

*Review Article*

**SEEING THE WOOD FOR THE TREES: EMPIRE,  
NATION-MAKING AND FOREST MANAGEMENT**

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S. Ravi Rajan, *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Eco-Development, 1800-1950*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, xv + 286 pp., ISBN: 0 19 927796 6, hardback.

Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, *Nature and Nation: Forests and Development in Peninsular Malaysia*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005, xxxvii + 487 pp., ISBN: 9971 69 302 X, paperback.

Seemingly operating in an inverse relationship to the declining area of actual forest, the vast wood of publications on the topic continues to grow (thereby likely adding to the deforestation of the books' subject). The reader can consult global surveys of world forestry, thanks to the outstanding efforts of Michael Williams and Stephen Pyne.<sup>2</sup> National and micro studies also abound for those wanting information about a particular geographical area. All such studies displaying an array of different perspectives on forests: their symbolism, exchange, arrangement in gardens, art, cities—even their biological espionage (the cinchona's 'abduction' from South America to

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Williams, *Deforesting the Earth: From Prehistory to Global History*, Chicago, 2002; Stephen J. Pyne, *Vestal Fire: An Environmental History, Told through Fire, of Europe and Europe's Encounter with the World*, Seattle and London, 1997.

South Asia, for instance)—are all covered.<sup>3</sup> For some scholars, forests are objects of ecological imperialism; for others, tokens of enlightened colonialism, precursors to environmentalism.<sup>4</sup>

In South Asia alone a great thicket of books slows movement through the topic, threatening to entangle the unwary researcher (a largely welcome entanglement, however, given the high quality of much work on this region).<sup>5</sup> In South Asia, forests are important sites for re-evaluating significant historical processes from colonialism and gender, to development and nationalism. For subaltern scholars, the forest provides a key area of study of subaltern resistance to the colonial and, later, to the post-colonial state.<sup>6</sup> The splendid work of Ajay Skaria on the hybrid-histories of colonialism and Dangi, for instance, has extended understandings of historical narrative and unsettled Euro-centric historiography.<sup>7</sup> Other revisionist works, like Richard Grove's situating of the origins of modern environmentalism in the western encounter with tropical areas, also focus on forest practices.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, a number of innovative studies on the nexus between imperialism and resource management has examined plants in general, and forests and their products in particular. Richard Drayton's *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* and John Gascoigne's *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* both investigate in their own ways the relationship between imperial resource

<sup>3</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, London, reprint, 1996; Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds., *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, Cambridge, 1988; Kavita Philip *Civilising Natures: Race, Resources and Modernity in Colonial South India*, New Delhi, 2003; Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860-1930*, Los Angeles; London, 1999; Tom Griffiths, *Forests of Ash: An Environmental History*, Cambridge, reprint, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, New York; Fan Fa-Ti, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire and Cultural Encounter*, Cambridge, Mass., 2004; Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, New York, reprint, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> A useful survey appears in Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Lee Peluso, 'Empires of Forestry: Professional Forestry and State Power in Southeast Asia, Part 1', *Environment and History*, 12 (2006), 31-64; Vandergeest and Lee Peluso, 'Empires of Forestry: Professional Forestry and State Power in Southeast Asia, Part 2', *Environment and History* 12 (2006), 359-93.

<sup>6</sup> Note, for instance, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Berkeley, 1993; Gadgil and Guha, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*, London, New York, 1995; Bina Agarwal, 'Environmental Action, Gender Equity and Women's Participation', *Development and Change*, 28 (1997), 1-44; Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Durham (NC), 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, New Delhi, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Grove, *Green Imperialism*.

needs and institutionalised science.<sup>9</sup> Broad introductions to imperialism and science also discuss debates on the way in which this process operated with regard to forests.<sup>10</sup> More recently, David Arnold has extended such understandings, examining the relationships between aesthetics, science and colonialism in India.<sup>11</sup>

The two books reviewed in this article add considerably to the historiography of forest management and imperialism in general. Ravi Rajan's *Modernizing Nature* examines the relationship between colonial forest policy and European science, a relationship that has concentrated the minds of scholars since the beginning of this process. Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells' *Nature and Nation* investigates the complex relationship between forests, development and 'govermentalities' in Peninsular Malaysia. Like Rajan's work, it also reaches out to examine the interplay of local and international factors. The following review begins with Rajan's book, then examines the continuities and divergences between it and Kathirithamby-Wells' *Nature and Nation*.

