

POLICY

REDD+ in Asia Pacific

Reducing emissions from forests is a key goal of international climate efforts. New research shows how ethnographic approaches can provide better outcomes for people and forests in Asia Pacific.

Andrew McGregor

Forest loss and the associated degradation of peatland is estimated to contribute 12–20% of global anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions — the second largest source of emissions after fossil-fuel combustion¹. The Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) mechanism, a key focus of global climate negotiations, aims to financially reward forest stakeholders who improve their carbon management. A recent special issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* provides a much needed update on how REDD+ is unfolding in the region. Written largely by geographers, anthropologists and political ecologists, the issue provides insights from Indonesia, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, from the perspectives of those most affected. The collection builds on recent contributions to global change research from social scientists^{2,3} by adopting grounded ethnographic approaches to explore the social, political and economic dynamics shaping success and failure.

The research shows how REDD+ initiatives differ across scale and space, and are transformed by the contexts in which they are implemented. Dixon and Challies⁴, for example, argue that REDD+ finance differs enormously depending on the motivations of the investors. Some seek a quick profit through the sale of REDD+ carbon credits while others commit to a broader range of outcomes motivated by principles of corporate social responsibility. The style of finance creates different types of opportunities and constraints for forest stakeholders.

At the national scale, Astuti and McGregor⁵ focus on the implementation strategies employed by the REDD+ Taskforce in Indonesia to transform the political ecology of forest loss. The unlikely phrase 'Beyond Carbon' has become a slogan for REDD+, providing a means for national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to pursue longstanding but unexpected goals such as Indigenous land rights. At a more local scale, affected communities are actively choosing to engage, reject or selectively negotiate REDD+ initiatives according to their interests. Far from being 'co-benefits', as



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Emissions reduction goals are an increasingly marginal motivation for communities to preserve forests. To reduce forest emissions global programs must empower local interests.

often represented in the REDD+ literature, non-carbon goals are found to be the primary motivation for the majority of forest stakeholders.

This type of malleability can be a strength if sufficiently responsive to local conditions⁶. When existing political economies and socio-ecological histories are not adequately integrated into planning and development, REDD+ initiatives can face stiff opposition^{7–10}. The high profile Kalimantan Forests and Climate Partnership (KFCP) project, for example, has run into problems partly because of entrenched community resistance to earlier development initiatives. The financial incentives on offer, while important, were not enough to overcome historic and ongoing concerns about access, elite capture, land rights, plantation economies, and justice. This leads Mulyani and Jepson⁹ to conclude that socio-ecological histories should be taken into account when deciding upon REDD+ project sites — some areas are likely to be more receptive and have greater capacity to engage than others.

Local support is vital to REDD+ success. Gaining informed support for such a complex program, however, is not easy or quick to achieve. Howell¹¹ shows that Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes inevitably reflect national and local dynamics. In post-authoritarian Indonesia this can result in poorly attended socialization sessions run by under-resourced NGOs seeking long-term support for a programme in which long-term funding is unclear. Howson and Kindon's¹² research in Central Kalimantan reveals unevenness within communities. Local power relations, authorities and social identities — based on gender, ethnicity or Indigeneity — shape who can engage with REDD+ and what sort of benefits are negotiated. Pasgaard's¹³ Cambodian analysis is similarly troubling, creating concerns that REDD+ reporting processes create self-reinforcing systems in which community priorities and concerns, rather than being of central importance, are 'lost in translation'. Mulyani and Jepson⁹ are

more hopeful, arguing that the Village Community Agreements used in the KFCP project boosted social learning about REDD+ and enhanced the capacity of local communities to negotiate their interests. However, local power relations, weak negotiating positions, time constraints, and uncertainties regarding the viability of the funding mechanism eventually contributed to community opposition.

Weaver¹⁴ reminds us, though, that REDD+ has the potential, when done well, to be a game-changer in terms of raising finance to improve human-forest relations. The issues identified in the collection, which do not engage with broader debates regarding the ethics of carbon trading, are not enough to call for a rejection of REDD+. They do, however, encourage serious reflection on current practices. Many of the problems stem from a disconnect between global and local interests. Whereas REDD+ industries prioritize forests as economically valuable carbon sinks, affected communities in Asia Pacific are more interested in livelihoods, land rights, and overcoming injustices. Such interests can compliment one another, yet conflicts are clearly emerging. A major stumbling block concerns the long-term viability of the REDD+ mechanism and the scale of funding available — it is hard for people to fully engage with a programme riven with such uncertainty. Such issues are amplified if the price of forest carbon is to be determined by market forces, creating

unwanted risks for already economically vulnerable communities, as has been the case for another high-profile policy, the Clean Development Mechanism.

More important is the need to reimagine REDD+ as an opportunity for affected communities to pursue particular social, political, economic and ecological outcomes. Rather than see REDD+ as a top-down initiative of the global community it should be seen as a negotiation between forest stakeholders who are pursuing diverse goals, most of which have little to do with climate concerns. For REDD+ to be successful it must go beyond financial payments to provide people with opportunities to improve their lives in locally significant ways. This takes time, effort and genuine dialogue between affected parties. It requires creativity and experimentation in coownership, comanagement, and coexistence, in which local aspirations, knowledge and ontologies are taken seriously¹⁵. The artificial separation of forest carbon from people, where the former is embedded as a clear priority in enabling income, risks marginalizing the latter.

The special issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* reminds REDD+ designers of the importance of recognizing people as crucial actors within forest landscapes, and reveals their considerable agency in shaping REDD+ outcomes. A one-size-fits-all approach will not be sufficiently responsive to the diverse contexts in which REDD+ is

being pursued. Instead, flexibility is required to reflect the different geographies, power relations and values associated with forests. This is occurring in some places, and on some issues, but not all. If REDD+ is to live up to its potential, it must engage with and respond to local people in just, significant, and empowering ways. If not, REDD+ projects will be resisted and deserve to fail. More ethnographic research, oriented at understanding local-global dynamics in planned project areas, can contribute to this goal. □

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CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Cultural knowledge and local risks

A focus on African American communities on the Eastern Shore of Maryland highlights the ways that local cultural knowledge differs from place to place, developing understanding of local climate risks and resources for adaptation.

Sarah Strauss

One of the key conclusions of the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) from the IPCC is that vulnerability to the impacts of climate change is not distributed evenly; marginalized communities are more likely to be at risk¹. While there is increasing evidence of impacts on natural systems, there is a much more limited repository of evidence documenting significant impacts of climate change on human systems, as they vary regionally and locally². A study by Christine Miller Hesed and Michael Paolisso³ in *Nature Climate Change* gives concrete evidence of the disparities in the distribution of risks as well as access to adaptive strategies for responding to

climate change impacts. The research focuses on local differences in identifying and addressing vulnerabilities, demonstrating that even in seemingly similar communities, adaptive capacity may be significantly different.

In January 2015, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) released a *Statement on Humanity and Climate Change*⁴. The document reinforces some of the IPCC's conclusions, namely that climate change is expected to intensify existing problems experienced by human communities and that these problems are already affecting communities in uneven ways, with the most vulnerable

at the greatest risk of the highest degree of suffering. This historic document accompanies a detailed report on the anthropological contribution to climate change research that also presents a framework for future directions in research and teaching⁵. The AAA is the largest organization of professional anthropologists in the world, with membership over 11,000. This is not only their first official statement about climate change, but it is also one of the few official positions that the AAA has taken that has strong policy implications extending beyond the association and its membership. The statement highlights the importance of attention to knowledge acquired in specific