

1. Introduction

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Across the world indigenous rights activists argue that ‘Land is Life!’ This slogan appears on bumper stickers, T-shirts and posters at demonstrations against large-scale, capital-intensive forms of industrial development that result in indigenous peoples being dispossessed of their customary land-related rights and sovereignty. It indexes the fact that the systematic dispossession of such peoples from their lands has led to the current situation in which they are often living at the very margins of all international indicators of health and welfare. It also means much more than simply that land is important to life. For most indigenous groups globally, their lands and territories are inextricably tied to their ontological propositions about the world and their epistemic practices with regard to the world. Land is interwoven with history, memory, belief, practice and subjectivity. In this volume, we expand the discussion around indigenous peoples and land and argue that in many places in the larger forested nation-states of Oceania, forests are also life.

Native forests and their health are an enduring source of concern for the indigenous communities who have lived with them ‘since time immemorial’. They are also a source of concern to many other actors or ‘stakeholders’ interested in their conservation or exploitation. Today, much of the news that we hear about forests is not good. There is an ongoing global debate about the pace of what is nowadays called deforestation and forest degradation, but there is widespread agreement that tropical forests are especially vulnerable (FAO 2010; FAO and ECJRC 2012; Hansen et al. 2013; Stibig et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2015). There is a parallel debate about the factors or drivers responsible for this loss in different parts of the world, and about the effects of this loss on local people’s livelihoods. Yet there is general agreement that the loss of tropical forests is inextricably tied to a corresponding loss of biodiversity values, and this in turn

has been linked to a decline in the health and welfare of the people living in and around these forests (Geist and Lambin 2002; Boucher et al. 2011). There is also a strong connection between the loss of biological diversity and the loss of social or cultural diversity, especially when the people affected by it are members of indigenous communities (Loh and Harmon 2005; Maffi 2005; Maffi and Woodley 2010; Gorenflo et al. 2012).

The contributors to this volume explore the ways in which indigenous people and other actors relate to the tropical forests of Oceania.¹ All but one of the chapters deal with this relationship in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands, where the recent rate of forest loss has been most extreme. Calls for action to counter the process of deforestation have resulted in global monitoring plans, international and multilateral policy directives, and national-level laws and programs. While these are much needed, our concern is that the focus on large-scale solutions too often erases the very people whose lives are intertwined with their forests (Tsing 2005; West 2005). The tropical forests of Oceania, like those in other parts of the world, have always been constituted through human interaction with the natural environment (Groube 1989; Johns 1990; Kirch and Hunt 1997; Haberle et al. 2001; Bayliss-Smith et al. 2003; Balée 2006; Hope 2007; also Hviding, Chapter 3, this volume).

Our approach is grounded in political ecology, which means that we do not accept approaches to environmental degradation that seek to blame the rural poor for changes that have been precipitated by external forces, often by internationally financed extractive regimes. Based on a set of propositions about the ongoing nature of global processes of accumulation and dispossession, political ecology seeks to understand the complex relationships between changes at different social and ecological scales (Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Peet and Watts 1996; Zimmerer and Bassett 2003; Peet et al. 2011). Furthermore, political ecology is not only concerned with material forms of dispossession, but also with the set of semiotic processes that accompany them (Biersack 1999). Anthropologists working in this area have also been interested in the ecological foundations of human structures of thought and practice and the role of these structures in production of the natural world (West 2006; Halvaksz and Young-Leslie 2008; Jacka 2010). The present volume sits squarely in this tradition of scholarship. Forests are sites where social, ecological and economic relationships can be examined within larger political-economic and historical contexts (Peluso 1996; Ribot 1998). The chapters in this volume deal with a variety of topics already covered in different branches of the political ecology literature, including economic development and the commoditisation

¹ The original drafts were presented at successive meetings of a session of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania between 2009 and 2011. The session was titled 'Forests of Oceania: Environmental Histories, Present Concerns and Future Possibilities', and was convened by Joshua Bell and Paige West.

of forests (Peet and Watts 1996; Bryant and Goodman 2004), the role of the state in resource dispossession (Bryant and Bailey 1997), the cultural politics of environmental transitions (Peluso 1992; Rocheleau and Ross 1995), the place of forests in the global commoditisation of nature (Castree 1995; West 2012), and the relationship between environmental conservation and environmental justice (Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Peluso 1993; West and Carrier 2004; West 2006).

