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Rainforest Politics, by Hurst

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Rainforest Politics, Ecological Destruction in South-East Asia. By Philip Hurst. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990. 303 pages.

The destruction of the Southeast Asian environment is evident in the extensive loss of original forest cover and coral reefs. Both tremendously complex ecosystems are composed of tens of thousands of different species existing in abundance and with growth patterns astounding in comparison with temperate climates. This degradation of our environment is due to social and economic pressures. What Philip Hurst points to behind all of this is a weak and corrupt political will that should, but does not, protect the Asian environment.

Rainforest Politics tries to awaken people to the destruction of the forests by doing a country profile of the situation in Indonesia, West and East Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and Thailand. Four causes of destruction are discussed: shifting agriculture, timber extraction, transmigration schemes and large-scale development projects. In each case, Hurst covers the effect of forest loss, the development of forestry policy, the present causes of forest destruction and the future of the forest. A few already well-documented and highly-political activities, where crucial environments were threatened or destroyed, are presented for each country.

In presenting the effect of forest loss, Hurst tries to give an insight into the problems faced by cultural communities and their relationship to the forest. Much emphasis is given to colonialism as the cause of the adverse decisions that continue to influence policy development. Though colonial powers did indeed begin the logging, but the present destruction of forest lands is in no small part the work of a national elite. It is an oversimplification to say that the adaptation of colonial legal frameworks by national governments has resulted in the present problems. Government passivity in following initial structures, not to mention active corruption, does not absolve it from the lack of will to act.

Hurst also fails to mention other important factors. Personal interest combined with political power at all levels of society has also destroyed the forests of Southeast Asia. The military's logging activities and relation to government in most of these countries is not adequately analyzed. As a result, there is no comprehensive presentation of present and future politics within each country.

As acknowledged, deforestation in the Philippines reached its height in Ferdinand Marcos's time, and though the international timber trade did encourage the exploitation, the level of destruction and how it was carried out reflect the violence of that political era. There are world economic powers, and Japan in particular, that continue to play a major role in the timber trade, but the abuse of a people by its own political and military

forces must not be lost sight of in the face of other larger patterns of international pressure. Burma most exemplifies this sad story today.

As regards Hurst's case studies, local opposition is recounted, but is not analyzed in such a way that we can improve our local or national political strategy. In the Philippines, since the 1970s Cellophil case in Abra, much has changed with regard to the involvement of communities in the protection of environment, but this is not noted.

Some important points are made in the conclusion, but they are skimmed over. It is evident that population growth does contribute to forest destruction. However, as Hurst points out but does not explain, such destruction is due much more to political and economic decisions in Southeast Asia than to shifting agriculture.

A text that does not systematically present a political analysis or review of forest destruction in Southeast Asia cannot hope to do justice to the limitations of scientific philosophy or the science of public service in a concluding paragraph. Questions are also raised but left unanswered as to what might be understood by an "Eastern approach" to government administration based on the philosophy of the whole. As a result, it sounds more like an "if only" reprise, rather than much-needed pragmatism.

There is no question as to the grave consequences of the World Bank and other organizations involvement in the development of the debt, nor of the value of different action plans and the need for each country to reform land use, access and ownership. However, the politics as presented is too general for anyone to have an insight on how to act in Southeast Asia. The book cannot be used to gain a deeper understanding of the political processes at work and how local people can effectively operate. Furthermore, the author appears to take the defense of the forest out of the hands of locals and put it in the hands of national organizations with international links.

Yet the book does have a value for people in Southeast Asia. They can compare their own situation with what is said of neighboring countries and then further evaluate their situation. With such a book, the author is always going to be exhausted long before the subject matter. Philip Hurst is clearly deeply concerned for the tropical forest and has spent long hours talking to people. He has thus produced a useful reference for environmentally-concerned persons and groups seeking a basic overview by which to support national and international environmental groups to challenge governments and industries outside of the region.

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