Book Reviews

Corson, Catherine A. (2016). *Corridors of Power: The Politics of Environmental Aid to Madagascar*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Reviewed by Merrill Baker-Médard
Middlebury College

Millions of dollars are spent globally on biodiversity conservation each year. Despite prolonged financial and institutional support, biodiversity decline continues at a rapid rate. Catherine Corson's *Corridors of Power: The Politics of Environmental Aid to Madagascar* helps explain the complex social, political, economic, and discursive drivers of conservation failure in one of the world's most treasured biodiversity hotspots: Madagascar.

Corridors of Power provides a deep dive into the history and inner workings of transnational environmental politics. It is an ideal read for graduate students and scholars interested in conservation governance, international aid, and the role of science in policy-making. While the book focuses specifically on Madagascar, it highlights power dynamics and processes endemic to most international conservation and development efforts. Corson digs into the dynamics of who is invited to the policy-making table, who benefits most from decisions made at the table, and who builds the table—that is, who frames the problem being addressed.

The title's double entendre draws attention to how the size and location of protected areas in key ecological corridors in Madagascar (forested areas with high concentrations of biodiversity) stem directly from high-level negotiations and decision-making occurring at international conferences and the headquarters of conservation organizations. By highlighting this connection, Corson argues that throughout Madagascar's history, foreign interests and ideas have shaped how resources have been used, as well as who benefits most from their use.

Corson brings insider status to this work, having held positions at the White House, State Department, and USAID. This perspective allows her to trace the formal and informal processes that shifted environmental management away from comprehensive integrated conservation and development to a more narrow focus on biodiversity research and the establishment of protected areas. This narrowing of the conservation agenda was enabled by the neoliberal push to reduce the role of the state, in combination with the participatory turn in international development that empowered nongovernmental, largely foreign-run, organizations to determine the goals and strategies of conservation in Madagascar.

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Corson asserts that the network of international conservation organizations, donors, philanthropists, celebrities, and private companies, something she calls the "conservation enterprise," has not only taken decision-making authority away from local resource users, but has also led to fewer funds making their way into the rural reaches of Madagascar. She illustrates how financial and technical expertise are concentrated at the highest levels, funding the creation of reports, brochures, maps, and meetings that take place primarily internationally or in Madagascar's capital city.

A significant portion of the book concentrates on the role of the United States in conservation efforts in Madagascar. USAID has been one of the largest financial supporters and intellectual architects of conservation efforts in Madagascar, something that Corson argues was enabled by the lobbying efforts of organizations in the United States to influence legislators who were more likely to fund environmental protection efforts overseas than within the United States, precisely because it wouldn't impact the constituents of congressional representatives. This dynamic illustrates another take-home message of the book: a fundamental injustice stems from the fact that the successes of conservation projects in Madagascar have been measured by a narrow set of biodiversity indicators established by distant funding organizations, instead of by those most intimately impacted by the projects. Biodiversity conservation has had consistent support from all US administrations since the 1980s; therefore, environmental organizations with much broader mandates learned to fit their missions into this more narrowly defined objective. This mandate inhibited organizations from taking on underlying structural issues pertaining to conservation governance or the deeper economic and social drivers contributing to biodiversity loss.

Corson specifically explores some of the more problematic components of the "Durban Vision," a commitment made by Madagascar's President Ravalomanana in 2003 to triple the area under protection in Madagascar by 2008. To do so, she draws on field research in two ecological corridors in eastern Madagascar. She shows that the hasty timeline undermined meaningful engagement with local resource users. Mayors were brought to large regional meetings where they were encouraged to accept the ecologically driven protected area boundaries, with little to no consideration for traditional users, sacred sites, or the potential socio-economic impacts of the new protected areas on local people.

One of the book's strengths is also one of its shortcomings. *Corridors of Power* is primarily an institutional ethnography; it traces the key players and negotiations at a level few authors currently cover concerning Madagascar. At the same time, little space is dedicated to showing how the key decisions made at the international and national levels play out on the ground from the perspective of local people. A small section in chapter 7 highlights more regional representatives, such as mayors, and local resource users. Given the book's assertion that local interests and needs were not adequately considered in the majority of conservation strategy decision-making, the book would have benefited

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from a few more examples grounded in interviews and opinions from individuals living in proposed or existing protected areas.

