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## Keepers of the Forest

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# Keepers of the Forest

*Peter Walpole, S.J.*



**Keepers of the Forest.** Edited by Mark Poffenberger. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990. 283 pages.

Now that the mystique and memory of the forests of Southeast Asia are nearly exhausted, people are beginning to talk effectively of forest management. Poffenberger, however, has for years concerned himself with finding collective schemes that will enable government foresters and communities living on forest land to work together towards this endeavor.

In this book, Poffenberger with a group of other forestry researchers and workers present us with some important developments in forestry management in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. The developments deal with cooperative action between state forest agencies and forest communities. Various new programs now seek to grant security of tenure to forest communities, engage communities in sustainable agricultural practices, and reduce government administrative costs. Through a realistic assessment of these experiences, the authors hope that others will further seek ways to effectively strengthen community management of the forest.

With such a focus, therefore, the book cannot be expected to deal with present issues of commercial logging or plantations, environmental advocacy, related insurgency, population programs, international timber trade and "development" loans; though these issues are very much related to the question, "Who are the rightful forest keepers?" While the authors raise the question of who is to care for the forest as a major political issue, their answer remains purposely ambiguous. However, the editor's focus on community participation in government programs suggests that he considers forest communities as the primary keepers of the forest—with supervision by government forest agencies.

State management programs and policies are discussed with due attention to the historical and geographic context. The authors avoid generalized discussions on the causes of and solutions to deforestation, and delve instead into the process of managing specific forests. The lesson learned from the historical overview of land conflict is the need for decentralization which is dependent upon national political will and government-community cooperation. The book then focuses on the latter, seeking change in government programs.

While such programs for community forest management have only begun to emerge, a valuable comprehension of management bureaucracy—its problems and potential—is achieved in this work.

Poffenberger considers five elements in the development of effective community forestry:

establishing an environment that supports experimentation and learning within forest agencies; helping communities develop local forest management organizations; collecting information and creating dialogues to improve mutual understanding and generate joint management priorities; enhancing the authority and tenure security of forest communities; and developing agroforestry technologies that are sustainable, productive and responsive to the needs of community managers and the nation. (p. 97)

The authors speak from a perspective of working with an enlightened bureaucracy. Consequently, governments are creatively criticized, with the overall appraisal hopeful. Though the authors acknowledge the internal conflicts and lack of political will in government, they highlight the success of government programs in being more community-oriented, rather than the programs' otherwise poor performance in dealing with deforestation.

The book has three parts: land conflict, participatory management techniques and government social forestry programs. The understanding achieved is worth reviewing in the context of the experiences of the different countries.

### **The Philippine Experience**

Given that there was a log ban in Cebu as early as 1870, and that the government has done virtually nothing to reforest the island—as distinct from developing the city as a commercial center—one may well doubt the political will to support community upland management. On the national scale, ineffective forestry management and legislation have not only contributed to deforestation, marginalization of tribal groups and increased migration of tenant farmers from the lowlands, but also to insurgency.

While there are indigenous practices, agroforestry practices have only recently been supported by the Philippine government. This situation is in contrast to the state forestry management in Java (Peluso) and the management systems in Thailand (Kamon and Thomas). The communal forest lease was first granted in the Philippines in 1974 to the Ikalahan tribe in Nueva Ecija (Cornista and Escueta); however, by 1988, only eight others had been granted (Gibbs, Payuan, and del Castillo).

Philippine forestry programs concerning communities have basically been "punitive." Gibbs et al acknowledge that "deforestation was only rarely discussed in terms of the mismanagement of timber concessions and although illegal logging was acknowledged, its scope and impact were not well understood." As a result, *kaingineros* (slash-and-burn farmers) were often blamed for the rapid deforestation. Furthermore, the three forestry programs implemented—Forest Occupancy Management (1975), Council Tree Farming (1978) and Family Approach to Reforestation (1979)—did not produce effects. According to the authors, what these programs lacked most was consultation with the people and regard for their basic needs.

While more recent forestry programs have tried to respond to such criticism, problems remain. The Integrated Social Forestry Program (ISFP) (1982) lacks a clear process to give communities formal control over common lands, resulting in community insecurity. Furthermore, the individual agreements are for unrelated lots across the landscape, and do not contribute to the urgent needs of managing the larger unit of a watershed. Similarly, Contract Reforestation (1988) is too rigid to respond to a community's needs and it lacks adequate social and technical retooling of forestry personnel to assist communities in achieving a reasonable degree of success in reforestation.

Gibbs et al cite as essential the establishment of a working group composed of key staff from the forestry bureau, scientists and social researchers from the country's academic institutions, and representatives from non-government organizations. Prior to the implementation of a national program, the working group provided a forum for discussing strategies for the bureaucracy to effectively coordinate community-oriented forestry programs.

Furthermore, they recognize the social characteristics of a site as being equally important as the biophysical in implementing forestry projects. They acknowledge the advancements made by ISFP in the process of site selection and introduction of the program to new communities, provision of tenure security and agroforestry development. However, they point out the weakness in the use of technical tools, managerial practices, and the urgent need to further develop these skills. The case study by Borlagdan on the ISFP project in Cebu confirms these problems and the inability to respond to communal land management needs. In spite of this, the project is hopefully the start of serious efforts to reforest Cebu after more than a century of bureaucratic mismanagement.