The remaining native forests in the tropical regions of Oceania do not constitute a single type of ecosystem, but vary enormously with altitude and climate — from coastal mangrove systems at one extreme to high montane cloud forests at the other (Paijmans 1976; Gressitt 1982; Whitmore 1990; Hammermaster and Saunders 1995; Mueller-Dombois and Fosberg 1998; Bruijnzeel et al. 2011; Telnov 2011). In their incredible diversity, these forests have provided local communities with an equally wide variety of ‘ecosystem services’. Perhaps most central has been the supply of food through the practice of shifting cultivation and the harvesting of tree crops, like the sago palm, that are more or less deliberately cultivated (Townsend et al. 1978; Clarke and Thaman 1997; Bourke and Allen 2009; Sillitoe 2010; Allen and Filer 2015). Although the centrality of this role has been diminished in some areas with increasing consumption of imported food commodities (Ohtsuka and Ulijaszek 2007), forests remain central to the livelihoods and sustenance strategies of many Pacific Island communities, even if forest resources are only used as a means of exchange for store-bought goods. Forests have also provided the raw materials for the construction of houses and canoes, both of which have been essential aspects of the different modalities of sociality, personhood, gender, space and time in Oceanic lifeworlds (Munn 1977; Bonnemaïson 1986; Weiner 1991; Carucci 1995; Barlow and Lipset 1997; Rensel and Rodman 1997; Stasch 2003; Damon 2008).² By their very presence, forests root local cosmologies in the landscape and connect local communities to the places they inhabit (Nero 1992; West 2006; Crook 2007). They are also integral to the ways in which people inhabit the world, shaping people’s sensory perceptions and aesthetics (Feld 1982; Gell 1995; Weiner 2001; Halvaksz 2003).

This volume explores the multiple ways in which the tropical forests of Oceania emerge in and through human action and imaginaries. Exploring the local dynamics within and around forests in the Pacific Islands region gives us insight into regional issues that have global resonance. Intertwined as they are with cosmological beliefs and livelihoods, as sites of biodiversity and Western desire, forests in this region have been and continue to be transformed by the

2 We use the past tense here because ‘bush material’ houses have been widely replaced by houses built with cement, milled timber and corrugated iron, while traditional sailing canoes have been widely replaced by aluminium dinghies or fibreglass ‘banana boats’.

interaction of foreign and local entities. As one of the assemblages that form global capital, these forests are also sites of the various frictions that accompany these connections (Tsing 2005).

The present volume builds on the concerns of scholars and activists about the social and environmental impact of a boom in the export of raw logs from PNG and Solomon Islands in the 1990s (Gladman et al. 1996; Barlow and Winduo 1997; Filer 1997; Filer with Sekhran 1998; Dauvergne 2001; Hviding 2003; Forest Trends 2006; Wairiu 2007). These concerns were amplified by a raft of foreign investment in 'integrated conservation and development projects' in both countries following their ratification of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (Kirsch 1997; McCallum and Sekhran 1997; van Helden 1998; Martin 1999; Hviding and Bayliss-Smith 2000; Filer 2004; Anderson 2005; West 2006; also West and Kale, Chapter 7, this volume). The logging boom was temporarily halted by the financial crisis of the late 1990s, and foreign funding for forest conservation projects began to decline at the same time. However, the volume of raw log exports from this part of Oceania has risen again over the course of the past decade, as the previous demand from Japan has been replaced by an equally strong demand from China (Dauvergne 1997; Filer 2013). In this recent period, the rising rate of timber extraction has not been matched by fresh investments in forest conservation, despite the global and national interest shown in the prospect of securing such investments for a reduction of carbon dioxide emissions from the process of deforestation and forest degradation (Melick 2010; Filer 2012; Filer and Wood 2012; Babon et al. 2014; also Filer, Chapter 8, Wood, Chapter 9, and Gabriel, Chapter 10, this volume).

Scholarly discussion of the political ecologies and economies of the Pacific Islands region has paid rather more attention to the impacts of mining than the impacts of logging (for example, Filer 1999; Rumsey and Weiner 2001; Kirsch 2006; West and Macintyre 2006; Bainton 2010; Golub 2014). This is partly because of the sheer scale and spectacle of big mining projects, but also because of the way that mining confronts and challenges the connection that communities have to their land. Indeed, the so-called 'selective logging' of native forests that is associated with the practice of 'sustainable forest management' does not typically involve the alienation of customary land rights or the dispossession of local landowners; it only involves the transfer of timber harvesting rights to logging companies for a fixed period of time (Taylor 1997; Filer with Sekhran 1998; Holzknecht 1998; Montagu 2002; Lea 2005). However, the latest logging boom in PNG has been associated with a process of forest clearance, or deforestation rather than forest degradation, that does entail a more complete form of dispossession because it is justified by plans to establish large-scale agricultural projects that are bound to displace subsistence livelihoods (Filer 2011, 2014; Winn 2012; Mousseau 2013). Instead of a cycle in which shifting cultivation (or selective

logging) alternates with periods of forest regrowth or regeneration, forest ecosystems are permanently replaced by cash crop plantations. These could be timber plantations (see Hviding, Chapter 3, this volume), but the current crop of choice in Melanesia is oil palm (Filer 2010; Fraenkel et al. 2010; Allen 2012; Cramb and Curry 2012; Nelson et al. 2014).