## Networks of information

Scholars of imperialism and forests face a number of difficulties. National frames of analysis remain the most common method of writing forest history. Synthesis, therefore, has to rely on mastering a variety of usually discreet, nationally-based historiographies. In addition to this challenge are the sheer logistical difficulties of travel, time and expense required to trawl through such vast and dispersed archives of empire. In these respects, Rajan has done scholars a great service by tying together a variety of historiographies; those on forestry in India, Germany, Britain and France.

Rajan's analysis of the complex flows of information—print culture, forestry models and education—that connected Europe, Britain and the British Empire is a particular strength of the book. Specifically, Rajan argues that the continental model of forestry, as it developed in Germany and later spread to France, was a model continually deployed (and adapted) in a variety of colonial settings. It was, he demonstrates, particularly strong in

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Harry Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World*, New Delhi, 2005; John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution*, Cambridge, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, Oxford, 2007, 111-129; David Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*, Cambridge, 2004, 147-53.

<sup>11</sup> David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Travelling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800-1860*, Seattle, 2006.

India, a point already acknowledged by a number of authors.<sup>12</sup> This dominance, he shows, came about because of the strong reliance by the British authorities on German forest science due to its absence as a scientific subject in Britain. By the later nineteenth century and into the twentieth, Rajan demonstrates that policies instituted in the colonies, as well as developments in continental Europe shaped the emergence of forestry science as a field in Britain. Thus, by the early twentieth century, ‘forestry had joined the bureaucracy, the army, and the railways as a permanent fixture in the British imperium’ (108). It was, as he notes, ‘a reluctant import—a German seed, acclimatized, so to speak, in British India, and then transplanted into the United Kingdom’ (154).

Rajan’s analysis significantly advances understandings of the characteristics of information-making and sharing in the British Empire and Europe. Debate on imperialism and empire tends to fall into two camps. Scholars either argue that colonial science was essentially derivative or, like Richard Grove, that some aspects of colonial science (e.g. forestry) worked the other way, significantly influencing scientific attitudes and action in Europe.<sup>13</sup> The trouble with both views, as Rajan points out, is that they are essentially static and ignore the complexity of changing forest ideas and their exchange between different regions. Rajan’s contribution here is to untangle that complexity and interconnectedness, and to demonstrate the ways in which local knowledge was framed by the very latest debates on continental forestry. In comparison with the only comparable work that attempted to demonstrate the influences of Indian forestry on the British Empire and elsewhere, Rajan’s book is a vast improvement—both conceptually and intellectually.<sup>14</sup> His work also meshes nicely with the arguments of respected historical geographer, Joe Powell, on the imperial forestry movement in the interwar and immediate post-war years.<sup>15</sup>

Rajan is cognisant of these evolving forestry debates. By World War I, as he notes, the role of empire and forestry was changing. Acute wartime scarcity of wood—in 1914 Britain had to import as much as 93 percent of this resource—combined with changing post-war social and political realities to forge a new vision for empire and its forests. ‘Imperial visionaries’ sought to integrate Britain and its empire better, arguing that increases in primary

<sup>12</sup> On the German influence in India, see Ulrike Kirchenberger, ‘German Scientists in the Indian Forest Service: A German Contribution to the Raj?’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29, 2 (May, 2001): 1-26; I.M. Salanha, ‘Colonialism and Professionalism: The German forester in India’, *Environment and History*, 2 (1996), 195-219.

<sup>13</sup> For a useful survey of such models, see Deepak Kumar, *Science and the Raj: A Study of British India*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., New Delhi, 2006, 1-31; S. Irfan Habib and Dhruv Raina, eds., *Social History of Science in Colonial India*, New Delhi, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory A. Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, Cambridge, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> J.M. Powell, “‘Dominion over Palm and Pine’: The British Empire forestry conferences, 1920-1947”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 33 (2007), 852-77.

production would benefit the British economy and help to ease growing unemployment. Regarded in this light, forests would thus fuel industrialisation.

