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Conserving exploitation? A political ecology of forestry policy in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

For more than a decade, Sierra Leonean resource management policy has been firmly embedded in broader political commitments to decentralisation and community ‘empowerment’. However, in response to a recent rapid incursion of foreign timber interests, the country’s Forestry Division has developed new legislation, recentralizing control of forests to the federal government. Despite its ostensibly ‘conservationist’ nature, the revised Forestry Act’s extensive requirements have (perversely) nearly illegalized subsistence and artisanal use of forest resources while easing access for large commercial timber companies. Yet such an outcome is not necessarily neoteric, as it is strongly reflective of earlier colonial practices relating to the protection and exploitation of nature. This paper examines the tensions and contradictions produced by this discursive entwining of ‘forest conservation’ and ‘timber production’ in historical and current Sierra Leonean forestry policies. Initially the paper presents a historical analysis of how ideas and practices around conservation and logging emerged during the early colonial period and their subsequent shaping through various historical processes. This provides an analytical and contextual foundation for a subsequent examination of the contemporary interactions between foreign timber companies, governmental actors and forest-reliant local communities.

Introduction

Since the early colonial era, West African forests have been politically and materially contested spaces. In this region, as elsewhere in Africa, colonial policies were consistently predicated on a perceived need to protect forest and other resources from an environmentally ‘ignorant’ and ‘destructive’ peasantry.¹ Following independence, post-colonial

¹ J. C. Ribot, “A history of fear: imagining deforestation in the West African dryland forests,” *Global Ecology and Biogeography*, 8:3-4 (1999): 291-300; P. A. Walker, “Democracy and environment: congruencies and contradictions in Southern Africa,” *Political Geography*, 18:3 (1999): 257-284.

administrations generally maintained such policies for largely the same reasons: states retained forest 'ownership' and rural forest users operated under ambiguous resource tenure while 'official' neo-Malthusian fears of environmental disaster supported approaches more like policing than extension.² Despite this legal authority, however, state agencies have often been extremely frustrated in their attempts to circumscribe local forest use activities.³ In many instances, even highly marginalized rural residents have found ways of undermining such policies, whether through open defiance, violence and protest,⁴ or more covert resistance such as 'quiet' disobedience.⁵ As a result, the outcome has been not so much a successful (if oppressive) system of conservation as a "lingering, embittered stalemate between African states unable to fully enforce conservation policies and local communities unable to fully escape state controls."⁶

Perhaps the most in-depth and influential recent analysis of these dynamics has been that of anthropologists James Fairhead and Melissa Leach.⁷ Building from in-depth fieldwork in Guinea to a broader regional

² T. A. Benjaminsen, "Natural-resource management, paradigm shifts, and the decentralization reform in Mali," *Human Ecology*, 25:1 (1997): 121-143; L. C. Becker, "Seeing green in Mali's woods: colonial legacy, forest use and local control," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91:3 (2001): 504-526; G. Foley "Sustainable woodfuel supplies from the dry tropical woodlands," ESMAP Technical Paper, 013 (Washington: ESMAP, 2001); P. Jagger et al., "Trading off environmental sustainability for empowerment and income: woodlot devolution in northern Ethiopia," *World Development*, 33:9 (2005): 1491-1510; Ribot, 1999.

³ D. A. Wardell and C. Lund, "Governing access to forests in northern Ghana: micro-politics and the rents of non-enforcement," *World Development*, 34:11 (2006): 1887-1906; E. Mapedza, "Forestry policy in colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe: continuity and change," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 33:4 (2007): 833-851.

⁴ S. A. Mvondo and P. R. Oyono, "An assessment of social negotiation as a tool of local management: a case study of the Dimako Council forest, Cameroon," *Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research*, 19:4 (2004): 78-84; M. Davis, "Forests and conflict in Cambodia," *International Forestry Review* 7:2 (2005): 161-164; M. Ejigu, "Land, forests, insecurity and conflict," *International Forestry Review*, 8:1 (2006): 72-77.

⁵ P. A. Walker and P. E. Peters, "Maps, metaphors and meanings: boundary struggles and village forest use on private and state land in Malawi," *Society and Natural Resources*, 14:5 (2001): 411-424; P. R. Oyono, "One step forward, two steps back? Paradoxes of natural resources management decentralisation in Cameroon," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42:1 (2004): 91-111.

