

# Forest and Society: Initiating a Southeast Asia Journal for Theoretical, Empirical, and Regional Scholarship

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Review Article

# Forest and Society: Initiating a Southeast Asia Journal for Theoretical, Empirical, and Regional Scholarship

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**Abstract:** Welcome to our first edition. We are excited to provide a new, and what we believe, timely avenue for presenting research findings and publications in Southeast Asia, for scholars interested in Southeast Asia. Although Southeast Asia as a region of study has provided tremendous contributions to theory and practice regarding forests and society across the social and natural sciences, avenues for cultivating a scholarship of the region remain limited. We seek to engage on a broad set of themes through the application of targeted research related to timely issues affecting the human-environment interface in a diverse region that we have much to learn from. We take a broad understanding of the forest - as a politico-administrative unit, a geographic area, and as an ecological unit. We do not limit the forest to its boundaries but rather seek to engage on the dynamics of change in social and ecological processes. Under such an umbrella, new approaches and methods become possible. 'Forest' can be analyzed as land use, ecological process, divided across watersheds, as landscapes, mountains, and more. The lens of 'society' allows for opportunities to understand change, whether it is the interaction between a resource to be preserved, exploited, forgotten, or erased. Forests, therefore, operate as the clues of what once was, has become, and what can be. Particularly in the age of climate change, riddled by increasingly complex challenges, a new dimension also emerges for the forest. Different perspectives at different scales - from the local to the global - provide equally important dimensions, and are those which we seek to provide avenues to learn from, and communicate through this journal. As the reader will find in this inaugural issue, we have compiled an initial set of studies across multiple methods and geographies that help to set the terms of future editions. We examine: historical political ecologies of land use around opium cultivation in the uplands of Thailand; emerging governance regimes of corporate social responsibility in Myanmar; the capacity of new state institutions to manage land conflict in forest estate lands in Indonesia; a close analysis of forest harvesting and management in a mangrove forest in Malaysia; and, an economic valuation of non-timber forest products in a national park in Indonesia. There is much to choose from and much more to delve into. We hope that this issue serves as an impetus to engage on these timely themes and further encourages new ideas for submissions.

**Keywords:** forest; land use; society; community; mixed methods; Southeast Asia

## 1. A Journal for Southeast Asia

*"Scholarship remains poor ... creating a long-term consequence on critical thinking and weak policy-connect."* (Rakhmani and Siregar, 2016: IV)

*"Recent events should show beyond a shadow of a doubt that Southeast Asia's diverse political systems are far from peripheral to the most momentous global trends. It is a region that the rest of the world can ill afford to ignore or misunderstand."* (Kuhonta et al, 2016: 2)

*Since 1990, licensing regimes have intensified; environmentalism has become ambient; volatile crops have expanded the agricultural frontier; post-agrarian land uses and livelihoods have changed the face of the countryside; intimate relations among villagers have fractured and realigned; and groups have mobilized to counter the powers deployed to exclude them, and to implement exclusions of their own... our goal [should be] to explore how these processes unfold, and the dilemmas they present for differently situated actors" (Hall et al., 2011: 192)*

In this viewpoint article, we describe the scientific journal challenges in Southeast Asia and situate the inaugural efforts to launch the journal *Forest and Society*, an international journal for the Southeast Asia region. Although the first quote above cites a study specific to the challenges of higher education in Indonesia, in a lot of ways it is applicable across Southeast Asia. On the one hand, some of the more notable works about Southeast Asia have been framed from outside perspectives. Indeed, the creation of Southeast Asia in and of itself as a region are steeped in the geopolitical history of the Cold War and Vietnam (CITE). This journal seeks to bring the study of people and the environment closer to local perspectives and to highlight scholarly efforts across the region.

