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Notes and queries

Roads Diverging in Yellow Woods: New Paths for Ecological and Environmental Anthropology

Sarah L. Hitchner
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Sarah Hitchner, a doctoral student at the University of Georgia, plans to conduct dissertation research in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak, focusing on the link between conservation and agrobiodiversity. Her research in the vicinity of Pulong Tau National Park will seek to promote a participatory proactive model for incorporating Kelabit agroforestry practices into protected area planning.

Background

Anthropology is at a crossroads; perhaps it always has been. Because it is such a broad discipline, there has always been debate among anthropologists over its role inside and outside of academia. There are often tensions between the paradigms of theory and practice, modernism and postmodernism, constructionism and deconstructionism, scaling up and scaling down, and many other seeming dichotomies that really contain many shades of gray. Anthropology has been called "the most humanistic of the sciences, and the most scientific of the humanities." We anthropologists should take this phrase as a compliment, and each strive to find our own niche inside the discipline that sweeps across temporal, spatial, and social scales in a way that no other discipline does. At the same time, we should listen to and collaborate with experts in other fields, as well as non-experts with experiences different from our own, always vigilant of our own motives and biases.

The global community is also at a crossroads, due to stronger technological, financial, political, and social ties than ever before in history, and few would argue with the statement that the global environmental situation is precarious at best. Every day we lose species and ecosystems that might hold answers to perhaps the most basic questions of mankind: how does the earth work, how did the world come to be the way it is now, and what is the proper role of humans in this world? We are also losing, at an alarming rate, groups of people who have answers to these questions that are much different from our own, as well as questions other groups cannot even think to ask. The loss of cultural, linguistic, and biological diversity leaves us all poorer and more ignorant. To combat these problems, we anthropologists must examine the political processes behind biological and cultural extinctions; indeed, as Marvin Harris once said, "If it be anthropology to struggle against the mystification of the causes of inequality and exploitation, long live anthropology."

Since every local problem resides within larger issues and even larger frameworks nested in still larger discourses, communication is vital. There is no time to reinvent the wheel; we should instead both stand on the shoulders of giants (as encouraged by Newton) and seek out the less-traveled paths in life (as Frost suggests). Anthropology stresses the message that all events are contextual and that no idea or behavior exists in isolation.

My Research: Agroforestry as *In Situ* Conservation in Sarawak

My research involves the study of indigenous agroforestry among the Kelabit people of northeastern Sarawak, Malaysia and draws upon anthropological and ecological research in historical ecology, political ecology, and conservation. I came to this work through a circuitous route. I was told in my first anthropology course as an undergrad that "anthropology is what anthropologists do," and the freedom and ambiguity implicit in this statement convinced me that while I appreciated the natural sciences, the social sciences were perhaps better equipped to handle the complex environmental and human rights issues I planned

to tackle. I had just come out of a forestry program that left me angry because of a lack of concern for the indigenous peoples of Borneo during the great fires of 1997 (that forestry department had just given an honorary degree to an Indonesian official who blamed the swidden agriculturalists instead of the logging companies for the fires), and so I moved to another school where I could pursue anthropology. I changed my focus several times throughout my undergraduate career, spent several years in the world of multi-cultural book publishing, and now I plan to become an applied anthropologist specializing in local, national, and international forest resource policy.

Dr. Anne Schiller, a cultural anthropologist who has worked for many years in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo, sparked my interest in the region, and I decided that Borneo would be the ideal place to investigate the complex relationships among the many institutions involved in forest management, including local and indigenous communities, migrant groups, state and national governments, corporate timber companies, and national and international conservation agencies. My focus will be on documenting the distinctions that people in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak make between different types of forests and non-forest lands, including primary forests, secondary (or tertiary or more) forests, swamps, open fields, and mountains, as well as the various land use matrices in and around these villages, including agroforests, gardens, agricultural fields, fruit orchards, timber stands, resource patches (such as bamboo and rattan), and pasture lands. I will therefore build on studies such as the ones done by William Balée (1990, 1992) on forest succession within horticultural and agricultural fallows as evidence of anthropogenic alterations to tropical landscapes, and in the process I hope to discover the means by which political land use decisions have been and are presently being made, especially regarding the ways that indigenous forestry practices are incorporated (or not) into the management plans of protected areas. This project will also address current political issues in the conservation field about the complexities of transboundary protected areas, since Pulong Tau National Park in Malaysian Sarawak borders Kayan Mentarang National Park in Indonesian Kalimantan.

New Paths for Anthropology

The links now between historical ecology, political ecology, and conservation biology are weak, and I hope that my work will fill in important gaps between these fields. Agroecological biodiversity as a result of generations of careful landscape planning by indigenous groups is just beginning to be recognized by conservation biologists as an important means of *in situ* conservation. Also, conservationists often have much influence in determining which people or groups of people continue to have access to the resources they have historically controlled. Currently, there is much debate over how the social sciences should be incorporated into conservation plans, and anthropology is vital to the success of land management plans. Conservation managers interested in preserving endangered landscapes need to be aware of the history of land use, the customary laws already in place to sustain the land, and other social and economic factors that anthropological ethnography alone can elucidate.

Anthropology of course is not just an academic discipline now; it has become the tool for many interest groups, including political lobbyists, environmental agencies, human rights advocates, and many others. But I also realize now that anthropology is more than just what anthropologists do, and that a working understanding of the theories that got anthropology to where it is today is essential to being able to contribute both to the discipline itself and to policy makers in an anthropological context. The process of globalization has merged more and more groups together, and in order to resolve cross-cultural conflicts over land use rights, intellectual property rights, et cetera, we as anthropologists need to understand the themes of power, domination, exploitation, and ongoing discrimination against (and within) marginalized groups.

Despite the forces of globalization, a variety of societal structures and land use patterns still exists; no amount of homogenization will make social and political organization identical between groups. And if we as ecological and

environmental anthropologists want to help facilitate the process of indigenous peoples becoming involved in global politics so that they can make their own decisions about their lifestyles, then we must be attuned to the patterns as they exist today, as well as the ways in which groups have responded to changes in the past. Many of us now stand at the forks of diverging paths in yellow woods, and no matter which one we choose, it will, ultimately, have made all the difference*.

* paraphrased from "The Road Not Taken," by U.S. poet Robert Frost, 1920

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