⁶ Walker, 1999: 264.

⁷ For example: J. Fairhead and M. Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and ecology in a forest-savanna mosaic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

study, they critique the conceptual foundations of such ostensibly 'conservationist' policies, pointing to the role of a self-perpetuating environmental narrative of population growth-driven linear deforestation and degradation. This narrative (and its attendant discourse), they argue, verified by repetition rather than empirical investigation, is predicated on out-dated successional ecology as well as a mistaken version of regional environmental history.⁸ As such, in their view, state agencies historical and ongoing preservationist efforts (in Guinea Savanna areas at least) are fundamentally misguided as the objects of their concern are not the 'last remnants' of once extensive forests, but anthropogenic forest islands derived from savanna.

Despite the valuable insights of this work, its analysis of forestry policy-making dynamics is distinctly limited. While the examination of local-scale ecology, land cover change and forest management practices is detailed and nuanced,⁹ this is largely at the expense of in-depth engagement with the historical importance of commercial timber production. Similarly, though the analysis of the evolution of international environmental narratives is well developed, its role in shaping forestry policy in West Africa is somewhat over-stated, to the exclusion of attention to the role of productivist concerns within the forestry department itself. In short, there is an over-emphasis of discursive dynamics and not enough attention to political economy such

1996a); J. Fairhead and M. Leach, *Reframing Deforestation: Global analyses and local realities: studies in West Africa* (London: Routledge, 1998a).

⁸ J. Fairhead and M. Leach, "False forest history Complicit Social Analysis: Rethinking Some West African Environmental Narratives," *World Development* 23:6 (1995a): 1023-1035; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, "Reframing Forest History: A Radical Reappraisal of the Roles of People and Climate in West African Vegetation Change", in Thackwray S. Driver and Graham P. Chapman, eds. *Time-Scales and Environmental Change* (New York: Routledge 1996b):169-195.

⁹ For example see J. Fairhead, J. and M. Leach, "Whose social forestry and why? People, trees and managed continuity in Guinea's forest-savanna mosaic," *Zeitschrift fur Wirtschaftsgeographie* 37:2 (1993): 86-101; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, "Local agro-ecological management and forest-savanna transitions: the case of Kissidougou, Guinea", in T. Binns, ed. *People and Environment in Africa* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 1995b): 163-170; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, "Culturing trees: the political ecology of Kissi and Kuranko forest islands", in K. Seeland, ed. *Nature is Culture: Indigenous Knowledge and Socio-Cultural Aspects of Trees and Forests in Non-European Cultures* (London: IT Publications, 1997a): 7-18; M. Leach and J. Fairhead, "Ruined settlements and new gardens: gender and soil-ripening among Kuranko farmers in the forest-savanna transition zone," *IDS Bulletin* 26:1 (1995): 24-32.

that ‘official’ conservationist rhetoric is taken largely at face value and only its underlying logic is examined.

This paper presents a preliminary re-examination of this influential thesis using the example of Sierra Leone. Engaging historical documentation and scholarly literature as well as recent empirical data collected by the authors, it finds Fairhead and Leach’s analysis incomplete. It argues that, despite the historical and contemporary prominence of ‘environmental’ discourse in official rhetoric, Sierra Leone’s forestry policies have been, and continue to be, predominantly shaped by a concern not for conservation *per se*, but for preserving forest resources to support the ‘right kind’ of (modern, rationalized, commercial and tax-generating) exploitation.

Sierra Leonean Forest Debates

Since the earliest days of exploration by European colonial powers, West Africa’s Guinea Savanna has been framed (in ‘official’ circles at least) by a Western neo-Malthusian crisis narrative, in which the present forest-grassland mosaic is understood as a degraded landscape, anthropogenically derived from a once pristine primordial forest. In several seminal works of the 1990s derived from research in Guinea’s Kissidougou’s region, James Fairhead and Melissa Leach presented a trenchant and wide-ranging critique of this perspective.¹⁰ Employing multiple methods including archival analysis, oral history and archaeological research they developed an empirically-based counter-narrative that presented an essentially two-fold challenge to ‘orthodox’ assumptions surrounding the extent and causes of deforestation. First, they claimed, the standard story was premised on outdated and inaccurate

