

# Tropical Forest Management

The sustainability of tropical forest management should improve with democratization.

Discuss the pros and cons of this statement, say whether you agree with it, and support your argument with both theoretical reasons and empirical evidence from South East Asia.

Streams clogged with silt, hillsides reduced to a landscape of blackened stumps, visible life absent save a few new shoots starting the reclamation of the land - this is deforestation. From Brunei to the UK, regardless of government type and economic status, the harvesting of the natural environment for economic gain is a major activity for many nations. Deforestation has been happening for thousands of years and only now are human societies beginning to recognize the impacts of their actions and take steps to mediate the effects.

Sustainability is a concept central to the changing perception of how humans view their impact on the world. With the popularization of environmental issues that began in the 1960s with Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, people began to examine the true effects of humans on the planet. In 1992 at the Nations Conference on Environment and Development the world's nations adopted Agenda 21 which is a programme designed to deal with environmental issues while maintaining economic and social development. Sustainability is recognized as a goal for human development though creating a sustainable world has proved difficult.

The majority of deforestation occurs in tropical areas where the potential damage to biodiversity and the global biosphere is the greatest. The tropical forests of the world are home to many unique species of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic to their area. The removal of their habitat is cataclysmic and in many cases leads to outright extinction. Humans value these species for their intrinsic worth but also as valuable sources of medicines, new chemical compounds and other commercial uses. The loss of a species means loss of any potential gain humans may have been able to derive from its existence.

The cause of the deforestation is not singular but complex and is driven by many proximate and underlying causes (Geist & Lambin, 2001). A major force for deforestation is land conversion to agriculture where forests are removed to make way for crop land and grazing fields for cattle. Commercial logging also plays a major role in deforestation. Links are also often drawn between poverty and deforestation as impoverished people of course place their own needs above the preservation of the environment. Other underlying causes include population pressures, education level and the range of economic alternatives to deforestation available.

In South East Asia the annual rate of deforestation is the highest in the world with more than 1.9 million hectares, constituting 1.6% of the forested area, being removed each year (Pearce & Barbier, 2000). The area typically identified as SE Asia (Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) contains a variety of government systems including communist, constitutional sultanate, constitutional monarchies, military junta and democracies (Central Intelligence Agency, 2005). To attribute the high rate of deforestation to a certain style of government is wrong and subordinates the underlying complexities of the true forces driving deforestation.

To answer the question of whether the sustainability of tropical forest management would improve with democratization one must examine whether democracy actually does lead to sustainability of forest management and whether governmental systems do not. An examination of tropical deforestation in South and Latin America reveals that tropical forests in this area of the world are being removed at a scale dwarfing the hectareage being removed in of SE Asia (Pearce & Barbier, 2000). These nations are all democratic and the deforestation occurring in these countries is massive. It seems that democracy does not bring sustainability of forest management though no other political system seems to either.

An examination of a nations which have tropical forests and yet low rates of deforestation results in the notion that the economic factors are more important than the political systems when it comes to tropical forest management. Cuba and Costa Rica both have world renowned conservation policies and have been successful in finding a compromise between socio-economic development and natural resource conservation. While Costa Rica is Latin America's oldest democracy and is famously peaceful, Cuba is a communist dictatorship established in the 1950s and has been involved in conflict for its entire existence. Neither nation is a world leader in GDP nor standards of living yet both nations have tropical forests preserved and have sustainability as a major pillar of their government policies.

The key to conservation in these two nations seems to be economics. Tourism is the major industry in both nations and ecotourism is a major facet of this. Economic incentives, not governance structures, seem to be a significant factor in tropical forest conservation and sustainable management styles. Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam all count tourism as a major industry and governments in these nations are all taking steps to preserve the environment and cultivate ecotourism.

Though democracy may not lead to forest sustainability it may be the best political vehicle for achieving this objective. Democracy is flexible and can respond to the will of the people while authoritarian regimes are inflexible and will act regardless of public will. Cuba is an exceptional nation as it is communist yet very sustainable-oriented as most other communist nations show little regard to environmental issues. While Western Europe and North America were recognizing environmental damage as an important issue in the 1970s and 1980s, the USSR continued to exploit the environment to the

point of ruin. Democracy is not without flaws however and if the people of the society do not recognize environmental issues as important then the government is not likely to respond to the threats identified by experts.

The evaluation of democracy as a vehicle for achieving sustainable forestry practices raises some questions about the role of government in protecting the citizens versus being directed by the will of the citizens. Would a democracy be justified in over-riding the wills of the people to respond to a threat not immediately apparent to the majority of voters? Environmental issues are long term affairs and the benefits often not readily apparent so people are often unwilling to sacrifice short term socio-economic gains for longer term seemingly intangible benefits for their descendants. Can a democratic government institute economic reforms without a popular mandate? If such a thing was to happen then the government would quickly be ushered out of office and a government that responded to the wills of the citizens would be elected. It seems that without popular support from citizens the proverbial hands of the government to act on environmental issues such as sustainability are highly restricted.

