

*Forests are gold: Trees, people, and environmental rule in Vietnam*

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Pamela McElwee's *Forests are gold* develops the argument that Vietnam's forest policies since the time of French colonisation are an evolving example of 'environmental rule'. According to McElwee, environmental rule is a situation where 'states, organisations and individuals use environmental explanations as justification for what is really a concern with social planning' (p. 5). This in turn produces environmental interventions that are actually designed to achieve social and political goals. Five central chapters explore why and how environmental rule is deployed. Through this exploration, the book shows that forest policy is ultimately 'complicated by ideas, identities, and physical properties of the environment that combine to result in formations that cannot be clearly identified as either exclusively social or natural' (p. 13).

The Introduction sets out the book's theoretical framework, which draws on Foucault's governmentality, and the concepts of translation and co-production from Science and Technology Studies (STS). Within this framing, McElwee sets out several analytical themes that are taken up in subsequent chapters. She studies how forests and the drivers of environmental change have been problematised during different historical periods in Vietnam. She examines how processes of knowledge production underpin the design of state interventions. Implementation processes are studied in terms of the enrolment of disparate actors, and the subjectification of upland ethnic minorities in order to minimise resistance.

Chapter 1 documents French efforts to classify, map and manage the forests of Indochina and upland ethnic minorities. It discusses the emergence of narratives that framed swidden cultivation as environmentally destructive, and how Indochina's highly diverse and slow-growing forests challenged French forest exploitation and management. Chapter 2 shifts to post-independence socialist Vietnam, where an 'industrial' model of forest exploitation called for the construction of 'socialist subjects' in upland forests. This was achieved through state-facilitated migration by lowland Kinh during the 1960s and '70s, to work on large-scale forest plantations. At the same time, indigenous minorities were resettled and sedentarised, echoing the 'environmental destroyers' narrative of the French. These two chapters clearly illustrate the networked nature of knowledge construction, and the nexus between forest policy and the subjectification of upland ethnic minorities.

Chapters 3 to 5 deal with forest interventions that have an explicit conservation focus. Chapter 3 examines, in the post-war renovation (*đổi mới*) era, the instrumental role of remote sensing technologies in creating a narrative of upland forest loss, along with new modes of intervention to address this issue. Chapter 4 specifically explores state-initiated reforestation, while chapter 5 considers recent market-based — but state facilitated — modes of conservation. McElwee casts these two types of schemes

(reforestation and payments for environmental services) as 'boundary objects', in their capacity to enrol many different types of actors, from donors to conservation NGOs.

The book's conceptual framing is arguably one of its most useful contributions. As a long-time enthusiast for actor-network theory, I found McElwee's approach a valuable exemplar of how STS's attention to the interactions between social and material realms can strengthen policy studies and political ecology. With this approach, McElwee shows that forest governance is highly contingent, and reflects a mutually constitutive relationship between nature and society. Her networked analysis illuminates the relational dimensions of power, which, she states, is 'about control of ideas as much as it is about control of material goods, whether land or people' (p. 221). The book also makes an original and valuable contribution to knowledge on the history of forestry in Vietnam and Indochina, drawing on McElwee's many years of ethnographic and archival research, as well as her judicious use of secondary research, maps and images.

The book raises two questions that could usefully be studied further. In asking why states might cast social planning in environmental terms, McElwee suggests that environmental justifications may be less controversial than bald attempts at social engineering. Access to international 'green' finance has also provided an important motivation in recent decades. Less explored is the role of internal state processes and frictions. For example, struggles between agencies responsible for forests and those dealing with economic planning or land administration are well documented in many post-colonial bureaucracies. Have these provided a motivation for issues to be problematised and solved in 'environmental' ways, in order to elevate less powerful agencies? Intra-state dynamics of this kind could deepen our understanding of why environmental rule might develop. A second question relates to the broader relevance of environmental rule. The book advances this concept through the case of forestry, which intersects Vietnam's upland territories and ethnic minority populations that have proven significance for statecraft (e.g. Jennifer Sowerwine, 'The politics of highland landscapes in Vietnamese statecraft: (Re)framing the dominant environmental imaginary', in *Upland transformations in Vietnam*, ed. Thomas Sikor et al. [NUS Press, 2011], pp. 51–74). How would the concept translate to contemporary issues such as industrial pollution? It would be helpful to explore how the interplay of different actors and sociopolitical and environmental agendas in such domains can shape the emergence and/or trajectory of environmental rule.

In short, *Forests of gold* is an accessible book that provides new insights on the networked and co-produced nature of forest governance. It makes an important contribution to the history of Vietnamese forestry. The book will therefore be of interest to those working in the fields of human geography, political ecology and forest governance, as well as scholars of Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

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