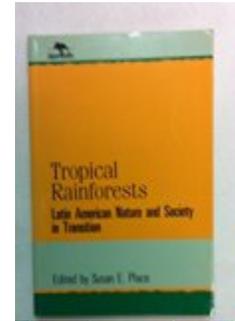


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan E. Place, ed. *Tropical Rainforests: Latin American Nature and Society in Transition*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1993. xxi + 229 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-842-02423-9 \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2427-3.

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The gradual destruction of tropical rainforests is one of the most significant events in Latin American history. Place introduces the book in the context of two major events in 1992 that focused attention on this ecological crisis: the quincentennial of Columbus's voyage and the Earth Summit in Rio. Discussions of the rainforest are complicated because the rainforest has come to mean many things for many people. *Tropical Rainforests* is a collection of thirty essays on the rainforests taken from travel narratives, policy papers, scientific articles, anthropological studies, and a wide variety of other sources. For Place, the Amazon represents "a microcosm of the unresolved economic, political, social, and environmental problems that plague Latin America as a whole." (xxi) These problems are explored in four thematic sections. Place begins each section, and each individual essay, with a brief introduction that sets the essays in historical and intellectual context.

The essays in Part I describe changing perceptions of the rainforest and the people who live there. The opening essays present literary views of the forest, contrasting William Henry Hudson's romantic evocation of the lush tropical jungle in *Green Mansions* with a darker and more foreboding portrait in Jose Eustasio Rivera's *Vortex*. The remaining three essays describe how natural scientists and anthropologists view the rainforest. The nineteenth-century naturalist Henry Walter Bates gives a dry but surprisingly informative enumeration of the plants and animals he encountered on a trip near current-day Belem, in Brazil. In an excerpt from a study published in 1957, the anthropologists Betty Meggers and Clifford Evans describe their controversial theory about environmental constraints on the growth of population in the Amazonian basin. In a more recent essay, the anthro-

pologist Katherine Milton describes the richness of tribal life and knowledge in the rainforest. The anthropological accounts, in particular, show how much "a society's perception of the tropical rainforest underlies and motivates its particular way of interacting with it."(xii)

Part II gives an overview of the prevailing explanations for deforestation. It is a complex problem, but as Place points out, most observers emphasize one aspect of the problem.(31). In an excerpt from *Where Have All the Birds Gone?*, the ornithologist John Terborgh argues that population pressure is the main cause of deforestation. In contrast, James J. Parson's article emphasizes the conversion of forest to pasture to fuel the export beef boom. The Brazilian environmentalist Jose A. Lutzenberger criticizes the Brazilian government's technocratic conceptualization of development, in which the state has allied itself with large corporations to promote gigantic, environmentally destructive projects. In contrast, the Brazilian diplomat Tadeu Valadares speaks hopefully of environmental benefits of Brazil's Nossa Natureza program "for incorporating the Amazon into the national economy without destroying the region's ecosystems."(89) Other essays in the section focus on the role of transnational oil companies, militarization and industrialization. Joshua Kerliner's article on deforestation in Central America sees the whole environmental crisis as a symptom, not a cause, of "five hundred years of domination and exploitation by foreign powers." In his argument, the agro-export development model has led to unequal land tenure and environmental destruction.(71-73)

The first step in preventing the destruction of the rainforests is to recognize their value. Part III, "Why save the rainforest?" explores the rationales for preserving

the forest. The reasons for saving the rainforest generally either ecological, economic, cultural, or ethical. Several essays discuss the importance of the rain forest's real or potential wealth, measured in genetic diversity, potential new foods, sweeteners, natural pesticides, and drugs. The indigenous peoples who inhabit the forest have a vast reserve of knowledge about how to use this botanical and animal wealth productively. Darrell Posey's article describes how the Mebengokre Indians "manage forest reserves in a complex and sustainable way based on their extensive knowledge of the local flora and fauna." (132) But knowledge, genetic diversity, and potential wealth have seldom been taken into account in economic calculations about the forest. David R. Francis proposes a new way of thinking about the the environmental consequences of economic activity, which many economists dismiss as mere 'externalities.' (108) In the end, argues Nigel J. H. Smith, countries such as Brazil have used rainforest colonization as an alternative for agricultural reform in long-settled regions, but it is becoming increasingly clear that these policies are not working and that universal agricultural reform is necessary.

