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Democracy in the Woods

As the many papers in this volume of *Conservation & Society* demonstrate, it is strangely difficult to combine social justice with environmental conservation. Strange, because so many conservationists and environmentalists are ardent in their support for social justice. Strange, because so many rural livelihoods depend upon well managed rural resources. And strange because, when viewed comparatively, the conflicts and contests that can arise in some contexts, can recede from view in some places, just as they explode in others. What is it that produces such different outcomes in the pursuit of such important goals?

In an ambitious, scholarly, and challenging book; Prakash Kashwan successfully tackles this question by comparing the evolution of forestry conservation and its outcomes across India, Mexico, and Tanzania. These countries matter because they have all embarked on significant episodes of forestry reform, seeking to decentralise control over forests from governments to forest dwellers. However rural groups in Mexico, from inauspicious beginnings early in the last century, now endure far more secure rights than in the other countries – despite the recent advances of the Forest Rights Act in India.

The scope of this volume is remarkable. The author's PhD in 2011 covered forestry in India; but since then Kashwan has embarked on a project that compares that country with two others, on two different continents. This is no mean feat, particularly given that he gets both the detail and the big picture right – insofar as I can tell. At times the brush strokes are a little broad – forest dwellers are not quite the same as the pastoralists who feature strongly in the Tanzanian aspects of this volume. But in the main, the result is a judicious and thoroughly researched analysis with even coverage of outcomes for forestry and social justice across all three countries. It is also an erudite study, littered with inspiration and readings from numerous fields.

The book unfolds across 8 chapters with extensive appendices. It entails detailed expositions of the origins of national forest regimes in all countries, the politics that have driven transformation and the implications for new policies to tackle climate change. The central argument of this work is that the outcomes for forests and people depend on the ways in which different state regimes have sought to extract surplus from the forests that they control. This should not be a surprising stance, but the value of this book is in the detail with which this story is told. Forest dwellers in Tanzania and

India have been too politically marginal to exert pressures on their governments for too long, hence their disadvantage now.

As Kashwan convincingly argues, states in Tanzania and India could have given much more rights, and much more security, over their forest resources than they have at present. Mexican peasants are in a much better position. Such politics are particularly important because, as he also shows, states are the most significant forest land owners globally, controlling 85% of forest lands globally, and most especially the tropical forests seen as so important for biodiversity and carbon offsetting. Over 97% of forests in African and 90% in Asia are state owned (page 214).

If things have been fraught in the decades leading up to this work then that is nothing on what is about to come. Current visions for forests are quite extraordinary in the scope and ambition. Plans following the Paris Accord allow for carbon emissions higher than the 800 billion tonnes, agreed upon because of plans to remove hundreds of billions of tonnes from the atmosphere, using Biomass Energy Carbon Capture and Storage schemes (BECCS)¹. This entails harvesting trees and biofuels, shipping them to power plants, burning them to fuel electricity generation, capturing the carbon emitted and pumping that down to underground reservoirs.² There are many sceptics who query the wisdom of this plan. Harvesting, transporting, and burning all that biomass becomes a rather ambitious logistical exercise for forests and power generators alike, let alone the challenges of getting the carbon back into the ground.

But greater still, I would argue, are the challenges of managing these carbon sinks in a manner which is socially just, equitable, and in ways which promote prosperity for the forests' current and future human residents. It is possible to imagine mass plantations and conveyor belts of once living tissues being conveyed to the maw of hungry power stations. It is possible to imagine that the dramatic inefficiencies of carbon capture can be overcome. But it is difficult to envisage these forests being pleasant or prosperous places for the communities who now inhabit them, and who will want to still. The BECCS plans seem to make all the mistakes of countless forest development planners of treating forests as barely animate resources that can be mined, reproduced, marshalled, disappeared, or gazetted according to the will, and profit needs, of administrators. Their social contexts, meaning, and vitality all vanish.

And this is why Kashwan's work is so important. Because he shows that just outcomes are possible, that injustice is not inevitable; but the product of particular

social, economic, and historical configurations that can be challenged. It is a significant contribution to a growing corpus of important work from this author that explores the relationship between conservation, marginality, and politics.³ But his findings in this book also mean that the socially just outcomes are contingent and vulnerable too. Democracy in the woods, if it is to grow and flourish will be a never-ending fight.

NOTES

1. <http://kevinanderson.info/blog/the-hidden-agenda-how-veiled-techno-utopias-shore-up-the-paris-agreement/>.
2. Fajardy, M. and Dowell, N.M. 2017. 'Can BECCS deliver sustainable and resource efficient negative emissions?' *Energy and Environmental Science* 10: 1389-1426.
3. For example in a recent paper in *Ecological Economics* (2017 131: 139-151) Kashwan shows that protected areas are greater in countries with high levels of democracy and low inequality, and in countries with higher levels of inequality and low levels of democracy. Conservation will be a popular endeavour if the fortunes and misfortunes are well shared, but can be imposed otherwise.

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