In response to such pressures, in 1926 a Standing Committee for Empire Forestry was formed, its object being to advise and to co-ordinate Empire Forestry Conferences and thus spread the gospel of forestry. As well as the forestry conferences meeting sequentially in different parts of the globe, the *Empire Forestry Journal*, so its organisers hoped, would spread the benefits of wise management through education, not only of local populations but also of 'recalcitrant' authorities who had failed to see the 'light' of scientific forest management. As Rajan demonstrates, foresters struck a number of obstacles on their path to reform and education. Firstly, they came up against an enduring problem of their discipline—its subordination to agricultural and other state interests. Secondly, the realities of colonial development meant that policies on paper often faced resistance in reality, particularly from indigenous peoples whose access to resources would be severely restricted. Empire foresters' response was to brand such attitudes as environmentally destructive and to attempt to 'educate' the populace. Thirdly, foresters suffered from relatively lowly status (and lower pay) by comparison to other civil servants. A fourth issue involved the decentralization of administration; a problem particularly pertinent to South Africa, where co-ordination and government cut-backs severely curtailed its forestry service. Issues like these, as Rajan comments, proved only some of the many facing empire forestry.

In response to such problems and in lieu of attempts to increase the prestige and therefore the bargaining power of empire forestry, Rajan observes that, by the 1930s, forestry discourse had become increasingly technocratic and professional. Technocentrism appeared in a number of guises—from a growing emphasis on soil erosion and fire management through to educational programmes and the tenor of advice given by foresters to the government and to the media. This technocentrism, Rajan notes, survived the last gasps of colonialism. Many of the same issues—such as between foresters' and local community's access to resources, and developmentalism versus conservation—continue to this day.

A particular strength of *Modernizing Nature* is its extremely useful surveys of complex historical fields. As noted, Rajan's overview of French and, in particular, German forestry science, a field hitherto limited to those with knowledge of such languages, is especially useful. His synthesis of Indian forest policies and issues is equally helpful. Neither is a mean achievement, given the breadth of the historical issues and volume of available sources. Such overviews will be extremely useful to specialists and newcomers alike, and are a credit to the author's skills of synthesis and argument.

Rajan's book is also refreshing because it focuses on ideas and situates forest policies in their intellectual frameworks. This freshness is particularly

apparent when read beside studies of forest economies and rates of extraction. Though they are extremely useful, many lack adequate intellectual background to the policies and the decisions made on the ground. They can also be extremely tedious, the reader numbed by statistic after statistic. Thankfully, this is not the case with *Modernizing Nature*. The author's clear and engaging style means the book proceeds at a lively clip.

The author is also careful to acknowledge the work's scope and arguments. Rajan observes that the work 'is primarily a context-bound intellectual history' (19), one which examines neither changing forest economics, nor compares and contrasts 'the subtle differences in forest practice from one region to another' (19). Furthermore, Rajan admits the limits of the book's scope; that it does not examine the impact of these debates in either a national or local context. Rather, as he notes, the work seeks 'to arm scholars working on narrower spatial and regional contexts with an awareness of the world view of the forestry community on natural resource management' (19).

Given these considerations, it is a useful exercise to read Rajan's work alongside an in-depth study of the forest policy of a particular region. In this case, I compare *Modernizing Nature* with another work of equally impressive scholarship; Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells' unprecedented study of the forest history of Peninsular Malaysia. The two works complement each other admirably. While Rajan's work focuses on the theoretical and political debates surrounding imperial forest policy and looks at the growth of forestry as a scientific bureaucracy, Kathirithamby-Wells gives a detailed and exhaustive investigation of these same themes on a smaller scale. Where Rajan provides a brilliant synthesis of an extremely complex theoretical field, Kathirithamby-Wells employs an amazing breadth of difficult-to-obtain sources to reveal the nuances of policy and implementation in the little known history of Peninsular Malaysia. At different ends of the same scale, both works examine the commodification of nature and the enduring debates, compromises and battles between forestry and agriculture, forests and development. Another strength of Kathirithamby-Wells's book is its analysis of the complex interactions between various communities and groups in Peninsular Malaysia: the Orang Asli, whose fortunes waxed and waned under different power brokers; the Chinese and Malay plantation workers and timber fellers; and, of course, the British and indigenous rulers. It is a credit to Kathirithamby-Wells that she manages to maintain a lively narrative as she shows the complex interactions between various groups and the forest.

One of her concerns in this work is to demonstrate, contrary to prevailing scholarship, that tropical forests have been crucial to development; from the early days of commodification, when the region became absorbed into regional and global trade, through to the colonial and post-colonial periods of more intensive exploitation. Over this period, Kathirithamby-Wells also teases out the rise of tropical ecology, conservation and nationalism. All have their origins in imperial forestry, she shows, but were

articulated through the particular experiences of this region. Indeed, the breadth of issues she examines is remarkable; at various times these are ethnography, colonial resource policies, ethnic Malay nationalism, and (in more recent times) global environmental accords and the relationship between free speech and environmentalism.

