



Community forestry engagement with market forces: A comparative perspective from Bhutan and Montana[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper asks: (1) how has community forestry been informed by the ascendancy of particular forms of neoliberal restructuring and rise in market-based interests in environmental governance and (2) how has its engagement with these market forces affected its effectiveness in meeting the objective to reconcile livelihood and environmental protection? Towards answering these questions the paper examines two places known for their forest landscapes and livelihoods and with community forestry activities: the Himalayan country of Bhutan and the U.S. western state of Montana. Bhutan's top-down, national community forestry program and Montana's bottom-up, collaborative effort known as the Montana Legacy Program are shown to be highly different not only in their institutional arrangement but also in their engagements with particular forms of neoliberalism including type of markets, regulatory processes, market opportunities, and the role of the private sector. Their differences reveal important ways that market forces and market-oriented interests shape threats as well as solutions to meeting forest protection and livelihood objectives in the two contexts, but produce unpredictable partnerships and awkward contradictions in the process.

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1. Introduction

From its earliest beginnings, the relationship between market forces and community forestry has been fraught with tension. On the one hand, community forestry (and its predecessors) in the 1970s and early 1980s (e.g. social forestry programs) were in part created to protect forests and forest-based cultures and livelihoods from commercial forest extraction, development and seizure within developing capitalist economies (Arnold, 1991). Elsewhere markets assisted community forestry groups to maintain forest land tenure and livelihoods (Bray et al., 2003). Different orientations towards markets continue to permeate political conflicts within community-based natural resource management efforts: while NGO and other practitioners may view markets as a means to improve local income, livelihood security and conservation, rural residents may see community-based natural resource management (including community forestry) as the means to negotiate market forces and regain control over natural resources for improving their livelihood security and conservation (Western et al., 1994; Dressler et al., 2010). Neoliberal economic restructuring since the 1970s further complicates the interplay between community forestry initiatives and policies that support (free) markets, especially with the turn of conservation policy and practice towards employing market-based interventions (Büscher et al., 2012; Roth and Dressler, 2012).

Neither community forestry nor neoliberalism can be reduced to simple definitions, forces or formulations regarding how they operate across time and space, nor in their mutual engagement. Rather the processes that each entail, and their intersections, are highly contingent and influenced by local contextual conditions (Büscher and Dressler, 2012; Roth and Dressler, 2012). Community forestry has been defined as an exercise by local people to wield power or influence over decisions regarding forest management, including rules of access and disposition of products, and which further necessitate "local" being defined and bounded within particular settings and conditions (McDermott and Schreckenberg, 2009). Understanding this exercise demands attention to the intersection of place-based socio-political dynamics and broader processes. McCarthy (2005) brought attention to the remarkable congruence with the rise of interest in community forestry and particular forms of neoliberalism, and suggests a definition of community forestry which reflects their engagement:

I see community forestry as a complex amalgam of trends in environmental governance, neoliberal policy agendas, and responsiveness to contingent historical and geographical factors. Rather than striving for fixed, programmatic definitions of it, we might do better at times to examine closely what other agendas and legacies it has hybridized with, and to what effects, in various locations.

[McCarthy (2005, 997).]

Li (2007, 279) builds on the view of community forest management as practices of assemblages which bring together an array of agents and

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objectives and, "... cannot be resolved into neat binaries that separate power from resistance, or progressive forces from reactionary ones. It is difficult to determine who has been co-opted and who betrayed. Fuzziness, adjustment and compromise are critical to holding assemblage together."

In light of the above, this paper asks: (1) how has community forestry been informed by the ascendancy of particular forms of neoliberal restructuring and rise in market-based interests in environmental governance and (2) how has its engagement with these market forces affected its effectiveness in meeting the objective to reconcile livelihood and environmental protection? Towards answering these questions the paper examines two places known for their forest landscapes and livelihoods, and with activities which constitute community forestry: the Himalayan country of Bhutan and the U.S. western state of Montana. The overall goal is to contribute towards understanding the ways that (different) practices have come together in response to the interplay of local conditions and translocal forces to inspire local mobilization to influence forest ownership and governance, and for whose interests they serve.

2. Neoliberal market dynamics and environmental governance

Neoliberalism has been defined as an attempt to reorganize capitalism, institutionally, politically, and ideologically along "free market" principles. It is often depicted as a project of social change for which human welfare can be improved by freeing individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework harboring robust property rights, free markets, and free trade; the role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework to enable these practices to occur (Harvey, 2005, 2). The central organizing mechanism is the market. While neoliberal capitalism shares with liberal capitalism a commitment to limit state intervention to enable capital accumulation through market exchange, under neoliberalism the market needs active regulation; it must be purposefully crafted (Pellizoni, 2011). This is done through an assemblage of practices, techniques and mentalities through which subjects are governed to follow these rules.

