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Reviews

The Political Ecology of Tropical Forests in Southeast Asia: Historical Perspectives

Lye Tuck-Po, Wil de Jong, and Abe Ken-ichi, eds.
Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press
ISBN: 1876843543
Year: 2003

This book contains ten articles that explore the complicated relationships between and among producers and consumers of tropical forest products in Southeast Asia. The authors focus on understanding current political, economic, ecological, and social situations in their proper historical contexts. These papers cover the many types of forests that exist in Southeast Asia, as well as the many types of forest use regimes. Using political ecology as a framework, they find commonalities in the political processes behind forest use and abuse. This book tackles difficult issues, such as the power relations among the various actors involved in forest management; the often unequal distribution of costs and benefits of forest exploitation; the discourses of science, neoclassical economics, sustainable forest management, and national development; and the colonial and pre-colonial roots of current deforestation in this region. Some of the papers are broad in regional and theoretical scope, while others are case studies of specific countries and villages.

Several articles are explicitly historical. Donovan discusses the role of trade in forest products in the process of the national development of Laos, while Potter reveals the different values placed upon agricultural and forest products in Burma, Java, and the Philippines and the historical role of plantation systems in these areas. De Jong et. al. write about the historical changes in rent-seeking strategies both within and among communities in Indonesia, focusing on how the commercialization of forest products has affected the current geographical distribution of ethnic groups in Kalimantan.

Another group of papers analyzes modern political and economic situations, emphasizing the historical events that created them. Rhee analyzes the ramifications of Indonesia's decentralization policies on both local forest management practices and on inter-ethnic conflicts. Masahiro examines the consequences of increasing economic opportunities for Iban people in Sarawak over the last century and how governmental policies have affected changes in land use, while Ken-ichi elucidates the ecological dangers of increasing plantation agriculture in Borneo's peat swamps, as evidenced by the devastating forest fires there in 1997-1998. Finally, Knight provides a case study from an upland Japanese community whose forest livelihood and cultural identity is threatened by the importation of timber from Southeast Asian countries.

The third set of papers presents a broader economic view of logging in Southeast Asia. Thompson critiques a reductionist neo-classical view of economics that relies on cost-benefit analysis, an oversimplified and strictly utilitarian slant. In Southeast Asia this discourse is used to justify taking resources from less efficient local communities and giving them to more efficient corporations to supposedly increase the overall social good. Gale scrutinizes the role of the International Tropical Timber Organization and its use of the scientific discourse of "sustainable forest management," which legitimizes industrial forestry and subsequently hampers the adoption of ecosystem-based forest management policies.

Overall, these papers propose that each situation should be seen as a result of local, regional, and global events and influences. The political ecology of tropical forests is Marxian in the sense that it examines current problems in the context of forest exploitation and hierarchical power relations, and also in the way that it views a dialectical relationship between politics and ecology. As Thompson (226) explains, "Instead of seeing the world as frozen in a black box of equilibrium and harmony, we must think about the world as an ever-changing system poised at the edge of chaos."

Reviewed by Sarah Hitchner, Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia.