

Managing the Earth's Wild Lands

George Vrtis

Nicholas K. Menzies, *Our Forest, Your Ecosystem, Their Timber: Communities, Conservation, and the State in Community-Based Forest Management*, Columbia University Press, 2007.

This book emerged at an interesting time. As many authors and organizations have recently documented in detail, the last century witnessed an extensive reduction of forestland and a general decline in forest conditions around the world. For instance, in *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*, John McNeill puts the overall 20th-century decline in global forest area at somewhere between 7.5 and 22.5 percent. [p. 229.] In what remained, major forces of change—logging, fragmentation, fire suppression, invasive species, and adjoining land-use practices, among others—have combined to reshape the health and condition of today's forests the world over.

At the same time that forestland has been disappearing and changing, there has been a growing chorus of interest groups seeking to influence the management of state- and collectively owned forests. Chief among these, as Nicholas Menzies (a wildland resource scientist and executive director of UCLA's Asia Institute) reveals in this book, are the constellations of local peoples and institutions that have begun to assert a more active interest in managing the forests they live in or near. This development has become known as Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM), and it is but one instance of the great surge of popular protest movements that has taken shape over the past three decades linking social justice and environmental concerns.

Menzies' book ties these threads into a thoughtfully constructed, policy-focused knot. His central argument is essentially twofold. First, he suggests that the history of CBFM shows that it is an effective and efficient approach to maintaining healthy, sustainable forests and strong, cohesive communities. Second, Menzies argues that although CBFM is not suitable for addressing all forest management situations, it does offer a particularly valuable approach for dealing with adversarial relationships (especially cases where indigenous communities have felt alienated from neighboring forests by state appropriation). These are interesting propositions, and Menzies pursues them across many political and disciplinary boundaries.

After the introduction, the next four chapters look at CBFM developments in four diverse corners of the globe—China, Zanzibar, Brazil, and India. Each of these case studies follows a similar story line. Menzies begins each chapter by framing the relationship between local community groups and nearby forests, and then he delves into the major political, cultural, and economic issues these communities have faced as they have sought to influence local forest management policies. This is a lot to do in a small number of pages, and the results are uneven. While Menzies offers some solid evidence (mainly NGO reports, CBFM documents, and secondary literature) to back his claim that CBFM approaches have been good for both forests and forest communities in these four regions, some key issues are not thoroughly explored. Of these, the legal standing and managerial capacity of CBFM organizations stands out. These issues are crucial to understanding the effectiveness of CBFM efforts, and they merit a more probing and sustained approach than Menzies offers.

The next six chapters explore the major themes that run through the four preceding case studies. Chapter six opens this discussion by attempting to recast the conventional historical narrative, as Menzies sees it, from a story of state appropriation of degraded lands to one that centers local communities and their struggle to reclaim historic rights of access and control of forestland. Seen in this light, Menzies suggests, the new story “points to more complex interactions between an array of different actors and interests and the potential for reaching accommodation between those interests and safeguarding the livelihoods of people for whom the forests represent an important material asset.” [p. 89.] Subsequent chapters build on this clearly political interpretation. Chapter seven looks at the early history of CBFM developments, particularly the transition from forest dispossession to the rise of CBFM efforts. Chapter eight examines the nature of forest management and how communities have been and are developing the technical and institutional capacities to manage forest resources effectively. Chapters nine and ten reflect on issues of power and authority in CBFM arrangements, and together they argue that CBFM organizations are seeking to realign political mechanisms that have often promoted inequitable and unrepresentative forest policies. The final chapter (Chapter eleven) is essentially prescriptive. Drawing on his earlier case studies and thematic analyses, Menzies outlines seven conditions that he suggests are important for determining the potential success or failure of a particular CBFM model.

In all, this is an ambitious book, and its very ambition rendered portions more and less valuable. As a work of forest history, its contribution is modest. While Menzies appears to have done field work in each of the places he writes about, he relies on a slender collection of mostly secondary English-language sources. Moreover, his work offers little insight on forest history beyond the very narrowly defined world of small indigenous forest communities that he studied and that inform his narrative framework. As a work of forest policy and management, though, its value increases dramatically. Menzies is at his best when ferreting out complicated political entanglements and explaining their significance for contemporary forest management debates. His vision of breaking with an adversarial past is thoughtful and ought to draw considerable attention. For this, and for taking on a work of global importance, Menzies’s book is recommended for policy makers, scholars, and students of forest policy and management, as well as those interested in social and environmental justice.