The influence of neoliberalism on the interactions between nature, society and environmental governance has been closely examined (and debated) among geographers and other social scientists (Peck and Tickell, 2002; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Castree, 2008; Bakker, 2010; Brockington et al., 2010), and community forestry (McCarthy, 2005, 2006). These studies illuminate the interplay between environmental subjects, development policies and programs, environmental governance and key neoliberal processes of decentralization, privatization and marketization. They have shown that they can operate in part or variegated forms across time and place, and coming together with local conditions in hybridized and often contradictory ways. The negative impacts of neoliberal markets have been noted, such as on producing new property rights and the loss of local resource access and control, as goods once produced for home use are converted into commodities for market sale (Nevins and Peluso, 2008). But outcomes are not always negative for society or some parts of society, nor do they involve straight-forward state actions. A simplified interpretation of community forestry as reflecting a rolling back of the state and reducing official involvement in local affairs has been shown by Li (2002) to not be the case in the uplands of Indonesia; rather she provides evidence that community-based natural resource management has the effect of intensifying state control over upland resources, lives and livelihoods. As a result some people in these areas may resist such programs while others may view greater involvement and integration into state systems as a benefit. Scholars of the "double movement" described earlier by Polanyi (1944/2001) further our understanding of complexity and contradictions of states as they may move back and forth between actions that facilitate laissez-faire capitalism through deregulation, and regulation to deal with environmental degradation that may result, and in the process create progressive opportunities such as local protests and "counter-movements" (Higgins et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, the idea that free markets and an active civil society are best suited to guide environmental governance and solve conservation problems has increasingly infused the conservation landscape around the world today, including community forestry. McCarthy (2005) suggested that community forestry became popular because the approach aligned with growing beliefs in the flexibility of markets and the non-governmental sector to finance and promote conservation in ways responsive to particular localities; however its expression varies with the particular configuration of neoliberal policies and practices (for example in Canada versus the United States). While the specifics vary, community-based conservation as well as conventional top-down efforts has increasingly come to incorporate expressions of market logics in their programs. For example, its tool box includes a strikingly similar array of programs centered on payment for ecosystem services, certification, private parks, and especially ecotourism.

How market-oriented forces operate in environmental governance and conservation, and for whom they serve, are highly variable (Igoe and Brockington, 2007; Igoe et al., 2010; Dressler and Roth, 2011; Roth and Dressler, 2012). Examples from the South suggest that impoverished classes, communities and other marginalized groups rarely benefit from market-oriented forces in conservation (Fortwangler, 2007; Igoe and Brockington, 2007; McAfee, 2012). Empirical cases from South East Asia document that markets in biodiversity conservation efforts represent a new source of income generation for elite capture and accelerates agrarian differentiation (Dressler and Roth, 2011; Büscher and Dressler, 2012; Dressler et al., 2013). On the other hand, farmers in Australia have been able to shape markets to their advantage amidst new conservation policies and rural economic restructuring (Higgins et al., 2012), while in England partnerships between governments and private corporations have protected public forest governance values (Hodge and Adam, 2013). In New Zealand "strategic brokers" or "partnership champions," often former community activists, have rebuilt social and communitarian links severed by new markets and other neoliberal dynamics (Larner and Craig, 2005). The value of public-private partnerships, MacDonald (2010) describes how mainstream non-governmental conservation organizations previously hostile to corporate interests have become willing to forge partnerships with them, and become central within conservation practice today (MacDonald, 2011). In the western U.S. there are many stories of civil society embracing collaboration with historic rivals to break impasses and forge innovative policy on government-owned ("public") forests (Brick et al., 2001; Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000). The success of grassroots environmental organizations working in partnership with non-governmental and government sectors in the U.S. has led to them to being labeled the "new environmental vanguard" (Weber, 2000).

Understanding neoliberalism and its intersection with socio-environmental action is complicated by the fact that "... while the contours of neoliberal conservation are observable, we do not assume there to be an absolute, fixed set of neoliberal characteristics in all places at all times, but rather a messy moshpit of market-based factors based in political economic conditions, past and present (Dressler and Roth, 2011, 852)." Local experience will reflect the interaction between local dynamics and translocal neoliberal forces which themselves vary from place to place, and require tracing "chains of explanations" across socio-theoretical perspectives and geographical landscapes as employed by political ecologists (Robbins, 2012). Empirical case studies remain crucial but need to be understood as to how they articulate with the larger assemblage of factors associated with broader trends. As such, scholars suggest the benefit of research involving "multi-sited comparative ethnography within a global perspective" (Büscher and Dressler, 2012, 367).

3. Method and context

This paper is a qualitative inquiry involving an analysis of policy documents, secondary literature, and a small amount of primary data. The latter includes survey research conducted by the author and others in

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