This minor shortcoming aside, Corson's critical and deeply historicized analysis of environmental policy in Madagascar affords readers unique insight into processes often shrouded in secrecy. Some of the more important financial and political decisions, as Corson points out, were negotiated behind closed doors or informally between strategically positioned actors. Corson's work is detailed, pulling from an impressive number of interviews and archival sources. As a result, this book will be the definitive source on Madagascar's conservation aid history for years to come.

Boer, Ben, Philip Hirsh, Fleur Johns, Ben Saul, and Natalia Scurrah. 2016. *The Mekong: A Socio-Legal Approach to River Basin Development*. New York: Routledge.

Reviewed by Joshua C. Gellers
University of North Florida

How is law deployed, understood, and (re)produced by actors operating in, around, and far afield from the Mekong river basin (MRB)? How does revealing the plurality of legal and governance structures at work in this area offer greater clarity regarding the sources of, and solutions to, transboundary water conflicts? In *The Mekong: A Socio-Legal Approach to River Basin Development*, Ben Boer and an interdisciplinary team of researchers at Australian universities respond to these queries in a brilliantly singular voice through an impressively comprehensive charting of regional riparian legal undercurrents.

Using a socio-legal lens, the book drills down to great depths to uncover the unsettled and complex nature of water governance in four of the states that make up the lower MRB—Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. These main cases join with case studies of interstate "dam suites" (p. 36) to showcase the cross-cutting applications of law and sources of legal influence at varying levels of governance. This ethnographic effort includes more than fifty in-depth interviews, with actors ranging from villagers to representatives from NGOs to high-level decision-makers in business and government. At its heart, *The Mekong* seeks to challenge the conventional wisdom that development along the river requires progressive adherence to hard law. As the authors amply demonstrate, the manifestations of and directions taken by law in the MRB are as varied and tortuous as the river itself.

The book begins with a thorough geographic overview of the Mekong and its riparian neighbors. Here also the authors introduce actors, institutions, and interests found along the river, characterized as elements in a metaphorical drama. The authors also describe an analytical framework that arrays law along the hard/soft and international/regional/national/subnational dimensions. They describe the book's purpose as not to empirically reveal law's shortcomings, but rather to challenge the assumptions that more law is needed to manage complex

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issues in the region and that law can produce consistent outcomes. An additional historical primer urges the reader to consider context when evaluating the trajectory taken by law, a strategy that helps explain why changes in the law "have had mixed and unpredictable results" (p. 85).

The latter section of the book constitutes the analytical proving ground for the socio-legal approach. In line with the authors' pluralist portrayal of the law, this part of the book focuses on technico-legal aspects of governance in the MRB—an intergovernmental institution (the Mekong River Commission), an environmental regulatory process (environmental assessment), and a democratic norm (transparency). The diversity of the arenas explored illustrates the ability of socio-legal analysis to span geographic scales and levels of abstraction. Each chapter in this section offers a compelling and extensive assessment of a particular socio-legal domain relevant to the Mekong that scholars can appreciate for its individual merits.

The Mekong closes with several summarized "contributions and displacements" (p. 188) emanating from the preceding analysis. The authors reiterate their earlier declarations: law in the MRB is complex, ever-present in social life, unreliable, and forged creatively and unexpectedly out of local experience and foreign influence.

Despite its great depth, the book suffers from a couple of acute shortcomings. First, it scarcely moves the ball forward with respect to theory. While the authors make passing mention of Michel Foucault's governmentality and pay brief homage to Marxism and several democratic theorists on the subject of transparency, the book lacks theoretical anchoring. As such, the effort appears more concerned with proving the novel application of an analytical lens than with enhancing knowledge about the causes and impacts of, and solutions to, transboundary water issues. Second, the interviews figure variably throughout the book, making it difficult to track the extent to which the conclusions reached reflect empirically derived insights from the actors deemed so integral to understanding the indeterminacy of law and politics in the MRB. It would have been useful if the authors had spent more time highlighting the experiences of those most vulnerable to the political and economic forces swirling about them.

The Mekong remains a stunning accomplishment that deftly zooms in and out of various levels of governance to provide a pluralist view not only of the law, but of the actors and institutions affecting or affected by riparian technico-legal decision-making. It opens the door to fresh practical and scholarly questions regarding the efficacy of hard versus soft law, how to account for the indeterminacy of law in resolving transboundary water issues, and what strategies civil society should adopt to overcome the power differentials embedded in legal and political systems. By illuminating the pitfalls of popular assumptions about law and development, the authors recover the agency of people previously deemed unwitting bystanders in a world of complex governance, while challenging the view that legal reform should proceed in linear fashion. As such,

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The Mekong offers a preview of the analytical possibilities that inhere in a socio-legal approach to water politics.

