
PREFACE

The world is already saturated with books about rain forests. What then can be our excuse for writing yet another? It's simple. After reading many of those other books in the course of preparing slide shows, lectures, and discussions, we came to believe that for the most part they really did not get it completely right. While they all made very important points about the nature of the rain forest and the alarming rate of its disappearance, and they all had particular analyses about causes, their analysis focused on one or another issue—overpopulation, export agriculture, peasant agriculture, etc.

We can appreciate the temptation to focus on the facts of rain forest destruction, and we agree that the nature of the problem itself is quite worthy of persistent propaganda. This, we suppose, is why all the books say the same thing—tropical rain forests are useful and beautiful, yet they are being destroyed. That the problem needs to be brought to the attention of the public, we agree. But once alerted to the problem, the public asks what to do. Causes must be addressed, and we feel that most of the popular literature on the subject does not do it adequately.

To be sure, many books talk about causes. But most frequently, authors are concerned with identifying some “ultimate factor”—overpopulation, greedy lumber companies, inefficient peasant farmers, avaricious export agriculture. We agree that some, even many, of these forces are part of the picture. But in the final analysis the cause is far more complicated. Indeed, the nature of the complications is the cause. This sort of analysis is multifaceted, with many interconnecting components—what we refer to as the “web of causality.” However, we also feel that it is not difficult to appreciate this analysis, if the focus is not on an individual component but rather on the complete web. That is the purpose of this book.

We aim to alert the reader to several obvious facts. The web includes subjects that ordinarily do not occur together between the same book covers: the poor soils of peasant farmers, international diplomacy, international agricultural economics, and a variety of other strands in the web.

Thus our narrative ranges from the acidity of rain forest soils to the acidity of international politics.

Furthermore, this book is in no sense complete. It is not a comprehensive analysis of the nature of rain forests and their potential utility, nor is it a full presentation of the details of rain forest destruction the world over. Many other books do precisely that, and they do it quite well. Our purpose is to elaborate, in a compact and straightforward manner, the complicated story of why rain forests are disappearing. This is mainly a social, economic, and political story, with a pinch of ecology. The story has nothing to do with overpopulation and is not about a few evil capitalists who care more for profits than trees. Rain forests thus will not be saved by handing out condoms nor by refusing to buy furniture made of tropical wood. The only way to reverse the pattern of the past five hundred years is, first, to understand the complexity of the web that creates the problem in the first place and, second, to develop a strategy that shreds that causal web. Perhaps a boycott of tropical woods would make sense, but only within the context of a clear analysis of how that boycott contributes to eliminating the web of causality.

While our purpose is to elaborate the web of destruction in a brief form, we frequently find it easiest to argue from example. Since our personal experience is mainly in the tropical rain forests of Central America, almost all of our examples are from there. Other authors would obviously have used different examples. But in the end, our analysis is not restricted to the Central American case. To be sure, there will be differences from place to place — logging is more important in Southeast Asia, for example, cattle ranching more important in Brazil. But the general principles, and consequently the appropriate actions, are not dependent on the particular site. The web is strung slightly differently in each place, but its connecting strands are similar the world over.

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