¹⁰ Which, in many quarters, is still very alive, their critique notwithstanding; for example see Fairhead and Leach, 1995a; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Reading forest history backwards: the interaction of policy and local land use in Guinea 1893-1993,” *Environment and History* 1:1 (1995c): 55-91; Fairhead and Leach, 1996a; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Enriching the landscape: social history and the management of transition ecology in the forest-savanna mosaic (Republic of Guinea),” *Africa* 66:1 (1996c): 14-46; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Rethinking the Forest-Savanna Mosaic: Colonial Science and its Relics in West Africa”, in M. Leach and R. Mearns, eds. *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996d):105-121; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Webs of Power and the Construction of Environmental Policy Problems: Forest Loss in Guinea”, in R. Grillo and R. Stirrat, eds. *Discourses of Development: anthropological perspectives* (New York: Berg Publishers 1997b): 35-58; M. Leach and J. Fairhead, “Natural resource management: the reproduction and use of environmental misinformation in Guinea’s forest-savanna transition zone,” *IDS Bulletin* 25:2 (1994): 81-87.

(successional, equilibrium) ecological theory,¹¹ which assumed – based on average rainfall – that the Guinea Savanna region ‘should’ have continuous tropical moist forest as its ‘natural’, ‘climax’ vegetation. Second, they argued, it was rooted in an historical assumption that this forest had, in fact, recently existed (until it was removed by various local human actors) a notion they found was not borne out by the archival record. In contrast, their research demonstrated how the ‘forests islands’ of the Guinea Savanna landscape were not remnants of a ‘virgin’ West African forest, but had been cultivated within the grassland matrix by previous generations of inhabitants. In this context, they argued, the long history of ‘conservationist’ West African forest policy must be properly understood as the self-perpetuating legacy of European colonialist ‘misreadings’ of the landscape that produced a ‘false forest past’.¹² Ultimately, these findings provided a basis for their broader West African deforestation thesis in which they plainly state that “forest loss [across West Africa] during the twentieth century has been vastly exaggerated.”¹³

In many ways, the potency and relevance of this broad thesis for understanding historical and contemporary issues surrounding West African forests are undiminished. Misperceptions of environmental degradation and a tendency to blame the rural poor remain common throughout much of Africa, including Sierra Leone.¹⁴ However, as this paper contends, Fairhead and Leach’s explanation of forest policy-making dynamics is incomplete due to an overemphasis of the role of conservationist discourse while neglecting key political economic dynamics – particularly the commodification of nature which was a key element of the European colonisation project in Africa.¹⁵ As a result, Fairhead and Leach take the conservation rhetoric more or less at face value, ignoring its relationship to underlying concerns with protecting and supporting modern, rationalised commercial timber production.

¹¹ For example see: F. E. Clements, “The Relict Method in Dynamic Ecology,” *Journal of Ecology* 22:1 (1934): 39-68; F. E. Clements, *Research Methods in Ecology*, (Ayer Publishing, 1974).

¹² Fairhead and Leach, 1996b.

¹³ Fairhead and Leach, 1998a, xiv.

¹⁴ For example see: P. G. Munro, “Deforestation: Constructing Problems and Solutions on Sierra Leone’s Freetown Peninsula,” *The Journal of Political Ecology*, 16:1 (2009): 104-124.

¹⁵ H. Bernstein and P. Woodhouse, “Telling Environmental Change Like It Is? Reflections on a Study in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1:2 (2001): 283-324.

For one thing, while their critique of deforestation due to demographic pressures is grounded in detailed local-scale research, their discounting of land-cover change due to colonial-era timber extraction appears to be less well founded. Regarding the case of Sierra Leone, for example, using official records of 19th century colonial lumber exports, they calculated that the amount of timber registered on ship cargoes exiting the country could only have caused a very minimal amount of deforestation.¹⁶ In contrast, Fenda Akiwumi has demonstrated that the 19th century period of timber trading in Sierra Leone was characterised by poor recordkeeping, under-reporting of cargo and widespread smuggling.¹⁷ As such, any historical records of ‘officially’ exported timber represent only a small fraction of the actual timber that was extracted and traded. While Akiwumi’s findings do not discredit Fairhead and Leach’s thesis in its entirety, they do strongly suggest that certain aspects of their work need reconsideration.

This discrepancy is, however, largely symptomatic of a lack of consideration of how the forestry policies of West African countries such as Sierra Leone have been shaped not only by broader environmental narratives but also (and perhaps even more importantly) by the imperatives of commercial timber production and the foundational commitments of forestry departments to particular visions of ‘appropriate’ forest resource exploitation.

