

**Reed L. Wadley, ed. *Histories of the Borneo Environment: Economic, Political and Social Dimensions of Change and Continuity*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005 (Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 231). 311+ pages, plus maps, glossary, index.**

Jay B. Crain

This volume contains selected edited papers from the conference “Environmental Change in Native and Colonial Histories of Borneo: Lessons from the Past, Prospects for the Future,” held at Leiden in 2000, under the auspices of the International Institute for Asian Studies. The conference and this book were inspired by *Paper Landscapes: Explorations in the Environmental History of Indonesia*<sup>1</sup> and Reed Wadley’s three-year study in the Dutch archives at Leiden. The contributions examine the environmental history of this vast island from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Collectively, the authors bring to their arguments great expertise in the literature, long and intensive fieldwork experience, and, equally important, the opportunity to reflect on the other papers in the volume. While Borneo scholarship has long suffered from the linguistic and political divisions of the colonial interregnum, these papers provide a wide geographical perspective on the island, including Sarawak and Sabah (Malaysia), Brunei, and the three provinces of Indonesian Kalimantan. The book is divided into three parts. In the preface, Wadley provides an introduction where he briefly discusses some definitions of environmental history and summarizes the chapters that follow. He goes on to critically assess previous work and suggests a number of fruitful areas for future studies.

Part One, “Distant and Local Economies,” contains contributions that deal with the economic side of environmental history, particularly how trade in sea and forest products affected the island during the period of recorded history. Eric Tagliaocozzo describes the one-thousand year history of Chinese trade with northwest Borneo from its ascension during the Sung Dynasty, continuing into the period of late-colonial capitalism. Exploring the “entwined ecological and trade histories” (p. 27), he charts the metamorphoses of both the human and natural environments that reflected the vagaries of Chinese demand for the products of Borneo forests. In the next chapter, Bernard Sellato turns our attention to the interior peoples’ view of forest resources and the history of their trade. Focusing on the Bulungan region of what is now northern East Kalimantan, he examines changes in the trade of ten non-timber forest products from 1850–2000. His reconstruction of these changes suggests a consistent pattern during this period. Taking up the argument about whether native peoples were exploiters or conservationists, he concludes that traditional sustainable practices alternated with severe extraction behavior according to the varying level of external demand. Continuing with this issue, Cristina Eghenter’s chapter studies the collection of *gutta-percha* (natural latex) and *gaharu* (aloes wood) in the Apo Kayan region during the twentieth century. Writing from her experiences with the formation of the Kayan-Mentarang National Park, she argues convincingly that an understanding of the depletion of these resources (and, by extension, others) requires consideration of the totality of biological, economic, and social circumstances. Central to her argument is

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Boomgaard, Freek Colombijn, and David Henley, *Paper Landscapes: Explorations in the Environmental History of Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997).

the ability of communities to maintain control over forest territories through systems of *adat* (custom, tradition) that provide protection for gathering areas from outside collectors (both from coastal communities and from inland neighbors). The legal status of customary law, particularly as it applies to land, is still in considerable flux. Lesley Potter's chapter provides a comparative picture of the commodification of a variety of collected forest products (*gutta-percha*), mangrove resources (*jelutung*, catch), and planted crops (para rubber and tobacco) across the former Dutch and British colonial territories. She describes the changing environmental constructs and the corresponding approaches to understanding the environments of the different colonial systems from 1870–1940. She (as do others in this volume) sees continuities of these views into the present and argues that the dilemmas presented by environmental preservation remain areas of political and economic contestation.

Part Two, "Colonial and National Resource Politics," contains papers that examine state control over its peoples and the environment. Focusing on the Iban of West Kalimantan, Wadley's chapter describes how the Dutch and their Indonesian successors used mapped territories to control access to the natural resources of this vast region. Using archival materials and fieldwork, he recounts the effects of changing Dutch policies and the continual resistance and challenges to these. Local contestations continue today in the post-*reformasi* politics at the regional level. Amity Doolittle's chapter examines discourses of power used by colonial and later Malaysian regimes in Sabah (formerly British North Borneo) to create and justify centralized control over resources. By focusing on ideology, she convincingly brings to our attention the essential role played by the cognitive models of Europeans in constructing the natural and social environment, especially the effects of these ideas on policies and practices. Viewed historically, the arrogance of these hegemonistic discourses is very clear. She further shows, in a lovely narrative about a walk through the forest with two Malaysian forest rangers, how these discourses are alive and well today.