A monarch, military junta or communist nation's government faces no such dilemma and can act without fear of reproachment from the populous. However unless the authoritarian leaders are sustainability-oriented or recognize the seriousness of the environmental crisis then there is little hope for policy change. In this facet Cuba as a green communist country serves as an example of the possibilities but few authoritarian states act on environmental issues unless forced by economic reality. The centralized power structure is superior to the decentralized one in terms of pushing through socio-economic reforms necessary to achieve sustainability. However the fatal fault lies in the fact that in such systems it is entirely up to the minority who rule to choose to follow such a path.

If we are to assume that democracy is the best political system for implementing policies which contribute to the environmental sustainability of the state, the question then becomes whether democracy can actually provide the necessary framework needed to move toward sustainability. Democratic societies have shown no inherent quality that results in environmental issues being addressed but democratic nations do implement policies to address environmental issues. The key seems to lie in the will of the people. By raising environmental awareness of the people, the government should then respond to public pressure in favour of policy reform and legislate in favour of environmentally sustainable policies.

However, as discussed previously, benefits from responding to environmental crises are usually not monetary in nature. Democracies are built on the notion of individualism and self-interest with the people supporting the government which supports their long-term interest. If the majority of the population do not see a gain to be made from the economic sacrifices they will have to make to fund environmental policies then they are unlikely to support a government that gives them little return. Since the government itself is amoral, it is up to the morality of the people to choose to sacrifice in favour of

gains for descendants. In today's society one seems democratic societies such as the UK and USA that do have environmentally educated individuals and do make moves to become more sustainable yet still have much work to do before the environmental crisis is mitigated. The global economy is fuelled by consumption, for which goods are provided from natural resources, and it is a moral choice to reduce consumption and therefore reduce environmental damage.

In Pearce and Barbier's (2000) book *Blueprint for a Sustainable Economy* the notion of market-based instruments in environmental policy is discussed favourably. These type of incentives would include taxes paid for social costs to environmental damage and subsidies to assist change to environmental standards as well as tradeable permits and compensatory incentives to facilitate technology transfer. A reflection of this theory is seen in the Kyoto Protocol's carbon trading scheme and the Global Environmental Fund. While these and other schemes and agreements help facilitate change, the destruction of the biosphere continues.

Deforestation in the Philippines reached such a level that a total ban on logging was declared in 2004 after a flooding disaster which killed 100 people. The Philippines was a major exporter of wood throughout the 1960s and 1970s but now due to the ban and restrictions on forest activity the Philippines are now a net importer of wood (Guiang, 2001). Deforestation continues today as illegal loggers still operate as the government lacks the resources to enforce the ban. The recognition of the need for regulating the timber industry came about after a return to democratization from military rule. The previous regime allowed widespread logging and gave permits based on patronage, ignoring sustainability issues (Guiang, 2001). Thailand and Vietnam have also imposed bans on logging natural forests. Neither nation is a democracy.

Though the majority of nations in SE Asia lack comprehensive and reputable forest inventories, almost all developed strategic forest management plans in the 1990s. Key aspects of all the plans are sustainability and management practices based on conservation and responsible exploitation (Brown & Durst, 2003). However the 2003 FAO report on the conditions of forestry in Asia note:

The glaring deficiency is that the existing laws do not address all the main issues. Thus the legislation does not adequately support the policy. As legislation is the most important tool in translating policy statements into action, if proper laws are not implemented or enacted, it is unlikely that the policy objectives can ever be achieved.

Brown & Durst, 2003

This statement serves to qualify that while the governments of Asia, democratic or otherwise, may be attempting to assuage the effects of deforestation they still have a long way to go. This dualism is not restricted to SE Asia, it is common worldwide in every continent and in all types of government. Enforcement costs money and environmental laws do not typically result in an immediate economic advantage. A

democratic government is able to put in place incentive schemes to assist the populous and other nations move toward sustainability but cannot do so without support of the voters.

Democratization does not lead to sustainable practices in forestry or any other arena. The current alternatives to democracy may allow a move to sustainable developments but it is completely dependent on the person or persons in power. Improvement in environmental practice seems to be only possible through the will and moral sensibilities of people. Education is vital to make this objective possible and even then the trade-off of socio-economic benefits for environmental ones must become more even for individual citizens to rationalize such a change. Whether this will ever happen or whether democracy based on self-interest can ever achieve the reforms necessary to become sustainable is unclear. It seems that democracy may not be an ideal method for sustainability but it is the best available.

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