The study made by Sajise and Omegan on the uplands of Northern Philippines highlights the indigenous land management systems of the people. However, the history of community resistance to the construction of the Chico Dam, the Celloghil Corporation projects and mining activities in the area—all of which have had a significant impact on the landscape and society—are also worthy of much attention. Hopefully, the continuing efforts to decentralize government and respond to upland community needs will be favored by renewed political will after the forthcoming 1992 elections.

### **The Indonesian Experience**

In Indonesia, people were already talking community forestry by 1933. But even today, economic development policy continues to overrule, since the forest is seen as a major source of funds for national development (as against private development in the Philippines). Among the three countries reviewed, Indonesia has a history of greatest state control and abuse of forest labor.

Peluso gives a very valuable history of the teak forests of Java, tracing how the state has largely controlled access and extraction of forest products to the detriment of forest communities. The author narrates the government's oppressiveness after the Japanese occupation in 1945. This period was marked by strong political organizing among the people to retain occupancy of the forest land. Such organizing was only crushed in the 1960's when forest occupation was violently rejected by the government. Social oppression and violence undermined all that had been previously achieved in the conservation and management of Java's forest.

The intercropping system of planting agricultural crops with teak has been practised in Java for over a century. This practice derived from the Burmese *taungya* system in which forest residents grew their own crops such as rice, corn or tobacco between rows of teak seedlings. The government allowed them to do this provided that they planted and protected the tree seedlings. These forest farmers even received a nominal cash fee for the teak seedlings they grew. Though teak-focused, this system shows a potential for sustaining further crop diversity and multiple use of forest land.

The experience of community participation in the Cyclops Mountains in Indonesia as discussed by Mitchell, de Fretes and Poffenberger shows that effective forest management does not require the relocation of forest communities, but rather, respect for the traditional land tenure and rights of the people.

However, until the conservationary agroforestry practices of the eighteenth century are on the whole made more responsive to the present needs of forest communities, the Indonesian government will remain the greatest destructive force of the country's forest.

### **The Thai Experience**

James Hafner's work regarding the forces and policy issues in Northeast Thailand gives a very valuable introduction to the national program and the Royal Forestry Department. The history of government control in the area, the pattern of settlement by lowland Thai in relation to ecological systems, and growth in cash crops have resulted in one of the highest deforestation rates in Southeast Asia.

The land management programs in the Dong Mun Forest, which is also in the Northeast, were intended to reduce rates of forest encroachment. However, these programs have had the opposite effect, by limiting individual land holdings and fostering social and economic conflicts. Government intervention in the area was primarily concerned with national security. Hopefully now, with the lessons learned, participatory programs for the people in the area will receive greater attention. A similar historical review of Karen and other communities, and their use of forest resources in North Thailand, would be of great value.

Kamon et al say that the development of the forestry agency in Thailand and the consolidated control of the forest by the state have not been immune to the interests of political and private groups in determining policy. Unfortunately, in my experience, this is often heightened with international assistance which cannot respond to community participation in reforestation programs because of the desired political and economic goals. For example, in the *UNDP Integrated Watershed and Forest Land Use Program*, destruction of secondary forest for eucalyptus plantations not only disregards the more valuable forest regeneration, but also the existing communities in the area. This is all the more reason that Hafner's call for a broad-based effort in establishing a stable and productive forest resource system should be heeded.

In the chapter on diagnostic tools for social forestry, Jefferson Fox points out that foresters should initiate the communication process with forest farmers. Establishing communication with farmers enables the forester to gain knowledge of historical land-use practices and farmers' perception of environmental problems. The author recommends three methods that the forester could use to facilitate information exchange between forest communities: semistructured interviewing, aerial photographs and sketch maps. The use of these methods also provides the opportunity for understanding patterns of conflict and cooperation in upland communities and the necessary sensitivity to local priorities.

## Conclusion

Poffenberger's criticism that "most forest policies are designed for political and economic ends, with little consideration for their impact on forest communities" remains evident. The implementation of national forest laws and the attainment of sustainable management by forestry organizations have always been hampered by political, military and commercial interests. Aside from these impediments, it may be worth noting that internal conflicts in forestry organizations have also contributed to the failures in forestry programs.

To counter these problems, Poffenberger suggests that policy makers and development agencies should work closely with sympathetic foresters to form political coalitions which can lobby effectively for decentralization.

He concludes that based on the work already done, the restructuring of forestry organizations must focus on: staff reorientation and skills development in facilitating community management systems; improved communication channels between communities and rangers, operational staff and their superiors to allow field level information to flow upwards; and new tools and forums to assess the problems of joint management systems and be able to respond effectively.

*Keepers of the Forest* is a source of many insights for those working with forest communities to sustainably manage forest lands to meet the country's needs, while curbing deforestation.

The problems of state forestry programs presented in the book should be taken in a positive light. These problems provide the bureaucracy with learning opportunities that are bringing government closer to the people. It is a trying time for many, especially for nongovernment organizations that must interact with government, for widespread and full impact of community-oriented programs cannot be achieved purely from below.

While NGOs can facilitate this exchange with communities and the transfer of rights, there is also the need for NGOs to seek more responsive financial investment from international donor agencies, participate in government policy and program reviews, and carry out field research to make many of the forest management programs sustainable.