The thirteen chapters and six parts to this book follow a chronological format, from pre-colonial forest use right through to present-day mantras like ‘sustainable management’ and ‘joint forest management.’ Following many authors, Kathirithamby-Wells sees the advent of imperialism as ushering in a new set of relationships that profoundly shaped both people and forests. Like many others—most famously and controversially perhaps Ramachandra Guha—she sees also that the all-too familiar patterns of colonial exploitation continued unabated through different governments. While depressing, this conclusion is a difficult one to argue with.

The first three parts of the book deal with the initial forays of colonialism and its framing of nature right through to incipient nationalism in the 1930s. In these sections, Kathirithamby-Wells is particularly strong on charting the local characteristics of global colonialism. She demonstrates the complexity of interactions with nature, as global demands and increasing migration impacted on the level and nature of forest exploitation. Demand for *gutta-percha*, for instance, led to wholesale exploitation, whereby whole *taban* (*Palaquium*) trees were felled rather than sustainably harvested. As with the *taban*; so with the aboriginal peoples. With expanding trade in non-timber forest products (NTFP), Johor’s aboriginal peoples became enslaved to the Temenggung who came to control trading networks.

Into this matrix came yet another conflict: that between development and forestry. Fears about the frightening effects of deforestation on climate change and soil erosion emerged in the region in the 1850s, as a result of similar experiences in India, and drew from continental forest practices, thus underlining the argument put forward by Rajan in *Modernizing Nature*. As Kathirithamby-Wells notes, ‘Benefitting from information disseminated via learned journals and associations such as the influential Royal Society and Asiatic Society of Bengal, they [natural scientists] were able to relate local research and observations on conditions of climate and geography to metropolitan and Indian intellectual developments’ (41). The success of these policies, however, depended on the interests of individuals sympathetic or otherwise to forest conservation. One sympathetic official, Hugh Low, Resident of Perak (1877-89), initiated a series of forest policies. Still, he was unable to prevent market forces over-riding his best-laid plans for forest conservation. As elsewhere, the forestry lobby quickly realised that the priority lay with agriculture, not forestry. It wisely, therefore, focussed its activities on the protection and development of upland forests.

Forest science, as it developed in the twentieth century, mapped new resources, playing an important role in what Kathirithamby-Wells terms the ‘territorialization’ of Peninsular Malaysia. Forest scientists also placed

increasing pressure on shifting agriculture, depicting it as a process disruptive to sound scientific management of forests. As a consequence, tensions erupted between what effectively amounted to conflicting visions of development; one based on forest management (espoused by forestry scientists) versus one based on exploitation of forest products or plantation agriculture. The aims of both groups, as well as the numerous merchants, peasants and shifting cultivators involved, therefore were crystallised into longstanding issues of territorial control. Under colonialism, Kathirithamby-Wells demonstrates that control of the forests, as exercised through British Residents and Advisers, favoured the Federal authority. This relationship changed with post-war Independence: state administration became decentralised, giving States control over land and, therefore, the ability to excise forest land.

Before then, in the 1930s, forest policy had played a significant role in the formation of national identity. As Kathirithamby-Wells argues, colonial authorities, bolstered by an empire-wide policy of nature conservation, supported the creation of a National Park (King George V National Park), finally gazetted in 1937 (and renamed Taman Negara following Independence). Seen as a means of uniting the Unfederated Malay States and other centrifugal forces, the campaign for wildlife preservation also demonstrated the growing power of global ecological ideas in relation to game conservation policy, as well as to an increasingly vocal and literate middle class who supported such measures. This interpretation interlocks neatly with Rajan's findings for this period, in relation to increasing pan-empire conservation initiatives.

Kathirithamby-Wells shows that the interlude of war, with Japanese control of the region, witnessed a period of increased exploitation, as forest areas were turned to food growing. This occurred alongside the influence of a small number of Japanese scientists who attempted to maintain forestry research (often through collaboration with imprisoned European scientists) and legislation. The impact of war on wildlife was also profound: when the Japanese banned weapons among the local population, numbers of wild animals increased dramatically.

In this period and afterwards, the forest became a refuge for, initially, anti-Japanese agitation, and then anti-colonial forces (primarily the Malaysian Communist Party). During the Emergency, Kathirithamby-Wells demonstrates how forest policy effectively operated on ethnic lines. In their eventually successful suppression of communist insurgency, the British offered considerable concessions (including opening up forest land) to the Chinese. With eventual independence in 1957, events in Malaysia unsurprisingly saw an upsurge in Malay nationalism at the expense of Chinese interests, including the nurturing of a Malay timber industry through increased technical input. In the face of a national push for development, the area of forestland dipped markedly. To offset this, some 20 reserves and sanctuaries were created, comprising around 6 percent of the land area.