Controlling and Exploiting Nature: Europeans and Sierra Leonean Forests

From its earliest days, the Sierra Leonean forestry department has been primarily oriented toward European-style commercial timber

¹⁶ Fairhead and Leach, 1996b; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Deforestation in question: dialogue and dissonance in ecological, social and historical knowledge of West Africa,” *Paideuma*, no. 43 (1997c): 227–252; Fairhead and Leach, 1998a; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Reconsidering the extent of deforestation in the twentieth century West Africa,” *Unasylva* 192:49 (1998b): 38–46; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Shaping Socio-Ecological and Historical Knowledge of Deforestation in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Togo”, in R. Cline-Cole and C. Madge, eds. *Contesting Forestry in West Africa*, (Aldershot: Ashgate: 2000a): 64–95.

¹⁷ F. A. Akiwumi, “Conflict Timber, Conflict Diamonds: Parallels in the Political Ecology of 19th and 20th Century Resource Exploitation in Sierra Leone”, in Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang, ed. *Africa's Development in the Twenty-first Century: Pertinent Socio-Economic and Development Issues* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006a): 109–125; F. A. Akiwumi, *Environmental and Social Change in Southwestern Sierra Leone: Timber Extraction (1832-1898) and Rutile Mining (1967-2005)*, PhD Dissertation (San Marcos: Texas State University, 2006b).

harvesting.¹⁸ Indeed, its very establishment in 1912 was predicated by the need to control, rationalise and derive colonial revenue from the chaotic and opportunistic logging that characterised the country's early colonial period. While many authors have identified this establishment of forestry departments and forest reserves in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in West Africa as early the early history of conservationism in the region,¹⁹ early forest production reserves were more about formalising the exploitation of a commodity than about preserving ecology. Similar to Sierra Leone, forestry departments were being established across Africa during this period,²⁰ two decades after the infamous "Scramble for Africa" during the 1890s. Conceptually, the creation of these forestry departments can be understood as an extension of 'The Scramble'. During the 1890s territories had been secured and the next step was the creation of institutions and infrastructure to exploit their natural resources for the benefit of European economies. Moreover, as the colonial adventure was intended to be profitable (or at least self-supporting), central control was also required to generate and protect state revenues.²¹ As a result, the formalisation and institutionalisation of natural resource exploitation for export was a key objective of the recently established colonies.

In Sierra Leone this orientation was clearly evident in the founding mandate of the country's forestry department, shaped by earlier studies conducted by two forestry 'experts' from Britain: Arthur H. Unwin and Charles E. Lane-Poole. These studies recommended that indigenous agriculture and forest exploitation techniques should be discouraged and restricted, while European timber exploitation should be actively

¹⁸ Commercial timber trading in Sierra Leone started as early as 1816, involving timber barons, freed captives, missionaries, ex-slave trader and colonial officers. In 1858 the colonial government attempted to introduce a licensing for cutting down trees. However at this time the jurisdiction of colony still only extended across the 30km long Freetown Peninsula, meaning here was minimal impact on most timber operations and thus unsurprisingly it was subsequently overturned in 1872; see Akiwumbi, 2006a, 2006b; C. Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁹ For example see: R. A. Pullan, "Conservation and the Development of National Parks in the Humid Tropics of Africa," *Journal of Biogeography*, 15:1 (1988): 171-183.

²⁰ R. H. Grove, *Ecology Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400-1940* (Isle of Harris: White Horse Press, 1997); Fairhead and Leach, 1998a.

²¹ Becker, 2001; D. Meredith, "State Controlled Marketing and Economic "Development": The Case of West African Produce during the Second World War," *The Economic History Review* 39:1 (1986): 77-91.

promoted.²² Thus, the establishment of the forestry department and forest reserves was not so much about conserving forests, rather it was about ensuring the ‘right kind’ of exploitation of the country’s forest: commercial timber exploitation. A quote from the British Government’s Travelling Commissioner in Sierra Leone during this period illustrates this point well:

Of course where Nature has been so lavish the natives are content with what they find to hand; it needs European intelligence to see what further wealth could be produced by cultivation, and to discover the uses to which the cultivated article could be applied, as well as a knowledge of the markets in which it could be sold.²³