Logging and mining can best be understood as two branches of extractive industry whose social and environmental effects are historically linked to booms and crashes in the value of specific commodities. Recent increases in the values of gold, copper, timber and oil palm are not necessarily associated with each other, but are each manifestations of the sort of commodity cycle through which the tropical forests of Oceania and their customary owners have come to be part of the world system over decades and even centuries. In most parts of the region, the ebbs and flows of commodity frontiers stretch back to the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century (Bennett 2000; Beinart and Hughes 2007; Newell 2010). In some areas, trade with Asia also has a long history (Swadling 1996; Spyer 2000; Dove 2011). And forests have not only been implicated in the export of specific commodities to Europe, Asia or America, but also in the importation of new products or commodities from these same regions, whether it be chainsaws in recent years or sweet potato since the seventeenth century (Ballard et al. 2005).

The history of the sandalwood trade illustrates these recursive loops and frictions. Needing a commodity to exchange for tea, Euro-American merchants discovered the value of the sweet-scented wood for the Chinese and quickly moved to exploit the groves found in Hawai'i in the early nineteenth century. These sources were exhausted by 1830 (Culliney 1988; Cuddihy and Stone 1990; Sahlins 1992), but the trade revived in the 1840s once new stands were located in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia (Shineberg 1967). During this second boom (1841–65), Melanesians, Polynesians and Europeans travelled through this area, establishing temporary camps or trading posts before shipping the wood to Australian or Asian ports.³ These encounters were partly responsible for the creation of the Melanesian pidgin language (Romaine 1992: 34). If the conditions of extraction helped to generate new forms of sociality, they also helped to disrupt them. Within Hawai'i the sandalwood trade flooded the islands with foreign products that inspired contests of conspicuous consumption among the indigenous aristocracy (Sahlins 1992: 55–66). Prominent nobles put pressure on their tenants to gather sandalwood for the trade (*ibid.*: 57–82), the productivity of local agriculture declined, and the nobles fell deeper into debt.

³ Along the southern coast of what is now PNG, sandalwood exports did not begin until late in the nineteenth century, and continued almost to the time of independence in 1975 (Zieck 1970). Howcroft (1990) estimates that a total of 8,150 tonnes of sandalwood (180,000 trees) were sent to Singapore and China from Port Moresby before 1971.

Increased interaction with Euro-American sailors and merchants encouraged the transmission and outbreaks of new diseases which, combined with the harsh working conditions needed to procure the ever-diminishing supply of sandalwood, led to an estimated 25 per cent decrease in the indigenous population over a 20-year period (Sahlins 1992: 57; Kame'eleihiwa 1992: 80–2).

It is easy enough to understand the recent concern with the large-scale logging industry in the two Pacific Island countries that still boast extensive areas of unexploited native forest, but the history of the sandalwood trade should also alert us to the fact that specific tree species and much smaller areas of native forest have been implicated in profound forms of social and environmental change throughout the wider region (see Mawyer, Chapter 2, this volume). They were also implicated in such changes in PNG well before the large-scale log export industry emerged in the post-colonial period. For example, when Huli people in the central highlands saw Europeans cutting down the hoop pines that surrounded their sacred sites and using the wood as a building material, they concluded that white people must be related to their own ancestors who had originally planted the trees, and that European ownership of chainsaws and sawmills was itself a sign that Europeans owned the trees themselves (Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991: 271). This example shows that the associations of people with forests, or the frictions between them, cannot simply be understood as an effect of market forces.

Nevertheless, market forces have played a very significant part in the long-term transformation of these relationships. In the central highlands of PNG, the transformation can be seen through the widespread adoption of coffee as a smallholder cash crop (West 2012), just as it can also be seen through the previous adoption of sweet potato as a subsistence crop. Coffee is only one of several cash crops that have worked to transform the relationship between forest ecosystems or landscapes and indigenous communities in different parts of the region in different periods of recent history. Others include copra, cotton, cocoa, tea, sugar and rubber (Bennett 1987; McNeill 1988; Sahlins 1992; Lewis 1996; Ogan 1996; Kelly 1999; Tucker 2000). Whatever the specific form or scale of cultivation, these crops have jointly contributed to a process that Clarke and Thaman (1997) call 'agro-deforestation', which involves a reduction in the biological diversity of traditional forms of agroforestry. The recent oil palm boom in PNG and Solomon Islands is one phase in this long history, but the relationship of the oil palm industry to the process of deforestation has some novel features that relate to the revaluation of tropical forests as carbon sinks or biodiversity hotspots.

