conceptions of politics. What does it mean to think about our politics as ecological, for better and for worse, involving different kinds of life? How do seemingly non-ecological but highly political ideas, like sovereignty, power, and security work ecologically?

Q: How do you see climate change impacting your research/work in the next 5 years?

Climate change is critical to any understanding of contemporary ecological issues. At the same, its dominance as an issue has also meant that other environmental issues like biodiversity have become been sidelined or incorporated under its logics. Climate change has impacted my teaching – I teach an undergraduate course that involves an international negotiation simulation centered on climate change. It is also central to research I'm starting on mountain governance

in the Himalayas. Mountains are unique climatic zones, and the Himalayas are a particularly fascinating and diverse area, inhabited by an equally diverse group of human communities. Climate change is affecting not only the glaciers in the alpine regions, which themselves feed major water supplies in the region, but also the conditions for local livelihoods, including agriculture, tourism, and harvesting of wild plants. Yet most climate change policy discussions take place at very distant international and national forums. Part of what I'm interested in understanding is how that distance is being bridged through development policy, and with what political effects.

Q: What are some of your latest projects? I have a book, *[Counting Species: Biodiversity in Global Environmental Politics](#)*, that came out last year with University of Minnesota Press. I'm currently finishing up *[a book on interspecies politics and international relations](#)*. One of the most interesting cases in the book has to do with wolves and moose on Isle Royale, which is the paradigmatic ecological case study both for wolf ethology and for studying the population dynamics in predator-prey relations. It's also a place to think about American national sovereignty, and how it has been related to the natural world,

both historically and conceptually.

I've learned a lot about this case from approaching it as an environmental studies question, from people across the natural sciences, policy, and political theory worlds. One of my newer research projects has to do with [looking at the ways that things, species, people, ideas and capital work to produce various kinds of inequalities and hierarchy around the US-Mexico border](#). This is a collaborative and interdisciplinary research project I've been involved with here the New School. I've been focused on issues around wildlife conservation near the border fence, at the same time that a growing border fence infrastructure intended to keep (some) humans out has been built. I want to understand how these two politics – environmental conservation and border politics – are intertwined, and whether there could be ways to re-imagine them as politically connected in a positive sense, rather than as mutually reinforcing constraints. **Project links** [Counting Species: Biodiversity in Global Environmental Politics](#) [Sovereignty and the Wolves of Isle Royale](#) [The Multiple Mobilities Research Cluster III](#)