The colonialists Unwin, Lane-Poole, and Alldridge all exhibited derogatory attitudes towards the ‘native’ population, casting them as ignorant resource degraders. The perception of an ecologically degraded Sierra Leone landscape was a powerful one, framed in terms of desiccation theory – a colonial pseudo-science that hypothesised the impacts of (perceived) deforestation on surrounding climates and soils.²⁴ This false construction has been the focus of Fairhead and Leach’s work, whereby the notion of the poor as ignorant forest degraders is still prominent in contemporary discourse, subsequently influencing policy outcomes. Despite the spurious basis of desiccation science, it ultimately provided the early colonial governmental justification for taking control of the forests in the name of conservation.²⁵

In line with this protectionist rhetoric, the newly founded forestry department quickly established a system of forest reserves around the country most notably in the Gola Forest in the east of the country.²⁶

²² C. E. Lane-Poole, *Report on the Forest of Sierra Leone* (London: Waterlow and Sons Limited 1911); A. H. Unwin, *Report on the Forestry Problems in Sierra Leone* (London: Waterlow and Sons Limited 1909); also see Munro, 2009.

²³ T. J. Alldridge, *A transformed colony: Sierra Leone as it was, and as it is its Progress Peoples, Native Customs and Undeveloped Wealth* (London: Seeley and Co. Limited, 1910): 356.

²⁴ For more detailed discussion of this see: Fairhead and Leach 1998a; J. Fairhead and M. Leach, “Desiccation and Domination: Science and Struggles over Environment and Development in Colonial Guinea,” *The Journal of African History* 41:1 (2000b): 35-54.

²⁵ Fairhead and Leach, 1998a, 2000a.

²⁶ Akiwumbi 2006b; P. Richards, “Saving the rain forest? Contested futures in conservation”, in Sandra Wallman, ed. *Contemporary Futures: perspectives from Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1992): 138-153; P. Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: war, youth & resources in Sierra Leone*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann

While local Sierra Leonean forest users were excluded from these reserves in line with the ‘fortress conservation’ model of the day,²⁷ however, these were not conceived as parks but rather as *production* reserves from which timber could be transported to Freetown by railway.²⁸ Moreover, these reserves were not ‘production’ oriented in name only, but for much of the colonial period were heavily exploited, particularly during the Second World War, when logging reached unprecedented levels in order to aid the war effort.²⁹ Such an approach has continued into the post-colonial era, notably in the late 1960s, during which the Sierra Leonean Government made efforts to stimulate the commercial forestry sector to increase national income.³⁰ Thus early colonial foresters not only *misread* the Sierra Leonean landscape as degraded, as Fairhead and Leach contend, but they also *reread* the forest as a commercial commodity; a combination of discourses that, as the next section illustrates, remains relevant and powerful today.

Global timber markets and Sierra Leonean forestry policy today

Over the decades since its founding, the Sierra Leonean forestry department has undergone some significant shifts in both its national importance and its mandate, particularly in recent years. In particular, during the 1980s and 90s – facing a stagnated timber industry, a major decline in its budget allocations and increasing environmentalist pressure from donor agencies – it was obliged to shift its programs toward more purely conservation-oriented objectives. Nonetheless, in the past few years, rising global timber consumption has triggered a resurgence of interest in Sierra Leonean timber, and the development of a new forestry policy that, despite its conservationist rhetoric, is once again quite explicitly oriented toward the commercial sector.

In contrast to the pivotal importance of timber revenues to Sierra Leone during the 19th and early 20th centuries, after the 1930s production began

1996); H. B. S. Kandeh and P. Richards, “Rural People as Conservationists: Querying neo-Malthusian assumptions about biodiversity in Sierra Leone,” *Africa*, 66:1 (1996): 90-103.

²⁷ R. P. Neumann, *Imposing wilderness: struggles over livelihood and nature preservation in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

²⁸ J. I. Clarke, *Sierra Leone in Maps* (London: University of London Press, 1969).

²⁹ R. A. Cline-Cole, “Wartime Forest Energy Policy and Practice in British West Africa: Social and Economic Impact on the Labouring Classes 1939-45”, *Africa*, 63:1 (1993): 56-79.

