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BOOK REVIEW
Extreme Conflict & Tropical Forests

Edited by De Jong, W., Donovan, D., Abe, K.

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The vast majority of the discourse focusing on conflict and resources revolves around commodity resources – that is, oil, gold, diamonds and other minerals that are extracted in particular locations around the world. Much less material exists on the linkages between particular ecosystems and violent conflict, and this work, which focuses specifically on tropical forests and civil war, is a notable addition to the field.

The book is divided into ten chapters, each dealing with the conceptual linkages between tropical forests and conflict, over a range of geographical contexts. After the introductory overview, there is a chapter on greed and grievance approaches to understanding tropical forests in war, then several chapters with a variety of case studies, interspersed with a couple of useful policy orientated chapters on conflict timber and peace parks. These chapters paint tropical forests as both a causal and contextual factor within conflict situations.

However, as with any academic field yet to reach maturity, there is a strong emphasis on the case study approach with a corresponding lack of conceptual and theoretical development. Indeed, seven of the ten chapters are explicitly case studies, while only one could reasonably qualify as giving a sense of a broader theoretical framework through which to understand the field. That this relatively meagre attempt at theorising is confined to the introductory chapter and borrows heavily from the wider resource conflict field without establishing new conceptual territory reflects the somewhat ungrounded nature of this field.

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A key theme of the book is that tropical forests do not cause conflict alone, but rather interact with other factors, such as governance issues, to incite, fund and hide militaries and armed groups. De Jong *et al.* identify four main linkages: *first*, as locations of concealment and illegal activities, *second*, as a source of direct conflict over the resources of this environment, *third,* as a source of resources for funding conflict actors and *fourth,* as a component of wider peacebuilding initiatives. In this vein, the book demonstrates that forests provide a source of shelter for refugees, combatants and illegal industries, fund despots like Charles Taylor of the Revolutionary United Front in Liberia, can be utilised as the locations of peace parks and, in some rare instances, cause direct conflict over control of the forest, such as Staver *et al.* make clear in the case of Nicaragua (pp. 57-74). These four strands provide a useful start in understanding forests and conflict.

The significant points of contestation in the field are also outlined in this book. The debate operates over two dimensions – incidence and duration. *First*, De Jong *et al*. observe that approximately fifty per cent of all conflicts in the twentieth century occurred in tropical forests: 'three-quarters of Asian forests, two-thirds of African, and one-third of Latin-American forests have been affected by violent conflict' (p. 1). However, opposing authors demonstrate that more civil wars have occurred in states without tropical forests than those with forests (pp. 37-56). *Second*, in terms of duration, the relationship is also highly contestable. DeRouen and Sobek argue that forest cover increases the duration of the conflict, while Buhaug and Lujala associate it with shorter conflicts.

Explanatory factors must therefore be sought elsewhere. According to Swatuk, we must conceptualise tropical forests as caught within 'confounding constructed realities' – that is, wider social, political and economic systems that make causation links problematic but still make the role of tropical forests paramount (p. 113).

In addition, forests can be seen as victims of conflict. Much of this debate is circular in nature – for instance, does forestry fuel conflict or does conflict increase logging? Linkages between combat and forest damage often take the form of indirect factors – Alvarez, for instance, exposes coca production as a key cause of forest clearances. In his case study of Columbia, it is the associated political economy of drug production that is the cause of the conflict, whereby the forest is merely a victim of wider ecosystem degradation induced by narcotic by-products, deforestation and anti-narcotic measures such as aerial spraying (p. 142). In addition, once the bullets have settled, governance issues in the post conflict environment are also a significant cause for concern amongst those looking for effective management (pp. 17-26). This is because forest resources are often the most readily available in the immediate aftermath of conflict, which, combined with their relative ease of extraction, make them ready targets for exploitation by local populations, often unsustainably.

The authors clearly want to make their work relevant to policy prescriptions - for instance those regarding the general improvement in the livelihoods of those who live in forests, and their increased participation in the political process. These prescriptions tend towards external intervention, reflective of the fact that most of the conflicts analysed are intrastate and in contexts with a considerable heritage of external intervention. Others reject

the idea that there are one-size-fits-all solutions and encourage caution in attempting to address what are often extremely complex issues. For example, Staver *et al*. recommend a pragmatic, inclusive case by case evaluation of forest 'frontier' zones, warning against catch all solutions imposed by western powers (pp. 57-74).

While the book is obviously a powerful introduction to the topic, the billion dollar question remains unanswered: do tropical forests incite violent conflict? The book often skirts around this challenge, sometimes confusing tropical forests as cause and tropical forests as background context. This is telling of a wider ambiguity around causation within the environmental conflict field. A more productive option would have been for a clearer conceptual separation between what is a 'causal' and what is a 'contextual' factor. This would have made the overall thrust of the work clearer. In addition, some important topics are neglected, including the use of tropical forests as carbon sinks, which is an important parallel development issue to that of conflict, especially in the context of peace parks.

To mimic the rallying cry of most articles and books on the environment-conflict link, 'more theoretical work must be done' if we are not to start barking up the wrong (proverbial) tree.

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