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Beyond the Sacred Forest: Complicating Conservation in Southeast Asia

MICHAEL R. DOVE, PERCY E. SAJISE and AMITY A. DOOLITTLE, eds.

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In recent years, numerous collections on natural resource conservation in Southeast Asia have hit the bookshelf. This latest addition is a joint effort by scholars from Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, New Haven, and the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture in Los Baños, the Philippines.

The edited volume is divided into three sections. Section I titled "The Boundary between Natural and Social Reproduction" comprises three chapters, in which the authors describe natural resource management as being entangled in historical trajectories, social dynamics and the attendant political and economic context. In chapter 1, the anthropologist Lye Tuck-Po analyzes the social hybridization of the Batek hunter-gatherer group living in the Taman Nagara National Park in Malaysia. She argues that the protected area status of the park has both provided a shelter for this ethnic group from pervasive external influences, allowing them to continue some of their traditional practices, and at the same time subjected them to official conservation narratives and regulations, thereby scrutinizing their "nomadic" lifestyle as potentially destructive to the environment. In chapter 2, the historian Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells looks at the evolution of colonial and postcolonial policies that enabled the emergence of the rubber estate economy in Peninsular Malaysia. She describes how "the plantation-biased government policy, originating in the colonial period, undermined the survival of environmentally sound smallholder practices" (p.88). While this phenomenon has been amply discussed by several scholars, her major argument is that the

colonial perception of smallholder Malay peasants as purely subsistence-oriented paddy cultivators that ignored their long-standing involvement in the market economy paved the way for the indiscriminate expansion of the plantation industry that continues to shape the landscape of Peninsular Malaysia. The anthropologist Michael R. Dove looks at smallholder rubber producers in Borneo in the third and final chapter of section I. His exciting essay explains why the Kantu' of West Kalimantan describe their economically successful and ecologically adapted rubber plantations as "dead land" (*tanah mati*) as opposed to the "living land" of their rice-based swidden agriculture. He argues convincingly that in the Kantu's worldview, the cyclical nature of the swiddens and the related complexity of social and ecological exchange are contrasted with the non-cyclical, fixed (i.e. "dead") character of the rubber economy.

Section II "Community Rights Discourses through Time" moves the volume's focus to questions of access to and control over natural resources. In chapter 4, the rural sociologist Upik Djalins explores the ambiguous role of the *adat* concept in the struggle of *damar* forest garden holders in Krui, Sumatra. She shows how the revival of the authority of the *adat* institution—invoked as a strategy to assert local resource claims against competing government interests—actually empowered traditional community elites, while alienating and marginalizing the common *damar* farmers who had fought hardest for their rights. Her essay provides a vivid account of the ambiguous and recursive nature of traditional, class-based institutions. In a similar vein, the social ecologist Amity A. Doolittle in chapter 5 explores the complex interplay between state law and customary law in a village in Sabah, Malaysia. She demonstrates how the colonial depiction of customary law as static and homogeneous has been perpetuated by present-day government policies and challenges the widely held assumption that members of a village community pursue similar land use strategies and thus have the same needs for tenurial arrangements. In chapter 6, Emily E. Harvell, another social ecologist, questions the rationale of clarifying resource tenure and determining boundaries of access to natural resources, drawing on a case study in the Danau Sentarum Wildlife Reserve in West Kalimantan. She holds that competing claims and resource contestations have often been interpreted as historical inaccuracies that need to be rectified in the process of territorial mapping. Instead, she calls for a "dispute management approach" (p.210) that emphasizes mediation and negotiation among various stakeholder groups. In chapter 7, the final essay of this section, the anthropologist Levita Duhaylungsod shows how the T'boli of Southern Mindanao in the Philippines make creative use of the politics of identity and indigeneity to ascertain their rights to ancestral lands. The price they pay for their political activism and struggle for territorial rights is a stronger engagement with various government agencies and other external actors and the partial transformation of their traditional resource management systems. All four chapters in this section provide evidence that local tenure regimes are embedded in myriad historical, socio-political, cultural and economic factors and that neither government conservation policies nor customary laws and cultural norms are monolithic or static, but rather ambiguous,

contested and in constant flux.

Section III “Reconstructing and Representing Indigenous Environmental Knowledge” comprises two chapters that reflect upon agrarian change processes in Indonesia. In chapter 8, the biologist Endah Sulistyawati presents a rule-based computer model that analyzes the evolution of the composite agricultural system of a Kantu’ community in West Kalimantan. This chapter is in stark contrast to other papers on two accounts: first, it adheres to a rigorous quantitative approach and second, it is the only contribution that explicitly discloses its specific research methods and the analytical process. Yet the findings fail to surprise the critical reader: population pressure affects farm households differentially—some households see their farm area reduced, while others accumulate land resources, leading to social and economic differentiation in the community. In chapter 9, the anthropologist Yunita T. Winarto examines the changes in the relationship between government agencies, farmers and the environment brought about by the promotion of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in villages on the north coast of West Java and in Central Lampung, Sumatra. She argues that the IPM programs popularized in the 1990s—which have gained recognition beyond the country’s borders—restored farmers’ creativity and dignity which had been lost in the Green Revolution era with its sole emphasis on modern varieties and reliance on agro-chemicals. However, the weakness of this otherwise rich and detailed essay on the history and significance of IPM in Indonesia is that Winarto misses out on recent trends in this field, where the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a certain IPM fatigue among both agricultural extension officers and farmers, coupled with new challenges of meeting food safety and certification standards under the rapidly rising importance of supermarkets and global food supply chains.

This lack of topicality is somewhat emblematic for the entire volume: most of the empirical fieldwork on which the essays are based date back to the 1990s and three of the chapters were already published as journal articles between 1998 and 2005. Thus, some of the latest and most challenging issues that are directly related to environmental conservation—such as the biofuel hype, the land grabbing phenomenon and emerging payment schemes for environmental services, to name but a few—do not play a prominent role in the volume. I also missed some linkages and comparisons with conservation issues in Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (the only apparent allusion to this region is the cover photo taken in the temple ruins of the former Thai capital of Ayutthaya by one of the contributors!). Notwithstanding these shortcomings, most chapters in this volume provide an empirically rich and theoretically grounded account of the complexity of national and local environmental politics at the interface of forest and agriculture in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, and will be welcomed by many scholars, students and decision-makers in the field of natural resource conservation.

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