³⁰ A. Grainger and W. Konteh, “Autonomy, ambiguity and symbolism in African politics: The development of forest policy in Sierra Leone,” *Land Use Policy*, 24:1 (2007): 42-61.

to gradually decline as discoveries of diamonds, gold, iron ore, rutile and bauxite initiated a shift toward mineral exports. As well, from independence until the 1990s, the mineral focus became still more pronounced due to its importance in supporting Siaka Stevens' patrimonial governance regime.³¹ By the 1970s, the only significant logging in the country was that conducted by the (now defunct) state-owned Forest Industries Corporation in the eastern region around the Gola forest. By the end of the decade, however, this too ground to a halt,³² not least because of the dismantling of the railways which made lumber transportation much more difficult.³³ As such, during the 1980s the once prominent forestry department found itself occupying shifting terrain: no longer allocator and regulator of timber concessions; under-funded and unable to 'police' the subsistence practices of rural residents, its role became uncertain.

During the 1990s, the emergence of global environmental and decentralisation discourses, institutionalised by international conventions, agencies donors and NGOs,³⁴ 'provided' the forestry department a new mandate. In many ways these two core principles of contemporary environmental governance – to prioritise conservation over 'development' and replace top-down administration with 'community empowerment' – were in tension with the department's historical orientation. Nonetheless, during and following the 1990s civil war the forestry department was in no position to object as it was sorely understaffed and 95 percent dependent on donor funding for field activities.³⁵ Moreover, there was also domestic political pressure as the Sierra Leonean President himself had committed to a nation-wide decentralisation crusade, announcing at the initiative's 2004 re-launch:³⁶

³¹ M. Boas, "Liberia and Sierra Leone – dead ringers? The logic of neopatrimonial rule," *Third World Quarterly*, 25:5 (2001): 697-723; Richards 1996.

³² V. R. Dorjahn, "The economies of Sierra Leone and Liberia", in V. R. Dorjahn and B. L. Isaac, eds. *Essays on the Economic Anthropology of Liberia and Sierra Leone* (Philadelphia Institute of Liberian Studies, 1979): 1-25; Richards 1992.

³³ M. C. Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: violence, history and the everyday in Sierra Leone* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Richards 1996.

³⁴ A. Agrawal and C. Gibson, "Enchantment and disenchantment: The role of community in natural resource conservation," *World Development*, 27:4 (1999): 629-649; J. P. Platteau, "Monitoring elite capture in community-driven development" *Development and Change*, 35:2 (2004): 223-246.

³⁵ Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) *National biodiversity Report* (Freetown: Government of Sierra Leone, 2003).

³⁶ During the Civil War period (1991-2001) the Sierra Leone Government essentially lost control of its forests, first to the rebel forces that occupied them, then later to the

Our democracy will remain hollow unless it is planted, nurtured and sustained at the grassroots level... communities, as far as possible, must be empowered to manage their own local affairs.³⁷

As a result, rhetorically at least,³⁸ by the mid-2000s the forestry department had shouldered its dual (and somewhat conflictual) new role as promoter of ‘community forestry’ (empowering local actors “to plan and manage their own development,”³⁹ and as educator to “engender a significant change in community attitudes and values...towards the environment.”⁴⁰

Just a few short years later, however, the Sierra Leonean forestry policy arena would be disrupted by a crisis linked to yet another set of international developments. During the past two decades, the developing world has experienced a major influx of foreign investment in natural resources. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Chinese presence has been of particular importance.⁴¹ Due to exponential growth in its wood products manufacturing industries,⁴² and major domestic timber shortfalls,⁴³ China

‘Civil Defence Forces,’ a militia of village level hunting groups: see Richards 1996; D. Hoffman “The Meaning of a Militia: Understanding the Civil Defence Forces of Sierra Leone,” *African Affairs*, 106:425 (2007): 639-662; M. Leach, “New Shapes to Shift: War, Parks and The Hunting Person in Modern West Africa,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6:4 (2000):577-595.

³⁷ As the former president was careful to point out, some decentralisation reforms had been initiated in the mid-1990s but were interrupted by “the 1997 military junta and its rebel collaborators”; see T. A. Kabbah, “Statement by the President, His Excellency Alhaji Dr. A.T. Kabbah at the relaunching of the Local Government Reform and Decentralisation Programme” (Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 February 2004), 1-2.

³⁸ Though in practice little changed in the field due to budgetary and human resources constraints. See: GoSL 2003; Institutional Reform and Capacity Building Project (IRCBP), *Institutional Reform and Capacity Building Project (IRCBP) Final report* (Freetown: Government of Sierra Leone, 2004).

