NEED AND GREED ON THE LAST FRONTIER


Tropical deforestation continues unabated after two decades of rhetoric by governments and international organizations alike and in the face of increasing popular recognition that it is contributing to human misery in the tropics and will contribute to a lower quality of life worldwide in the near future. This very nicely organized, fact-filled volume from Columbia University Press’s Biology and Resource Management in the Tropics and Methods and Cases in Conservation Science series examines tropical deforestation from numerous anthropological perspectives to identify causes and offer possible solutions. In each chapter, the authors conclude by drawing lessons from their case studies that can be useful for changing current policy. The editors are field anthropologists with extensive experience in the tropical regions most subject to current and future deforestation, so their choice of case studies provides pertinent examples that are representative of all of the tropics.

The book is divided into five sections. The first is a single chapter in which the editors provide a concise overview of tropical forests: their worth, the causes and consequences of their loss, and some ways to preserve them. The editors note that deforestation is driven by need and greed, both of which are the result of political and economic policies chosen by national governments and international development organizations, especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The two chapters in the second section discuss prehistoric deforestation. Elliot Abrams, Ann Corinne Preter, David Rue, and John Wingard show that the collapse of the Late Maya civilization in Honduras was caused in part by population pressures that led to mismanagement of the forests. Brien Meilleur shows that the occupation of Polynesia was accompanied by extensive deforestation and extinction of endemic plant and animal populations.

The third section contains two chapters that discuss historical deforestation in colonial India and Kenya. Both chapters illuminate the major lesson of the book, namely, that deforestation results from political and economic policies that deny the rights of native peoples to their land and its resources. Janis Alcorn and Augusta Molnar show that before the British arrived, the Indian subcontinent was a patchwork of small to medium kingdoms in which peasant communities had almost total control over their forests. As Britain consolidated control over the subcontinent, the forests were brought under state control and peasants were denied their traditional rights to the forests. The result was increasing deforestation, which in turn increased hunger and poverty by reducing access to previously “free” forest resources, such as food, construction materials, and firewood. The Indian forest service has begun work in partnership with peasants to restore some previously forested areas, with variable success; where such partnerships are not being tried, environmental deterioration and poverty continue.

In Kenya, as Alfonso Castro shows, the history of deforestation is somewhat different, but it also involved the loss of peasant control over their resources, especially land rights, resulting in deforestation and increased hunger and poverty. Early in this century, several districts developed farm-level forestry programs that succeeded in increasing forest cover and reducing hunger and poverty, but these programs were abandoned during the turmoil of independence and are only now being revived.

The fourth section contains five chapters about modern deforestation. These chapters examine this topic from a political-economic perspective, both national and international. Emilio Moran’s chapter on the Brazilian Amazon is especially disturbing because he predicts increasing violence against the disenfranchised human population and accelerating deforestation that can be avoided only if the current business-as-usual approach is changed. Eduardo Bedoya and Lorien Klein examine the effects of the US anti-drug program on humans and their environment in the Peruvian Amazon. Again, the report is disturbing because it clearly shows how the lack of political will in the United States to address the reasons for drug use can negatively affect people in other countries who are only responding to an economic opportunity where no other good opportunities exist. Susan Stinchon and Billie DeWalt’s chapter on Honduras is especially thought provoking because it shows that accepted development strategies—the export of agricultural commodities, as encouraged by the United States and international development organizations—are the root causes of increased deforestation and consequent hunger and poverty. The increased deforestation is expected because deforested land is necessary for farming; the increased hunger and poverty are not expected, but they are certainly the most common outcomes of the export-led “development” espoused by the United States and international development organizations.

James Vandemeer, the only non-anthropologist in the book, uses a political-economic perspective to compare deforestation in Nicaragua and Costa Rica during the 1980s and 1990s. This chapter is especially interesting because it contrasts two “treatments” over 15 years and the reversal of one treatment after 10 years. Treatment 1 took place in Nicaragua, where, in the 1980s, the Sandinistas and President Reagan were in power and at war. The Sandinistas returned control over
their forest resources to local peoples, and the conflict reduced outside development assistance. The result was relatively little deforestation and a reduction in hunger and poverty. Treatment 2 took place in Costa Rica, where, in the 1980s, deforestation accelerated with outside development assistance, although the peasants received some economic and social benefits as well. In the 1990s, the Sandinistas were out of power, and Nicaragua was at peace and receiving outside development assistance, resulting in loss of local peoples’ control over their forest resources, accelerating deforestation, and increasing hunger and poverty. In Costa Rica, deforestation has slowed because of a lack of forests outside of the few well-marketed national parks, and welfare among the lower classes is starting to deteriorate. To me, this chapter clinched the editors’ contention that a political-economic perspective provides important insights into the causes and consequences of deforestation.

In the final chapter of the fourth section, David Wilkie examines a modern logging concession in the Congo. Not surprisingly, few economic benefits trickle down to the indigenous population as their resource is being degraded. Logging has had a major negative social impact in many other places in the tropics as well but is widely recommended by the major international development agencies.

The fifth section, entitled “Contributing to Solutions,” nevertheless presents four more case studies of deforestation driven by political-economic policies. James Eder shows that even with traditional knowledge of sustainable agricultural practices, local peoples in the Philippines are not always able to practice them when they have been pushed into marginal environments.

Carolyn Cook’s chapter is especially interesting because it again contrasts two political-economic “treatments” on an originally homogeneous background: Papua New Guinea, where the government is trying to support local peoples’ land rights against pressure from international economic interests, and Irian Jaya, where the Indonesian government is denying local peoples’ land rights and assisting national economic interests in pillaging natural resources. Indonesia’s annexation of Irian Jaya, its policy of genocide of the original inhabitants, and its pillaging of the natural resources are well known and silently accepted by most of the international community, but the important role played by international economic interests is sobering. Equally disturbing is the role of international economic interests, both private and public, in undermining local peoples’ rights to their traditional lands in Papua New Guinea.

Robert Sussman, Glen Green, and Linda Sussman deal with Madagascar, where ineffective government policies have failed to offer opportunities for a rapidly expanding population, which is deforesting the island for food and fuel. The authors use satellite imagery to identify critical areas and anthropological methods to determine the precise reasons for deforestation in each area.

The final chapter deals with central Africa. Robert Bailey shows that conservationists and development planners have often given inadequate attention to local peoples, who have traditionally used forest resources for survival and who are attempting to defend their rights to continue doing so. The result of this inattention is often project failure. Local people must be a part of any solution to reduce deforestation in Central Africa and elsewhere.

This book should be read by all development planners, conservationists, politicians, economists, and scientists involved in development and conservation, especially those who still have faith in the currently accepted development model, which stresses top-down approaches. Because various chapters address accepted assumptions about politics and economics, the book is especially valuable as a stimulus to the kind of new thinking that will be necessary to change the world’s current disastrous course and reduce tropical deforestation and human misery around the world. The bottom line is that local peoples must have rights to their traditional lands and a say in how outside influences are allowed access to them. All of the authors in this book recognize that these rights are not a panacea but rather the cornerstone for a future in which development in tropical forests and elsewhere is sustainable. At the same time, the authors demonstrate the need to temper the greed of national and international economic interests by using both national policy and international agreements. The kinds of changes that are recommended in this volume can help to transform the rhetoric on slowing deforestation into policy options that might effect real change.