While large areas of native forest were cleared in the early years of the industry's development in PNG (Longayroux et al. 1972; Buchanan et al. 2008), the two companies that now export palm oil from PNG and Solomon Islands have both

made a commitment to avoid any further deforestation as one of the conditions of having their products certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (Nelson et al. 2010). This matters because the whole of their output is exported to Europe, where evidence of 'sustainability' attracts a better price. But the existing industry's reputation is now threatened by a raft of new proposals to fund the establishment of additional oil palm schemes from the profits to be made out of logging the native forest that they will replace, while depriving customary landowners of their land rights as well as their timber harvesting rights. Some of these so-called 'agroforestry' projects may be little more than logging projects disguised by agricultural development plans that will never be implemented, but even where a new oil palm estate does materialise, the operators evidently do not aim to prove their own sustainability. The industry has therefore come to be divided between companies that defend and companies that attack the same combination of indigenous rights and native forests (Filer 2013; Nelson et al. 2014).

The new generation of 'agroforestry' projects in PNG may well fit David Harvey's (2004) model of accumulation by dispossession, but the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil illustrates a more recent transformation of tropical forest ecosystem services into a sort of commodity that companies can purchase as part of their 'social licence to operate'. Palm oil companies are not the only companies attracted to this market; logging companies can also seek to have their products certified if they think that this will raise their value for consumers (Atyi and Simula 2002; Rametsteiner and Simula 2003; Gulbrandsen 2004), while some mining and petroleum companies have shown an interest in purchasing carbon or biodiversity offsets to compensate for the environmental damage that they cause (Koziell and Omosa 2003; Maron et al. 2012; Virah-Sawmy et al. 2014). None of these corporate endeavours has yet had much effect on the relationship between people and forests in the Pacific Islands region, yet they reveal the capacity of capital to find new ways of doing business with this relationship.

This is not to deny the agency of indigenous people or local communities in the changes that actually happen or the way they are represented. Far from it, the chapters in this volume show how the peculiar histories of the region's many different types of forest can inform a challenge to policies or practices based on the assumption of a single historical trajectory. Together they show how Pacific Islanders continue to engage with the various processes at play in and around their forests, how the forests continue to generate social relationships, and how these relationships warrant the continued attention of anthropologists.

In Chapter 2, Alexander Mawyer discusses a process of rediscovery that is by no means uncommon in those parts of the Pacific Islands region where the indigenous population fell dramatically as a result of contact with Europeans and their diseases in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When the population

of Mangareva in French Polynesia fell below 500 in the 1870s, parts of the island that had once been densely settled and intensively cultivated began to revert to forest. The human population stabilised, recovered, and has recently grown quite rapidly. As a result, Mangarevans have begun to recolonise these areas of secondary forest and, in this process, have been rediscovering material evidence of former human occupation. This evidence has not only produced all sorts of curious entanglements with their own island's history; it has also become the subject of contemporary political debate about property, civility, sociality and identity.

In Chapter 3, Edvard Hviding shows how the indigenous population of New Georgia in the Solomon Islands was actively involved in the production of what later observers wrongly thought to be 'virgin' forests during the period in which the population of Mangareva fell so dramatically. Like Mawyer, Hviding contrasts the environmental transformations of the nineteenth century with those of the recent past, but in the case of New Georgia, the 'recolonisation' has taken the form of large-scale industrial logging and forest clearance, followed by the establishment of commercial tree plantations. What is most interesting about this transformation is that it has not involved the dispossession of local landowners by foreign investors, but has been organised by an indigenous social movement known as the Christian Fellowship Church. The leaders of this movement have a quite distinctive understanding of the relationship between their religious beliefs, their economic policies, and their position in a 'nation-state' that seems no more substantial than the 'virginity' of the native forests which they and their followers have removed from the local landscape.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Jamon Halvaksz and Jerry Jacka both examine the fate of the forest, or local people's relationship with local forests, in parts of PNG where mining has been a prominent and even dominant commercial activity during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

In Chapter 4, Halvaksz shows how Biangai people living in the upper part of the Bulolo River catchment in Morobe Province have responded to changes in the relationship between the logging and mining industries over a period of almost 90 years. While people from other parts of PNG were attracted to this area by periodic booms in large- and small-scale gold production, the Biangai people retained a close relationship to the towering pine trees that line the ridges of their landscape, and obtained more in the way of an income from the large-scale cultivation of these species. Their involvement in the social relations of compensation from the logging industry has more recently informed their response to the development of a new large-scale gold mine over the course of the past decade.