³⁹ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS) *State of the nation: Ministerial report*. (Freetown: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security, 2003): 17.

⁴⁰ GoSL, 2003: 161.

⁴¹ M. Davies, “China's developmental model comes to Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 35:115 (2008): 134-137; J. Holslag, “Commerce and prudence: revising China’s evolving Africa policy,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 8:3 (2008): 325-352; R. Kaplinsky, “What does the rise of China do for industrialisation in Sub-Saharan Africa?,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 35:115 (2008): 7-22.

⁴² G. Auld, L. H. Gulbransen and C. L. McDermott, “Certification Schemes and the Impacts on Forests and Forestry,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* no.

has become the world's largest log importer,⁴⁴ with imports from Africa becoming increasingly important.⁴⁵ From 1998-2003 China's share of West African log exports rose from 25 to 42 percent,⁴⁶ and already in 2004 Gabon, Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon alone accounted for 14% of China's raw log imports.⁴⁷ Moreover, as China's wood demand continues to grow, Sino-African timber trade is expected to double over the next decade.⁴⁸ This has caused the potential economic value of Sierra Leone's and West Africa's timber to be reemphasised.

In many West and Central African countries with active timber industries these developments have manifested through gradual shifts accruing over a decade or two. In Sierra Leone, however, they have been both precipitous and surprising. In early 2007 several Chinese companies moved into northern Sierra Leone and – bypassing the forestry department – cut and exported shiploads of *Azelia Africana* and *Pterocarpus Erinaceus* timbers from community woodlands. Despite significant delays before knowledge of these developments reached the forestry department, once alerted, it took dramatic action. First, in order to take control of the situation, it lobbied the office of the President for nationwide bans on all tree harvesting and export, which were enacted in November 2007.⁴⁹ Second, frustrated with the way its authority (and revenue claims) had been circumvented, it set to work on developing a

33 (2008): 187-211; J. Mayer and P. Fajarnes “Tripling Africa's primary exports: what, how, where?” *Journal of Development Studies*, 44:1 (2008):80-102.

⁴³ Michael Stone, “China and Certification: A Questionable Future,” *Journal of Forestry*, 104:6 (2006): 332-333.

⁴⁴ J. Zhang and J. Gan, “Who will meet China's import demand for forest products?,” *World Development* 35:12 (2007): 2150-2160; S. Démurger, H. YuanZhou and Y. Weiyong, “Forest management policies and resource balance in China: an assessment of the current situation,” *The Journal of Environment and Development*, 18:1 (2009): 17-41.

⁴⁵ Z. Chunquan, R. Taylor and F. Guoqiang, *China's wood market, trade and the environment* (Beijing: Science press USA Inc and WWF international 2004); D. E. de Blas, and M. R. Perez, “Prospects for reduced impact logging in Central African logging concessions,” *Forest Ecology and Management*, 256:7 (2008): 1509–1516; Holsag.

⁴⁶ S. A. White et al., *China and the global market for forest products: transforming trade to benefit forests and livelihoods* (Washington, D.C.: Forest Trends, 2006).

⁴⁷ S. Naidu and M. Davies, “China fuels its future with Africa's riches,” *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 13:2 (2006): 69-83.

⁴⁸ Naidu and Davies, 2006; White et al., 2006.

⁴⁹ Greg Hiemstra-van der Horst, “‘We are Scared to Say No’: Facing Foreign Timber Companies in Sierra Leone's Community Woodlands,” *Journal of Development Studies*, 47:4 (2011): 574-594..

longer term solution. In early June 2008, invoking generalized narratives of ‘deforestation’, ‘desertification’ and ‘global warming’, it announced new legislation subjecting all tree harvesting to (re)centralized controls and drastically heavier fees. As a senior officer explained on public radio, ‘the main purpose of this new policy is: government wants to control the forest, we want to control it.’

