

Book Reviews

Martínez-Reyes, José E. (2016) *Moral Ecology of a Forest: The Nature Industry and Maya Post-Conservation*, the University of Arizona Press (Tucson, AZ), xi + 200 pp. \$55.00 hbk.

el monte da vida, pero hay que trabajarlo [the forest gives life, but you have to work it]. (Unattributed Maya assertion, p. 107)

What do we mean by ‘conservation’ in the Anthropocene – that ill-defined, intellectually contested age in which we live and in which people have become the most potent force for climatic and environmental change – and is it a universal or culturally contingent concept? In *Moral Ecology of a Forest*, Martínez-Reyes argues that conservation, nature, biodiversity, and related concepts reflect a range of ontological perspectives that differ between peoples, cultures, the capitalist north, and the oppressed south. Following more than a decade of fieldwork, friendships, and fascination with the Maya community of Tres Reyes, Quintana Roo, México, the author concludes that ‘[f]orests are living questions, [...] political-economy questions, [...] and cultural and moral questions’ (p. 3). Maintenance of biocultural diversity (not the ecologist’s biodiversity) in the forests of Quintana Roo depends crucially on answering these question, but the answers vary with ideology, culture, ethnicity, class, and so on.

Ecologists and conservation biologists like myself tend to be preoccupied with living questions: the diversity of non-human species and their complex interrelationships. Anthropologists like Martínez-Reyes focus more on political-economic, cultural, and moral questions: how people interact with one another, other organisms, and the surrounding landscape. Such intellectual specialisation lends itself to aggressive dichotomies: ‘The Maya Forest’ or ‘Communities’ versus ‘The Nature Industry’ (in, respectively, the titles of the introduction and Chapter 2); ‘Forest Commons’ versus ‘Caste War’ (Chapter 1), ‘Green Land Grabs’ versus ‘The Milpa’ (Chapter 3). The world is littered with conservation projects that have failed because such perceived conflicts have precluded compromise.

The key idea running through *Moral Ecology of a Forest* is that contemporary disputes about conservation stem from different views of relations between people and

nature. The ‘nature industry’ places humans apart from nature, whereas indigenous peoples like the Maya ‘maintain an intimate relation with the forest and their communities [and] are engaged in a beyond human *moral ecology of the forest*’ (p. 19, original emphasis). Confrontations between the Maya and environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) such as the Nature Conservancy and Amigos de Sian Ka’an led, dialectically, to what Martínez-Reyes calls ‘post-conservation’, which is grounded in the moral ecology of the forest but also incorporates compatible elements of capitalism and ‘western’ science. Whether post-conservation ultimately will succeed in preserving bio(cultural)diversity remains unknown.

An unacknowledged point of divergence is that for the ENGOS and many (western, northern) conservation professionals, a forest (or nature) without people has intrinsic value, whereas for the Maya of Tres Reyes, the forest (or nature) without people working it, is incomprehensible: ‘The forest exists, but by dwelling in it and engaging it, it gives life, and the Maya ecology comes into being’ (p. 107). The milpa (what an ENGO would call ‘slash-and-burn’) is a flashpoint: ENGOS assert that milpa-based agriculture threatens biodiversity, whereas Martínez-Reyes asserts that if done well, it can enable biodiversity to flourish. But biodiversity is more than either the “‘natural” process[es] devoid of years of human interaction’ Martínez-Reyes attributes to the ENGOS or the additional species he asserts have been ‘planted or saved’ by the Maya (p. 108). Rather, it is both, and it is more. To take the view of the ‘nature industry’, one needs to find (or imagine) places untrammelled by people; in the Anthropocene, this is virtually impossible. But to take the view of the ‘community’, one needs to find (or imagine) places that have always been inhabited and used by people; unless one disregards evolution and the geological record, this too is impossible. The desire to conserve bio(cultural)diversity is an assertion of values, not facts or data; a challenge for post-conservation is to harmonise different value systems.

Bio(cultural)diversity can be found at many scales—in a milpa or a village, on the Yucatán Peninsula or across the globe. By focusing on the Maya of Tres Reyes, Martínez-Reyes reveals the importance of acting locally, living in a community, and enhancing the bio(cultural)diversity of a place, and makes a cogent case that the Maya do a better job sustaining themselves and their environment than do ENGOS with ill-conceived projects to extract economic value from the forest. But in ‘de-linking from the global and re-linking with the local [...] in the search for alternatives to modernity’ (p. 159), Martínez-Reyes misses a bigger picture. Millennia of milpas have homogenised the forest while international commerce is on the fast track to homogenise the culture. In the Anthropocene, far-flung communities really are connected to each other, and we need a new set of shared values to conserve and sustain a peopled nature.

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