In Chapter 5, Jacka explores a somewhat different form of political ecology in the Porgera Valley in Enga Province, where mining has been the dominant commercial activity since gold was discovered by the Europeans who first contacted the Ipili people after World War II. The Ipili people themselves were quick to engage in small-scale mining activity, but their relationship to the local environment was profoundly transformed when a large-scale gold mine was developed in the 1990s and attracted a huge influx of people looking for a share of the economic opportunities it provided to local residents. Logging has never been a commercial activity in this area, but expansion of the mining industry has changed the way in which Ipili people make economic and cultural use of the diminishing amounts of different types of forest that have survived the process of industrial expansion and population growth.

In Chapter 6, Joshua Bell explores the entanglement of place, history and subjectivity in a very different part of PNG — the Purari Delta in Gulf Province. This is an area where the logging of native forests over the past two or three decades is part of a fractured history of efforts by outsiders to exploit a range of local resources, including cultural artefacts and human labour, since the area was first colonised in the 1880s. These experiences are central to local people's understanding of the constellation of relations between humans and non-humans that collectively comprise the delta's forests and waterways. Regional narratives of cultural loss and distant commodity abundance intersect with people's struggle to gain access to 'landowner benefits', including jobs and royalties, while dealing with the periodic incursion of police mobile squads searching for marijuana, home-made guns and stolen chainsaws. Overt and covert forms of violence are thus entangled with local people's perception of their connection with, or disconnection from, the nation-state and the wider world.

In Chapter 7, Paige West and Enock Kale review the history of one 'integrated conservation and development project' in the central highlands of PNG and show how it was unable to survive when some of the local villagers who were supposed to benefit from the 'development' component decided they preferred the prospect of large-scale mining or a petroleum project when this prospect began to materialise. While the apparent failure of this project can partly be explained by the reduction in funding from foreign sources, West and Kale argue that this and other similar conservation projects also failed because their neoliberal 'business models' placed them in the same game as their competitors in the business of 'development'. In other words, they were doomed to fail by their insistence on treating local people as rational economic actors who value forests or biodiversity because of their market potential. Nevertheless, West and Kale find some source of comfort in the fact that this 'business model' coexisted with a program of education and training that produced more substantial and enduring benefits for other Papua New Guineans.

The last three chapters deal with various aspects of the push to link forest conservation or forest management in PNG with international sources of finance for climate change mitigation by means of policies and projects that aim to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the process of deforestation and forest degradation.

In Chapter 8, Colin Filer reviews the history of the one so-called REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) project that seems to have survived an international scandal about ‘carbon cowboys’ and a ‘carbon cargo cult’ that caused acute embarrassment for the PNG government in 2009. The April Salumei REDD project in East Sepik Province was adopted as a ‘pilot project’ by the PNG Forest Authority because the government had already acquired the right to turn a large area of forest into a logging concession but was unable to exercise this right because it was impossible to make binding agreements with all the different groups of customary landowners in the area. Nevertheless, a coalition of national ‘stakeholders’ was able to agree that a REDD project was the next best option, partly because it would not entail any further disturbance to the forest, but also because the question of how to distribute project benefits to local villagers was one whose answer could be postponed for some time — perhaps indefinitely.

In Chapter 9, Michael Wood tells the story of another REDD project that failed to survive the international scandal, partly because it achieved greater notoriety than all the rest. This was the Kamula Doso project in Western Province. Wood shows how the project proponent’s engagement with the nascent (or perhaps illusory) ‘national carbon economy’ through the creation of exuberant images and narratives was way in excess of any ‘rational’ strategy for the acquisition of marketable property rights in forest carbon or the creation of a viable forest carbon market. His chapter therefore highlights the contingent role of such representations in a new world of connections between capital and conservation.

In Chapter 10, Jennifer Gabriel switches our attention from specific areas of tropical forest that are subject to specific forms of conservation or exploitation to the one big multinational company that has dominated PNG’s logging industry for the past 25 years. She shows how Rimbunan Hijau has constructed an intricate web of power and meaning that aims to promote a corporate version of ‘sustainable forest management’ that can now be represented as an ‘ethical market solution’ to the problem of climate change. If Crater Mountain represents the failure of one neoliberal business model in the business of forest management, companies like Rimbunan Hijau have another type of neoliberal business model that continues to exert a lot more influence at different levels of political organisation, from the ‘project’ level to the national level and even the global level.

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