In a many ways, the somewhat heavy-handed approach of the new policy to these developments is quite understandable, and perhaps even appropriate. Given dramatic and unsettling nature of the illegal logging crisis, particularly in this somewhat politically delicate and uncertain post-war period, the strong ‘command and control’ approach taken in the new policy is not entirely unsurprising. As well, given the department’s historically ‘protectivist’ discourse, and in the context of Fairhead and Leach’s analysis, it comes as little shock that the policy’s announcement has been surrounded by ‘conservationist’ rhetoric. As one District Forest Officer (DFO) explained, echoing the likes of Unwin and Lane-Poole: “reforms have been issued out...[because] in the past there was lawlessness, in the past people used to connive – to exploit these resources without renewing [them].” More perplexing, however, (though perhaps still not entirely surprising) is the way in which the ‘indiscriminate’ exploitation, which the new policy is supposed to regulate, has been at least as strongly tied to the activities of rural farmers and other domestic forest users rather than those of the foreign companies whose activities precipitated its development. As one Forest Department official expressed:

We cannot just encourage this subsistence farming – “go ahead...cut and go and move there, forget that grass grows in, wild fires come” – so that at the end of the day you get grassland entrance.

In line with this rhetoric, the policy provides a startling array of cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and heavy new fees that must now be negotiated and paid before access to forest resources can be granted.⁵⁰ From a strict conservation perspective, this approach would appear to be largely self defeating as they do not present a significant barrier to large timber companies, while subsistence production will be largely pushed into the realm of illegality.⁵¹ One need not read between the lines (nor even far into the policy), however, to discover that it is far from solely conservation-driven. According to introduction to the policy proposal

⁵⁰ Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), *Forestry Development, Exploitation and Trade Reforms* (Freetown: Government of Sierra Leone, 2008).

⁵¹ Hiemstra-van der Horst, 2011.

itself, “during the war and thereafter, there was a breakdown in law and order...the ultimate result has been a mosaic of small logging companies...making management by Forestry Division very difficult.”⁵² In essence, the policy is not intended to reduce production, so much as to ‘lean up’ the timber industry, “result[ing] in larger and more integrated companies as many of the smaller [read: domestic] companies, increasingly unable to obtain the forests, go out of business.”⁵³ Moreover, this is to be centrally controlled by the forestry department:

because we know what the land surface area is, we know the quantum of trees that are in the north, we know the number of trees, we know the species that are in the north, the south and the East [provinces], So we know the quantity of timber that [may]...be removed from each area.⁵⁴

Finally, a key concern is that all forest-related activities, subsistence or commercial, must generate revenue to support the department’s activities. As one DFO explained, from the department’s perspective a key concern regarding the illegal logging episode was that “concession agreements were made only at the communities...[and] they were bringing some income to the communities but very little...was going to the government.” Another echoed this view: “If you...go ahead leaving the authorities out, that is cheating. So they have to pay the right amount and it goes to government coffers.”

In sum, the motivations, objectives and provisions of Sierra Leone’s new forestry policy, like those of the past, cannot be fully understood solely by reference to the influences of international environmental discourses and narratives. While these clearly remain influential they may also be understood as instrumental, serving (whether deployed cynically or sincerely) to support and justify not a ‘purist’ approach of conservation for its own sake, but establishment of ‘right kind’ of exploitation: rationalised, (centrally) controlled and taxable.

Conclusion

This article has offered a new analytical frame with which to examine forest history in Sierra Leone; providing both an extension and critique of Fairhead and Leach’s earlier work in West Africa. In particular, it has illustrated the close relationship that exists between ‘conservation’ and ‘rational’ exploitation discourses in forestry policy, despite their

⁵² GoSL, 2008: 1.

⁵³ GoSL, 2008: 1.

⁵⁴ District Forestry Officer, Personal Communication 2008.

seemingly disparate objectives. The early colonial ‘conservation’ of Sierra Leonean forests had a focus on centralised control, which involved restricting subsistence use, while providing laws and infrastructure to promote formalised commercial timber exploitation. While this was often dressed up in the rhetoric of the colonial pseudo-science of desiccation theory and the perception of a degraded landscape, the underlying objective always remained the transformation of the country’s forests into generators of profitable commodities. Moreover, neither the transition to independence, nor contemporary developments such as the rise of a modern environmental discourse and the emergence of the (nascent) global forest governance regime have brought any fundamental change to this approach. Contemporary forestry policy documents seamlessly integrate discussions of the urgent need to protect forests (for biodiversity and climate change) with the imperatives of improving the efficiency of the country’s forestry sector with the aid of large timber companies. Between the colonial era and the present, the specific ‘conservationist’ rhetoric used to rationalise centralised control of forest management country’s forest might have changed, but the focus on commercial exploitation has not.

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