

Section I: Dynamics of the Past

Introductory Remarks

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We develop policies of rainforest protection in part based on our images of forests and the history of interaction between human beings and the natural environment. Some people see the rainforest as a pristine environment that should remain untouched. Others see it as a disease-infested, hostile environment that repelled humans, or at least “civilized” ones, until recently and should be tamed and exploited through modern technologies. In these views formed by outsiders, forest dwellers are often seen as anomalies who have remained outside the mainstream of human history. Most of these views, unfortunately, derive from ethnocentrism and ignorance of past human occupation and cultural ecology of forested areas.

Only recently have scholars realized that the vast Amazonian forest, for example, fostered a long history of human settlements, including relatively developed complex societies. The study of Guatemalan and adjacent rainforests may be more advanced than that of some other forest sites, owing to popular interest in Mayan temples and inscriptions. Still, many people, including locals, view the Classic Maya as a “lost” civilization. Yet debates about Mayan civilization are relevant to the present. Some argue that the Classic Maya “collapse” was caused by the over-exploitation of fragile rainforests, teaching a lesson we should learn from this history. Others, however, contend that the ancient Maya successfully adapted to their environment for a long period, and that some of their strategies can be applied to the modern situation.

It appears that our understanding of human occupation in the African tropical lowlands is even more limited. In both Africa and Amazonia, archaeology does not address current problems directly, but rather provides information relevant to the philosophy and policies of forest preservation. The question of “what” to protect cannot be detached from understanding the history of interaction between humans and the natural environment.

At a more practical level, archaeology is not unrelated to rainforest protection. In Guatemala, national parks are often developed around archaeological sites. I believe that archaeological sites are worth protecting for their own value, but ruins can also add to motivation for the creation of protected areas. The Sangha River area may not have such spectacular sites as Maya ruins. Neverthe-

less, emphasizing archaeological remains and cultural heritage may be an effective strategy when we talk to a wider international audience about conservation efforts.

The general public tends to support the protection of things they feel close to or can relate to. The protection of whales and dolphins has received popular support partly because they are attractive, intelligent animals that can communicate with humans. Protection of the Amazonian forest drew wide international attention, partly because of the indigenous people who live there. Archaeology may offer images of forests with cultural and historical value, making them more compelling to people who are being mobilized to protect them.

At an even more pragmatic level, I would like to comment on ecotourism. Through my archaeological work, I have been involved in tourism development in Guatemala and Honduras. Although I am somewhat skeptical about the economic benefit of ecotourism to local people, I strongly support the development of ecotourism. What is important in my view is that ecotourism gives visitors an opportunity to experience and learn about rainforests and other protected areas. As mentioned above, popular images of rainforests are often formed without much knowledge of their past or present status. Ecotourism probably helps people from various parts of the world to understand the rainforest, the people who live there, and their history. Conveying this knowledge is a slow process, yet is essential for successful environmental protection in the long run.

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