Tree planting and/or caretaking as a means of improving our carbon capture and fostering biodiversity is a multifaceted and politicized topic, on a global scale. However, it is widely agreed that simply planting more trees is not the answer to climate change; this planting must be undertaken alongside the significant conservation of preexisting trees and diverse old-growth forests. To confront the climate crisis, as The Woodland Trust states, the “bottom line is, we need more trees and we need to protect the ones we already have.”[1] Through a variety of case studies, Thomas K. Rudel's *Reforesting the Earth: The Human Drivers of Forest Conservation, Restoration, and Expansion* explores examples of how the successful protection, reparation, and development of tree cover offer a natural climate solution, a solution that might “play a significant, worldwide role in extracting humans from the predicaments created by climate change” (p. 4). While being aware of geographical and climatological differences and the “plasticity in the conditions of forests” all over the world, through an ecological and sociological lens, Rudel argues for a global, collaborative, and “corporatist” approach rather than a “top-down” attitude toward planting and protecting tree spaces (p. 3).

In chapter 1, “Forests,” the author outlines recent “top-down” approaches to natural climate solutions and forest restoration and, from this, introduces the rationale and plan for the book. Chapter 2, “Theory,” is the crux of Rudel’s argument in *Reforesting the Earth*. In contextualizing this study, Rudel charts how political and economic change in the nineteenth century, connected with the growth of the human population after World War II, diminished forests and tree cover across the globe. Using Karl Polanyi’s terminology (*The Great Transformation* [1944]), Rudel remarks on how this “great transformation” in western Europe affected patterns of forestation and deforestation in the Global South, in particular (p. 14).
In response to the growing impact of markets on the environment, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries then saw a rise in environmental campaigns, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and state activism. Building on this context, and in discourse with A. S. Mather’s 1992 conceptualization of a “forest transition,” Rudel makes the case that it is “social corporatism [that] provides an antidote to the top-down approaches to forest restoration” across the world (p. 28).[2] The argument proposes that states in the Global North and South, intermediary groups, NGOs, donors, activists, and local and indigenous stakeholders should connect, mediate, and collaborate on reforestation and recovery for more substantial change in the Global South, especially as forests “in humid settings exhibit a dense, luxuriant growth” and “sequester substantially more carbon” (p. 12). Alongside ideas about protecting and restoring forests, and in confluence with corporatist-like processes—including United Nations-endorsed REDD+ payment initiatives and eco-certification schemes, which are recognized across the book—Rudel proposes that it is a collaborative ecosystem of global contributors that might work to successfully reforest and recuperate the world’s tree cover and ability to capture carbon.

From this historiographical and conceptual underpinning in the second chapter, most of the book then comprises several case studies that examine past, present, and ongoing examples of approaches to conserving, restoring, and expanding tree coverage. Chapter 3 explores the loss and protection of tropical rainforests in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia. Through a focus on conservation in these examples, Rudel presents five approaches that should “work in combination” to avoid further loss of primary forests (p. 65). This includes the further creation of national parks, reserves, and community forests; the author also calls for leaders around the world to play a meaningful role in deferring deforestation and for wealthier states to pay for environmental services in the Global South. Building on from conservation, in chapter 4, Rudel considers the spread of secondary forests—“trees that regrow spontaneously on former agricultural land”—as a preferred form of restoration (p. 218). Through four case studies, and with an awareness of trends that foster the spread of secondary forests—including “land abandonment” as a result of urbanization and the degradation of such spaces through intensive agriculture—the author makes the case for allowing new secondary forests to develop and become old-growth forests over time (p. 96). While noting that planting new forests is not the most productive mode of retaining carbon, in chapter 5, Rudel provides several examples wherein the expansion of infrequently harvested forest plantations can constitute natural climate solutions in “a highly defined set of circumstances” (p. 97). Chapters 6 and 7 consider the development of “agroforests,” including spontaneous and cultivated “silvopastures” in Brazil and Africa, and the varying successes of integrating crops (including rubber, cocoa, and coffee) that can sequester carbon and provide livelihoods. Rudel here emphasizes the importance of eco-certification as a process that is better for the environment and landowners.

Chapter 8 draws Rudel’s thoughts together in a qualitative and summative review of the case study chapters and identifies four strands that run through the argument for successful conservation, restoration, and expansion of tree cover: the review of “political processes,” the preservation of “old growth or growing on degraded land,” the acknowledgment of how “restored forests have important human uses,” and the understanding that “expanded or restored forests” require some intervention or “sustainable agricultural intensification” (p. 197). The final chapter of the book is a forward-looking one, wherein the author argues that a “global forest transition” envisioned across the previous chapters might only occur when sociopolitical changes are advocated for and enabled in a corporatist-like manner. Though Rudel argues that there are already changes happening at a so-
cietal level (e.g., reduction of beef in diets), there needs to be further connections and collaborations fostered at local, community, national, and global levels to protect, restore, and conserve trees and forests as a significant natural climate solution.

Across the book, Rudel's argument follows a clear structure, which works through examples of forest conservation, restoration, and expansion in turn and articulates the nuances in protecting and developing tree cover in a coherent and accessible way. This is further supported by the case study method, which supports the book's evidence of a "corporatist" approach. As the author notes in the preface, the original contribution of this book is that it brings together and builds on a vast range of subject matter and research on land-change science and forest transition theory. In particular, the author seems to take up Mather's suggestion that perhaps "the prospects for forest-area transition at the world scale are not wholly gloomy"; indeed, with this book, Rudel argues that they are possible (p. 375). However, Rudel is not idealistic in argument but is sensitive to what this natural climate solution might look like because of and responding to various climates, geographies, states, and modes of governance. Moreover, the book is well presented, with a useful glossary of key terms for those outside the book's main fields and an extensive bibliography.

However, as an academic from the environmental humanities, I think that the book's "corporatist" approach could be realized for a broader audience with greater acknowledgment of how these ideas are to be communicated (beyond activism) via other cultural means and modes to the varied and global audience of this argument. As John Miller suggests in his hopeful book, The Heart of the Forest, thinking about personal and cultural associations around trees "is not to sideline science, economics and politics ... but rather to complement them by providing a deeper sense of the contours, stakes and urgency of the straits we find ourselves in."[3] While, admittedly, this is not something that Rudel's book needs to address—a book can only consider so much, and it is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the development of "forest-transition" theory, ecology, and sociology—the "corporatist" approach to conservation, recovery, and expansion might also benefit from a deeper consideration of the contributing cultural value of trees. For example, Rudel places emphasis on the role of indigenous people in the protection of trees in national parks and reserves but does not allude to the cultural reasons for why these spaces have such value for these peoples. Perhaps this is the work of environmental and cultural historians, but the collaborative approach at the heart of the book lends itself to making such interdisciplinary connections in this field in the future.

Notes