The chapter by Michael Dove and Carol Carpenter ingeniously examines the long and changing construction of the meaning of the *upas*, the so-called "poison tree." In the course of some two hundred years, the tree changes from being a thing of great fear and mystery to being an accessible object of naturalistic description. They convincingly argue that this shift reflected diminishing European fears about control over native peoples and their products.

Part Three, "Social Transformations," explores the relationship between social and environmental change. George Appell's chapter deals with the Rungus of Sabah, Malaysia. Basing his analysis on fieldwork extending across forty years, he describes the "dismantling of the Rungus cultural ecosystem" (p. 213). He describes how the traditional Rungus social, residential, religious, and economic lives existed as part of the natural world. The cognitive models of the colonial Europeans never enabled them to understand this. They systematically took the Rungus world apart as they intervened to change community life, religious practices, and subsistence patterns to fit into their concepts of society and nature. The Malaysian successors continue using these European models. Monica Janowski's chapter describes the dual symbolic and economic roles of certain varieties of wet-rice among the Kelabit of northern Sarawak. The prestige of wet-rice fields (expensive to build, maintain, and harvest) and the use of the rice from these fields in status-building naming ceremonies is apparently a

recent (1960s) development. Some of this activity is funded by educated Kelabit who have moved out of the highlands and work in towns and cities. Urban Kelabit in the milieu of inter-ethnic competition that characterizes the town of Miri found the highly valued *Bario* rice both a marker of their Kelabit identity and a valued commodity in the wider Sarawak marketplace. The final chapter by Graham Saunders is a very useful epilogue to what has proceeded. He reviews the ecological developments on the island since prehistoric times, starting with the domestication of rice (perhaps 5,000 years ago) until the arrival of that great transformer, the chainsaw. He reviews how perceptions of the environment changed (and are changing) and argues that it is not a simple task to evaluate environmental change.

A number of omissions in the book are clearly pointed out by Wadley in the preface. Adding to these, we may note that the coverage is largely directed at plants and peoples of the forests, whereas the coastal littoral is little considered. Sellato briefly summarizes the coast-to-river-to-upriver movement of trading kingdoms in the Bulungan. These were, and this must be, an aspect of the historical environment elsewhere on the island, the historical residue of old networks of Sulu, Bugis, Arab, and Chinese traders. There was, however, some movement in the other direction. A number of central Borneo peoples have stories that link their folk heroes to coastal rulers. Like Janowski's contemporary Kelabit, interior peoples have come to the coasts and in so doing reinvented their social and physical environment. As Wadley notes, additional work is needed to explore local constructions of environmental histories.

This book reveals how the environment, by its very construction, its preservation (and what that means), and the changing values of its products, relies on the connections among communities and even the personalities and convictions of individuals (e.g., the community leaders in Eghenter's chapter or the district officer in Appell's narrative). Certainly the different kinds of people who came to the island brought with them models with which to understand what they found. A comparative study of these would be illuminating. For example, the Europeans (and their post-colonial successors) sought (seek) the edges of things; the Chinese and southeast Asians sought (seek) the center. The English sought to define and delineate things; the Dutch (and likewise the Suharto regime) divided people, tied them to areas via *adat*, and manipulated their relationships with other communities.

This volume lives up to its title and clearly demonstrates the changing perceptions of the environment of Borneo and variously suggests how these perceptions reflect the political, cultural, and economic worlds of those who constructed/construct the environment. This is an important book, and given the examples of historical and ethnographic analyses within, including a myriad of suggestions for future study, it is highly recommended. The challenge to us is clearly indicated in the chapters by Dove and Carpenter, Appell, and Doolittle, where the social and historical nature of ideology is shown to underlie our construction of the environment. Saunders underscores this point across a long span of time. In the current climate of global debates about planetary warming and ozone levels, this should come as no surprise.

There is a sad postscript to this review. Reed Wadley died on July 28, 2008, after a two-year battle with Ewing Sarcoma. He was forty-six.