Howard, Philip H. 2016. *Concentration and Power in the Food System: Who Controls What We Eat?* New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Reviewed by Jennifer Clapp
University of Waterloo

How often do we pause to consider the social and environmental costs associated with bagged salad? Philip Howard's *Concentration and Power in the Food System* challenges us to think about the broader consequences of corporate control over the food we eat. His excellent and engaging book examines both how the global food system has come to be dominated by a small number of truly giant firms and the wider environmental and social implications of this trend.

Howard adopts a critical approach to analyzing the problem of corporate concentration in the food sector, focusing on how firms maximize not just profits but also power in the marketplace. In the food system, corporate concentration has reached considerable levels at all stages, from farm to plate. As Howard documents, just six firms control over 75 percent of the global seed and agrochemical market, and this number is set to drop to just four firms if the recently proposed agribusiness megamergers are given the green light by regulators. Only four firms control over 70 percent of the world's trade in grain. And in the retail sector, the top four firms control over half of the US grocery market, with just one firm—Walmart—capturing a whopping 33 percent of that market. Most economists consider sectors in which the top four firms control more than 40–50 percent of the market to be uncompetitive.

Howard's insightful analysis reveals multiple strategies used by large agribusiness firms to maximize their power. These strategies are employed in distinct ways in different nodes of the food supply chain. Food retail companies, for example, have actively engaged in campaigns to weaken antitrust legislation in the United States, which has allowed them to dominate huge swaths of the market. This dominant position has enabled them to further consolidate their power through practices such as demanding lower prices from their suppliers. Food-processing companies have worked to engineer demand for highly processed or packaged foods. Commodity-trading firms use their market power to manipulate prices in ways that enable them to gain financially. Large-scale farms are situated to receive the lion's share of government subsidies, enabling them to further expand. And the seed and chemical industry has pushed for more stringent intellectual property rights to protect their innovations and prevent other firms from entering the market.

The environmental and social consequences of these corporate strategies are significant. To return to bagged salad, firms such as Dole and Chiquita have

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taken what were previously unbranded greens and packaged them into a branded convenience item with a market worth over $4 billion per year. Beyond the obvious profit grab of branding lettuce, the product itself contains a huge amount of virtual water that is then transported far and wide through the grocery retail networks. The large-scale salad operations have also been implicated in instances of bacterial contamination that spread widely through these networks. Relying on prewashed and processed salad also has a broader "deskilling" effect in society, as even the simple task of making a salad "from scratch" is framed and marketed by firms as somehow being difficult and time-consuming.

In the input sector, corporate concentration has contributed to a narrowing of crop genetic diversity and a growing use of certain agrochemicals associated with genetically modified seeds produced by the same companies. The loss of biodiversity reduces the resilience of agricultural production systems, making them more vulnerable to shocks such as climate change. Commodity-trading firms profit from food aid programs that serve to undercut prices for local farmers in poor countries, while at the same time framing their role as "feeding the world" (or what Howard dubs "grainwashing"). Because of their capacity to speculate on commodity markets, they also profited handsomely during the 2008 food price crisis when food prices fluctuated sharply. Even the organics sector has been subject to the trend of increased concentration. Many organic food brands have been purchased by large food-processing companies who operate as "stealth owners" that continue to use the name brand of the firms that they have purchased.

What to do? Like many books on the food system, this book ends with a half hopeful chapter suggesting that small-scale alternative food movements might be able to tame the beast. While such alternatives are necessary to show that another food system is possible, the book's analysis itself does not leave a lot of room for optimism. Howard also suggests that the growing size of corporations may be their own undoing, as the public becomes more aware of the inequalities and impacts associated with their dominance. The book could have said more about the potential leverage points for broader policy change, such as more stringent regulations at the state and international levels to curb corporate concentration and its effects.

Howard gives us much to ponder regarding the problem of corporate control in the food system. In presenting his analysis, he supplements his arguments using visualizations that provide powerful ways to illustrate the trends he examines. His analysis is sophisticated, yet highly accessible—an approach that will appeal to scholars across different disciplines. The book is sure to become essential reading for students of the global environmental politics of food.

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