Part IV explores a variety of plans for developing Latin America's tropical rainforests. Place is primarily interested in sustainable development, particularly "economic development based on sustained-yield use of renewable resources and an equitable social system in which everyone receives some of the wealth created by economic development." (151) The breadth and diversity of solutions proposed under the category of "sustainable development" are truly impressive. The geographic scope of the essays is at its widest in this part: the essays jump from resin tapping in the Honduras, to ecologically sound methods of forest clearing in Peru, to the development of the Costa Rican rain forest by U.S. drug firms, to ecotourism in the Amazon. The activist Chico Mendes, in an excerpt from his autobiography, proposes the establishment of "extractive reserves" in the Amazon, which would use renewable resources on a sustainable basis. He describes the organization of the CNS (National Council of Rubber Tappers) as the beginnings of an organized resistance to environmental destruction in the Amazon. (154-157) Denise Stanley challenges the idea of the "tragedy of the commons" in her study of resin tappers in the Honduras, where she suggests that the resin tappers worked hard to develop and promote growth in common lands. (164) Not all of the solutions have been successful. Rita Mahony questions the value the debt-for-nature swaps that were popular in the 1980s, which she argues have two essential problems: first, that they

make only a small impact on the total debt, and second, it is impossible to provide protection for the parks thus created, which become "paper parks" still subject to environmental degradation. (185ff) Ty Harrington's contribution describes the dangerous effects that agencies and tourists promoting "ecotourism" can have on the environments that they seek to preserve and enjoy. (213ff) The solutions to deforestation are just as complicated as the problem itself.

Collectively, the articles emphasize the destruction that has taken place over the last several decades. The trends of deforestation, as Place recognizes, have taken place over a much longer period of time. The stories that this collection of essays tells could have been strengthened by some more attention to historical writing on the environment in Latin America. Manuel Moreno Fraginals' chapter on "the Death of the Forest" in *The Sugar Mill* is an eloquent account of deforestation in Cuba during the early nineteenth century. Warren Dean's article "The Green Wave of Coffee" and Stanley Stein's *Vassouras* describe the ecological devastation caused by the coffee industry in nineteenth-century Brazil. Two books that have come out since *Tropical Rainforests* emphasize the importance and usefulness of long-term historical analyses for understanding environmental problems: Dean's *With Broadax and Firebrand*, and Elinor Melville's *A Plague of Sheep*. *Tropical Rainforests* is strong on contemporary issues, but weaker in its historical perspective. This weakness highlights the need for much more historical work to be done on the environmental history of Latin America.

The essays in this collection emphasize deforestation in the Amazon basin. This region is centrally important, but it would have been interesting to see a more systematic comparison with patterns of deforestation in other parts of the neotropics. The sugar industry in the Antilles, the banana industry in Central America, and the coffee industry in Central America, upper South America, and Brazil all caused massive deforestation, yet the ecological consequences of the deforestation differ from the deforestation characteristic of the Amazon region. The almost total destruction of rainforests on several Caribbean islands in the eighteenth century and on Haiti in this century have important historical lessons to offer people who are interested in deforestation in Amazonia today. As Richard Grove has pointed out in *Green Imperialism*, concern for environmental and conservation issues have a long history.

Given that this book is about Latin America, there

are remarkably few unmediated Latin American voices in it. Most of the essays describe what North Americans and Europeans have found in their studies of the rainforest and the people who live there. Only four of the articles were written by Latin Americans: Rivera's excerpt from *The Vortex*, Jose Lutzenberger's exploration of the destruction of the rainforest, the technocratic view of deforestation described by Tadeu Valadares, and Chico Mendes's account of extractive reserves and labor unions. Perhaps the articles were selected on the basis of what was readily available in English or in translation. The absence of Latin American voices is most obvious in Parts 1 and 2, which describe perceptions of the rainforest and seek to explain why deforestation take place. Biologists and environmental historians have written extensively about the importance and power of myths about the wilderness in shaping how people interact with nature. (See the Cronon and the Gomez-Pompa and Kaus articles, cited below). How then, did past Latin American politicians, technocrats, writers, farmers, and scientists construct nature? They were the people who most actively shaped the construction of the myths about nature and implemented the policies that transformed it, so their voices are central to the understanding of the problems of today.

The book is aimed at providing an introduction to contemporary issues in the rainforest, and does so very well. Many of the articles in the volume are included complete with their bibliographies and footnotes, which makes it easy for interested readers to pursue their own research. A short but comprehensive annotated bibliography, and a list of suggested films, make this a useful source for courses on the history of tropical rainforests. *Tropical Rainforests* gives a concise yet nuanced introduction to a complicated issue.

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