



Sustainability Series



Kevin Woods

Agribusiness From the Ashes: Legacy Landscapes of Armed Politics in the Indigenous Uplands of Burma

I begin with a look at the material conditions of state power and politics in Burma's borderlands. After the end of the Cold War and subsequently ceasefires were reached with rebel groups, village forests and remaining rebel hideouts in northern Burma were selectively targeted by the military to be Chinese-financed logging and agribusiness concessions. Now during Burma's recent market-led reforms and national peace process, guns have been traded in part for briefcases and law books to court foreign investors, but state political power and control in relation to indigenous identity, rights, and territory is unchanged. Fifteen years of work in the region has made it painfully clear that legacies of racialized political power must be addressed first to achieve sustainable and equitable natural resource governance and management. My dissertation case study traces the environmental politics of "turning land into capital" through the case of Chinese-financed rubber estates given to state-backed elites in northern Burma. The industrialization and commercialization of agriculture has so far failed to boost agricultural production as promised, yet has fueled political and economic grievances among ex-poppy farmers sympathetic to the rebels and contributed to clearcutting the region's last remaining extensive forests. Large-scale concessions — as territorial interventions — have forcibly uprooted highland farmers who have been resettled along valley roads under state surveillance or fled as landless migrants, only to be replaced by ethnic majority Burman plantation wage laborers. The subsequent production of more legible state landscapes in effect does the work of the military-government in post-war state building. I close with a sample of my more uplifting collaborative engagements that reassert indigenous peoples' rights to sustainably govern and manage the last remaining stands of forests and free flowing rivers in the region.

Kevin Woods is a doctoral candidate in the Society and Environment Division in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management (ESPM) at the University of California, Berkeley. His dissertation, *The war to rule: Ceasefire capitalism and military-state building in Burma's indigenous uplands*, examines how state-backed violence continued after Burma's ceasefires through the transfer of land and natural resources from indigenous groups to government coffers, military-backed cronies, and narco-militias. His work historically grounds contemporary market-based land and resource reforms within the context of post-Cold War indigenous armed political struggles. His research and policy work grew out of over a decade of practical, political work with indigenous groups who have struggled against the military government to sustainably manage their resource-rich environments. Kevin's work has been published extensively in peer-reviewed academic journals, book chapters, NGO policy reports, and online media. He has recently finished a two-year research fellowship with the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague with Prof. Jun Borrás on climate change, mitigation, and land rights in Burma and Cambodia.

Thursday, April 13th

3-4:20 PM

Crawford Hall 105

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