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REVIEW OF: TROPICAL DEFORESTATION: SMALL FARMERS AND LAND
CLEARING IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON. by Thomas K. Rudel with Bruce
Horowitz. Columbia University Press, New York 234 pp.

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REVIEW OF: TROPICAL DEFORESTATION: SMALL FARMERS AND LAND CLEARING IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON. by Thomas K. Rudel with Bruce Horowitz. Columbia University Press, New York 234 pp.

This book provides a highly readable account of how and why tropical deforestation occurs, with a review of problems and controversies about forest clearing throughout the tropics and a detailed case study in Ecuador. A large part of the funding dispensed by international aid agencies on the basis of need to slow tropical deforestation, and thus avoid its environmental impacts, is based on "immiserization" theories of deforestation--the idea that it is primarily driven by the poor clearing forest to avoid starvation. Rudel and Horowitz muster a wealth of information pointing to other explanations of deforestation as better fitting the facts. Chief among these is what the authors term the "lead development/coalition" model.

This book does an excellent job of identifying social processes and actors in the deforestation process. That the qualitative picture arrived at is different from the one guiding development aid indicates the gulf that must be crossed in order to have effective measures to diminish rates of forest loss. The book contains much quantitative data on the Ecuadorian case study, obtained in a series of visits over a period of 18 years. The book also makes clear the distance that we still need to go to have quantitative models to predict the effect of different actions on deforestation rates. Such predictive models represent the next step that will be needed to make sustainable development out of environmental services obtained through avoidance of deforestation.

The kind of work contained in this book is much more likely to lead to valid models of deforestation than are generalizations derived from regressions that try to relate economic, population and other indicators to deforestation rates in a wide array of countries. The study makes clear case-specific nature of deforestation, and that the process is not immune to understanding through quantitative methods. There is no shortcut to understanding deforestation: the example of Rudel and Horowitz needs to be emulated by researchers in a wide variety of tropical forests.

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