Despite this, most were neglected. Balancing development and conservation remain a problem for post-war policy makers.

For the remaining section of the book, Kathirithamby-Wells' focusses on Malaysia within the wider, international environmental movement. Kathirithamby-Wells shows that, in the 1970s, attitudes started to change gradually owing to fears about the socio-economic impact of continued deforestation. These reflected global environmental problems experienced at the local level. In 1974, a new environmental journal, the *Malayan Naturalist* (a supplement to the *Malayan Nature Journal*) sought to broaden knowledge about environmental degradation. Certainly, the government of the time was paying increasing lip-service to issues of conservation; the Protection of Wild Life Act 1972 reflected global concerns about fauna protection, but development continued to threaten even its first national park, an issue fought over by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia. As Kathirithamby-Wells points out, NGOs have had to be careful not to criticise the government too harshly or to question the ethos of development, lest they be accused of being anti-development. Instead, these groups have argued that such projects were environmentally wasteful and contrary to the national interest. Here, given the international, comparative nature of this section, it could have been revealing to discuss the role of civil society in environmental protection in greater depth, perhaps even drawing parallels and divergences between NGO activity in Malaysia and China, or across the region as a whole.<sup>16</sup> As it is Kathirithamby-Wells tantalisingly refers to this, noting that, 'In an ethnically divided society where public expression is often muted by political sensibilities, the environmental movement has provided a source of empowerment for citizens' (423).

On the world stage, too, the Malaysian Government utilised its country's position in order to draw attention to the problems of sustainability in developing countries. At the 1992 Earth Summit in particular, President Mahatir Mohamad took the lead for other G77 countries in arguing that it should be the responsibility of developed countries to cut emissions as well as to help developing countries in that area. Generally speaking, like many other countries in the wider region (notably China and Japan), Malaysia has been relatively good at ratifying international treaties, but not necessarily as good at implementing them at home.<sup>17</sup>

What recent trends in environmental protection does Kathirithamby-Wells discern? While acknowledging that significant deforestation has occurred—in 1956 the area of forest was 73 percent; in 1999/2000 it had been reduced to 44 percent—Kathirithamby-Wells observes that there is now an established middle-class support base for environmental issues. Likewise,

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion on China, see Vaclav Smil, *China's Past, China's Future: Energy, Good, Environment*, New York; London, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> See Paul G. Harris, ed., *Confronting Environmental Change in East and Southeast Asia: Eco-Politics, Foreign Policy and Sustainable Development*, London; Stirling (Va), 2005.

as the economic base has changed, forests no longer provide the principle source of income. Rather, emphasis now falls once again on NTFP. At the same time, there has been growing collaboration between environmental NGOs and the government. NGOs, however, are still restricted by their inability to comment upon political issues.

Before concluding, I wish to offer a very mild criticism of *Nature and Nation*: Kathirithamby-Wells' seeming acceptance of nationalism as a unifying creation destined for the public good. 'The increasing collaboration between state and citizen towards reinstating nature as a shared heritage, overriding sectoral [sic] claims and interests,' she writes 'adds a valuable dimension to nationhood.' She also suggests that 'The designation... of nature reserves and parks... symbolize a common national heritage on which all can make an equal claim' (423). The latter comment, in particular, is open to contestation. As many scholars have shown, reserves and nature parks are not the neutral and beneficial spaces officials make out; they favour certain groups over others and are biased towards particular kinds of landscape, plants and animals.<sup>18</sup>

In their scope and use of sources, both *Modernizing Nature* and *Nature and Nation* are impressive works. Both will prove invaluable additions to the debate on the role of empire, nation and science. Rajan's book makes a sterling contribution to debates on forestry and empire, injecting both a long needed perspective from continental Europe and an acknowledgement of the complexities and historical contingencies of colonial knowledge-making. Kathirithamby-Wells' work provides a fine-grained analysis of the impact of forest policies on the peoples and environments of Malaysia. This analysis is distinguished by an outstanding breadth of sources.

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<sup>18</sup> For a sample of such literature, see Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces 1860-1914*, New Delhi, 1996; William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York; London, 1996; Tamara L. Whited, *Forests and Peasant Politics in Modern France*, New Haven: London, 2000.