In another way, as Kuhonta et al. (2008: 2) argue, Southeast Asia has not fulfilled its potential in connecting with global currents. They argue that "Southeast Asianists have indeed accumulated theoretical as well as empirical knowledge but that these general, portable insights are often easily missed when scholars refrain from framing their arguments in theoretically self-conscious terms, or from discussing the potential comparative implications of their arguments". In various ways however, opportunities for entry are limited for scholars across Southeast Asia, due to the lack of forums for cultivating and sharing research efforts in and of the region. In this way, we wish to build one conduit – in the broad fields related to people and the environment – for sharing Southeast Asia scholarship to engage in contemporary research and policy.

We also place a heavy emphasis on developing the capacity to improve research approaches and communicate their message, which we will detail below as parallel initiatives coordinated within journal publications. Therefore, this viewpoint discusses the issues, the framing, and the capacity necessary to invigorate a Southeast Asia research community on *Forest and Society*, building on the richness of potential study areas from the region, and for the world. In the next section, we explore the possibilities

## **2. Introducing multiple approaches for the study of 'Forest' and 'Society' in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia as a region continues to play a critical geographic, political, and economic role in globalization. The eleven countries that broadly define Southeast Asia, including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam cover a population of about 600 million people, and a forest area covering 1,904,593 square kilometers, and has coastline about 173,000 kilometers (in 2007) and peatland areas about 25 million hectares (60% of global tropical peatland) (ASEAN Cooperation on Environment, 2015). We do not have a bounded or limited definition for Southeast Asia. In one sense, we wish to encourage thinking around counter-histories such as building on the concept of Zomia, in which Scott (2009) describes the similarities of montane Southeast Asia reaching into the uplands of Southwest China. Furthermore, Southeast Asia is not limited by its territorial areas as porous issues of mobility and migration have been closely related to global and regional land and labor dynamics. As explained above, we make open definition about society which ranges from social to economics, or from anthropologies to politics. Southeast Asian countries has unique and outstanding cultural context, but more or less has a memory collective for both colonial and postwar state-building efforts included major programmes by lowland-based states to take control of upland and forested areas (Peluso et al., 1995). Therefore, the power, actors, and institutions discussion on forest politics is very relevant to be included for this journal.

In regards to land use, Hall et al.'s description above highlights the perplexing drivers and implications of change, emerging from what appear to be the friction of distant initiatives that

interact in very localizing terms (cf. Tsing, 2005). One recent example, highlights this convergence and complexity across forest and society. The dramatic fires and transboundary haze of 2015 have implicated the region geopolitically, connecting people in new ways: as actors between each other at a local level, as neighbors among states, and globally, especially through dramatic levels of greenhouse gas emissions attributed to burning. Wildland and peat fires in this manner highlight numerous ways to analyze such a complex issue, ranging from the political economic-drivers of land conversion, changing land management practices, human health concerns, threats to biodiversity conservation, to the way policies both serve to entrench, or help to overcome complex challenges. Fire and haze, albeit a prominent recent example, is just one apparent way to study the important changes taking place across the region.

Southeast Asia is rich in, and dependent on forest resources, both for local and national uses, as well as for the purposes of global trade (Boomgard 2007, Peluso et al., 1995). For example, Indonesia and Malaysia share some 80 percent of the global tropical timber trade (Dudley et al. 2014), which has transitioned into the leading cultivation of one of the world's most prominent plantation crops: palm oil. Other commodity crop booms and mining resources also define trends taking place across Southeast Asia's landscapes. Meanwhile, local communities are also primary stewards of much of the region's diverse forest regions, even if they only have tenure to roughly 8% of these forests (RECOFTC, 2014).

From ancient times to industrialization forests have never held such an important role in human society. The forests themselves and the natural resources contained within them have vital functions, including environmental services and recreation, regulating the climate, providing habitat for endangered species, sustaining daily life of local people, as well as providing numerous economic opportunities. In a single area of forest, there may be claims by logging companies, customary forest users, community forestry groups, NGOs, state interests, and more. Actors are constantly re-negotiating their control over forest resources and relates with perceptions of power and the differing values about land by different actors.

