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Because of its extraordinary ecological complexity and associated cultural diversity, South-East Asia is one of the most interesting and important regions in which to examine environmental change. In recent decades the dramatic rates of change which have accompanied the rise and crash of the region’s economies have had profound impacts on its environment and produced challenges of global import.

*Environmental challenges in Southeast Asia* begins with several critical studies of colonial constructions of the environment and indigenous resource practices (Bryant and Colombijn). It ends with a deconstruction of North/South rhetorics on the environment from a South-East Asian perspective (Zawawi). While the contemporary political dynamic of competing global resource interests remains a backdrop...
to the collection, its great strength lies in the rich, historically informed and close to the ground detail of the case studies presented. These span some of the most significant and controversial issues faced by the region at the end of the twentieth century: deforestation, the depletion of fisheries, population pressure, land use, globalization and the place of colonial and post-colonial developmentalist ideologies in the process of environmental change.

Undoubtedly, its most distinctive contribution to the burgeoning literature on the environment in South-East Asia is the temporal depth this collection of studies brings to the understanding of the contemporary situation. Many of the environmental challenges faced by the region in the present can be traced to perspectives and structural arrangements established in the colonial period. Several studies show how colonial attitudes, for example towards the place of women and indigenous cultivation methods (Colombijn), become the model for contemporary bureaucrats’ misplaced developmentalist assumptions—although an implicit ‘State’ bias towards intensified production and gender hierarchy has arguably as important an explanatory role as colonial tutelage. Attitudes towards productivity as the primary measure of proper resource use, towards the ‘backwardness’ of indigenous resource management (in particular, shifting cultivation), and the sectoral focus within state bureaucracy, are reproduced in contemporary policy. Moreover, the externalization of social costs to local people by political and economic elites who profit from extraction policies has been one of the key features of state-sponsored natural resource extraction under both colonial and post-colonial regimes of governance.

All these topics are approached with an appreciation of complexity and detail that belies neat or simplistic correlations. The studies of disease, environmental change and population expansion and movement in Borneo (Knappen and Parnwell/King) produce a multidirectional picture of the ways in which these factors interact. Predictably, resource depletion and migration are patterns whose feedback effects are mutually reinforcing. But this picture is qualified too by socio-cultural and other contextual or locational factors that significantly complicate outcomes. Changing land uses resulting from in-migration, competing resource extraction interests and local responses to commercial opportunities are issues explored by Heersink, Psota, van den Top, Moonen, and Sutton/McMorrow. These studies give a similarly mixed picture of cause and effect, long and short-term sustainability, large and small-scale impacts, resource depletion and resourceful local adaptation. Heersink for example, points to the prosperous economies developed by the Bugu cultural group in Southern Sulawesi whose mixed economies involving migration and market niche adaptation enable them to thrive despite their marginal ecological base.

Finally, the mostly unsustainable use of fisheries (Backhaus, Masae/McGregor), forests (van den Top) and tourism resources (Backhaus, Hitchcock/Jay; Persoon/van Beek) are addressed as part of a complex dynamic in which ‘traditional’ practices and ‘modern’ forces have anything but straightforward implications. While on the whole these studies reinforce generalizations about the critical effects of increasing scale on land and resource depletion, the eco-tourism study shows that in some areas of environmental management, small is not necessarily beautiful.

The one criticism to be made of this collection is its unbalanced regional and thematic coverage, which makes the generality of the book’s title misleading. The case studies are primarily focused on Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo with fewer representing Thailand and the Philippines, and none on Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam or Singapore. There is no study either considering the impact of the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the region in the last few decades. These gaps warrant at least a second volume. As the fate of this region is so bound up with its environmental future, it is to be hoped the editors and publishers take up that challenge.

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