



In search of the rain forest

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In search of the rain forest. Edited by Candace Slater. Durham NC, and London: Duke University Press. 2003. 318 pp. US\$22.95 paper. ISBN 0 8223 3218 3.

Tropical rainforests are places where interests converge, and often collide. For hundreds of indigenous groups they are a home, for ecotourists a place to visit, and for multinationals a source of primary commodities. For others they are fragile environments in need of protection, a safe haven for illegal activity or reservoirs of as yet undiscovered medicines. Far beyond their confines they are a source of inspiration, concern and even fear. *In search of the rainforest* ably explains how various actors appropriate, manipulate and reproduce images of rainforests as part of dynamic, ongoing narratives – or bioscripts – that influence perceptions, attitudes and policies about how they should be used and managed. A recurring motif consists of how rainforest icons – simplified representations embodying an array of associated meanings – are constructed and transmitted through photographs, brochures, newspapers, books and movies. Although various groups may draw from a common environmentalist ideology, they do so in opposing ways, sometimes disseminating one discourse while attempting to silence others.

One chapter demonstrates how a company operating in the Ecuadorian Amazon publicizes the implementation of innovations that purportedly allow for the harmonious coexistence of oil extraction and the biological diversity of a vast, untouched forest – while obscuring the deliberate disruption of indigenous organizations or the use of state violence to suppress resistance. Here and elsewhere, the authors show how depictions of rainforests shape notions about the relationships between people and nature, and how these in turn can lead to quite different outcomes. For example, if forests are thought of as ancient and pristine, they will warrant strict protection; if they are anthropogenic, better understood as ‘gardens gone to seed’, they may in fact require resident populations to maintain certain ecological processes. As another chapter illustrates, the long-standing policy of removing villagers from reserves in India – developed in collaboration with international conservation organizations – is not merely unjust, but can ultimately result in the devastation rather than protection of wildlife populations.

This book provides valuable insight into the dynamics of competing social constructions of nature. A limitation, perhaps, is an asymmetrical emphasis on the perceptions and representations of rainforests among outsiders (e.g., colonial administrators, an expatriate natural medicine guru – not to mention the contributors themselves) rather than those who are most affected by them. What are some of the icons that resident peoples use? What are some of their distinct cultural interpretations of the rainforest? These questions receive much less attention. Nevertheless, this remains an engaging, thought-provoking volume rich in ideas grounded in real-world cases, and may alter to some degree the way many of us see the rainforest ourselves.

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