Southeast Asia, with its many ethnicities, languages, and landscapes is perhaps the most diverse region in the world, which include numerous indigenous communities with various land management contexts. Poffenberger (2006) analyzed social forestry in several Southeast Asian countries and found a diverse range of contexts in which communities protect, manage, and restore forests across the region. He, like many scholars (e.g. Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001; Maryudi et al, 2012) believe that the community continues to have a critical role to play in sustainable forest management. These communities often help to preserve biodiversity and maintain hydrological functions, while also engaging with the land for subsistence and livelihoods. Nevertheless, rights among local community members remain limited under the legislative frameworks that govern the formal forest sector in most Southeast Asian nations. In this context, community forestry initiatives are always both pragmatically and substantially linked to varying global and regional forest regimes such as climate change mitigation, forest certification, and trans-boundary forest management (Sahide et al., 2015).

Such diversity of context enriches and boosts the recent scientific discourse that forest is not a monolithic theme. Indeed, research have generated a number of insights in the field of planning, economics, sociology, land use, anthropology, history, jurisprudence, psychology, and many others. Therefore, we necessarily keep the definition of forest and society broad in order to address numerous questions and cull from a broad range of insights, both theoretical and empirical. To what extent is there an international forestry regime and in what ways is it taking shape in Southeast Asia; and in return, to what extent has practices in Southeast Asia influenced this global regime? How are natural resource practices changing in ways that both indicate an expansion of plantation infrastructure, while also an increase in community based natural resource management programs? What are the implications of climate mitigation programing in the last decade for carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation? What are the changing land relations occurring between people and are these new positions reshaping the landscape? What are the drivers and effects of increasing violence over land access and exclusionary effects? In what ways are different forest ecologies changing, and what can we learn about current

management approaches? These diverse yet closely inter-related questions therefore, highlight what we believe to be the organizing themes under the umbrella of *Forest and Society*, which allow for timely insights affecting the human-environment interface in a diverse region that we have much to learn from.

Society can also be seen in the connection between globalization and local narratives. Globalization has changed not only the way we reimagine the past and examine the present, but also how we think about the appropriate land-uses, conservation, and society for the future. Globalization also contributes to the international relations discourses of forest regimes and how they in turn interact with domestic policies and influence local institutions. The 'international and global forest regime' can be treated as if it were a unified-unitary actor, and can also be analyzed as national interests or domestic sovereignty. This is a rich area ripe for continued political analysis. Specifically, in the field of international forest-related cooperation discourses, the concept is useful for various approaches to empirical analyses (Giessen, 2013, Rayner et al., 2010). What scholars define as 'regimes' are fragmented across global and regional (e.g. ASEAN) levels. Essentially, an international regime can be demarcated as a "set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations" (Krasner, 1982; Giessen, 2013). Hence, the concept of a regime, regime complex surrounding forests is proposed as an emerging theoretical organizing framework, accounting for adjacent policy fields which partly regulate forest transformations as well.

Previous top down research and analytical frameworks have contributed to political science examining specific national political consequences such as the relevance of forest regimes (Sahide et al., 2015), as well as regimes that influence domestic interests (Sahide et al. 2016; Singer and Giessen, 2017). This has in turn resulted in an unbalanced analysis, that too easily assumes there is an 'infiltration' of domestic policy by international 'pressures', when the opposite is also likely. In other words in several cases, domestic policy actors purposively employ international regimes to meet their objectives. Therefore, we see an important interplay and opportunities for engagement through differing and countervailing perspectives in ways that flip top-down to bottom up approaches, from local to international. We believe such bold new ways of convening research imperatives can provide unique contributions to political science, especially regarding emerging hollow policy contexts common across Southeast Asia. We also open the possibility that our findings could strengthen a new perspective around non-regimes, whereby numerous non-decisions are imposed to keep actors from benefiting from particular situations.

We encourage timely research that examines issues across disciplines, at multiple scales. By discipline we highlight forest and society explorations that range from political economy to law, ecology to history, and other within or beyond these unbounded categorizations. By scale, we hope to collect scholarship that range from the context of: Southeast Asia and its global implications; regional initiatives that examine multi-state comparisons or regional governing bodies like ASEAN; country-specific and national level studies; sub-national research; as well as, the deep village level histories and ethnographic work. In this way, we imagine a scholarly community to emerge around conversations that provide insight across different geographies, levels, and disciplines. In future issues, we will also be encouraging submissions that include timely topics, such as: "Disaster: Fires, Floods, Landslides, and More;" "The Social Forestry Turn in Southeast Asia: Community, Indigeneity, and Decentralization;" "The International Forestry Regime: A Regional-Global Dialectic;" "The New Shapes of Participatory Mapping: Re-negotiating Territoriality;" and other potential organizing headings.

### 3. Building Capacity for Scholarship in the Region

Rakhmani and Siregar's (2016) study about the poor state of higher education in Indonesia and the dearth of social science perspectives highlights a trend across the region. Other than a recent spur of investments in the past decade in Singapore, higher education in Southeast Asia has lagged amongst its peers such as the immediate geographic neighbors in East Asia and Australia. In Indonesia, for example, despite the large numbers of students and universities, higher education

institutions have struggled to make any meaningful contribution in scientific publications. Weak English-writing skills is one of the causal factors for poor quality and quantity of scientific publications. Historical and institutional factors are a greater institutional barrier. About two thirds of Southeast Asian nations' educational institutions do not incentivize communicating or submitting research for journal publications, and furthermore, even when scholars would like to share their research, there is a lack of support services for them to do so.

These issues are certainly much larger than the efforts that a small journal as this one can address. However, even though we do not imagine that we can overcome some of the deeper structural barriers to higher education challenges in Southeast Asia, we do hope to present an avenue for publication and provide opportunities for capacity development. For example, for each journal publication we would like to incorporate a capacity building element. This includes areas such as: writing workshops, informational sessions on demystifying the publication process, improving research methods and approaches to research, seeking funding sources to do research, and expanding our pool of peer reviewers among up and coming researchers from the region. Our editorial team already spans much interest across broad institutional partners across the region and internationally.

#### 4. About this Inaugural Issue

In this inaugural edition, we are pleased to present some exciting research that span a diverse set of geographic regions and intellectual approaches. We hope the backgrounds and audiences of future journal editions also follow the diversity included herein. In the first piece, Fisher et al. (2017) describes how the initial stage of Forest Management Units (FMU) in Indonesia are expected to play the role of conflict administrator amidst a complex and rapidly evolving policy and institutional framework. This paper is a timely survey and examination of the contentious policy efforts that seek to address growing tensions of conflict and violence in forestry governance in Indonesia. The subsequent article by Strasser (2017), shifts attention to the dramatic changes taking place in Myanmar. She analyzes the very complex corporate social responsibility (CSR) history and its contemporary deployments, connecting the numerous ways powerful corporations interact with local communities. The third article by Anderson (2017), describes the contentious history of community poppy cultivation. Utilizing a political ecology lens he highlights the narratives that have affected vulnerable populations in Northwest Thailand over time. The fourth article by Empawi et al. (2017) look more specifically at one forest in Malaysia. They evaluate the time and productivity of forest harvesting operations at Matang mangrove forest and presenting a more classical economic valuation in a bounded site. The fifth and final article of the volume by Affandi et al. (2017) returns to Indonesia. They examine economic valuation of non-timber forest products and the role of communities practicing agroforestry that buffer Sibolangit park in North Sumatra.

Across these numerous studies on national policies, new governance approaches, national parks, different ecological zones, commodity shifts and historical analysis, we have a great foundation for inaugurating the first publication of *Forest and Society*. We hope that our readers, contributors, reviewers, and supporters will get as much as we have during the editing process. Furthermore, we hope this can be an enriching intellectual process in future efforts to come.

#### Acknowledgments

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