



Forest certification, institutional capacity, and learning: An analysis of the impacts of the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme



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ABSTRACT

While forest certification remains one of the favored policy instruments for assessing the long-term sustainability of the world's forest resources, its impacts on the forest management systems undergoing certification remain vastly understudied. While previous studies have focused almost exclusively on the impacts of FSC certification on forest management practices, our research focuses on elucidating the impacts of the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS) on the forest management systems of Peninsular Malaysia. Using primary and secondary data, our study analyzes the types of noncompliance issues present in these systems and their frequencies and distributions over space and time. We found that the distribution of noncompliance issues across the MTCS forest management standard was skewed toward the more ecologically-related criteria. Yet we also found evidence of significant improvements having already occurred in the forest management systems of Peninsular Malaysia. Overall, our systematic analysis of the role of certification in shaping forest management systems in Peninsular Malaysia suggests that PEFC-endorsed schemes like the MTCS may ultimately lead to positive impacts in these systems.

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1. Introduction

Forest certification is a market-based policy instrument aimed at promoting responsible forest management (Rametsteiner and Simula, 2003; Siry et al., 2005; van Kujik et al., 2009). In endorsing what is largely seen as a more transparent approach to both forest management and the timber industry's activities within individual forest management units (FMUs), this form of environmental certification provides assurances to consumers that the timber products they are buying come from 'well-managed forests' while concomitantly driving forest management systems toward becoming more environmentally and socially responsible (Maser & Smith, 2001; Viana et al., 1996).

Though originally envisioned as a solution to the rampant and destructive logging occurring in the tropics, forest certification has gained most of its traction in the temperate and boreal forests of Europe and North America (Cashore et al., 2006; Leslie, 2004; Ozinga and Krul, 2004; Siry et al., 2005). In fact, the proportion of certified forests in the tropics is still negligible (Ghazoul, 2001). Explanations for the uneven geographic distribution of certified forests typically center on the notion that certification proceeds most easily in regions where forest management standards are already high and/or biodiversity and structural complexity are lower (Ghazoul, 2001; Leslie, 2004; Pena-Claros et al., 2009; Siry et al., 2005). Yet, despite the relatively slow implementation of this policy tool in the tropics, forest certification remains one viable

option for increasing transparency and accountability in forest management systems (Auld et al., 2008; Cashore et al., 2004; Cerutti et al., 2011).

Although previous research focuses on the potential of forest certification to promote conservation and protect biodiversity worldwide (e.g., Nussbaum and Simula, 2004; Schulte-Herbruggen and Davies, 2006; van Kreveld and Roerhorst, 2009; van Kujik et al., 2009), there have been only limited attempts to carefully document the impacts of forest certification on the overall quality of forest management systems (e.g., Karmann and Smith, 2009; Newsom et al., 2006; Thornber, 1999). Many of these studies focus fairly exclusively on the impacts of certification on forest management systems in the "Global North." To date, there have only been a handful of similar studies conducted in tropical producer countries and the vast majority of these studies rely almost exclusively on secondary data (e.g., Pena-Claros et al., 2009; Schulte-Herbruggen and Davies, 2006). Moreover, with the exception of comparative studies like that offered by Araujo et al. (2009), previous research efforts have focused almost entirely on impacts of the forest certification scheme developed by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). With nearly 180 million hectares (ha) of forest lands in 80 different countries now certified under this scheme, it is clear that the FSC has established its approach as the world's widely recognized certification system (Araujo et al., 2009; Eden, 2011; Gale, 2002; Klooster, 2005; Ozinga and Krul, 2004). While Cerutti et al. (2011) assert that FSC certification does not universally result in higher quality forest management practices in Cameroon, others report that elsewhere "certification has a positive impact on all aspects of forest management" (Pena-Claros et al.,

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2009, p. 55; see also, Newsom et al., 2006; Newsom and Hewitt, 2005; Thornber, 1999).

Meanwhile a number of questions remain concerning the impacts of alternative forest certification schemes, like the many national certification schemes now endorsed under the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). With an astounding growth rate of nearly 500% in the past decade, the total area of PEFC-certified forests now far surpasses the area certified under the FSC scheme (www.fsc.org, 31 May 2014; www.pefc.org, 31 May 2014). Despite its critics questioning the legitimacy of its mutual recognition approach, the PEFC scheme continues to gain traction worldwide. Yet, to date, studies that analyze how PEFC-endorsed national schemes are faring with regard to their impacts on forest management systems are limited in number and scope. For example, while Araujo et al. (2009) consider the role of market, learning and signaling mechanisms on the uptake of different certification schemes by Brazilian companies, they do not attempt to systematically assess how and to what degree these different approaches affect the quality of forest management systems themselves.

In an attempt to redress these gaps in the literature, this paper investigates the impacts of the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS), a national timber certification scheme endorsed by the PEFC in May 2009. Building on previous in-depth case study approaches (e.g., Maletz and Tysiachniouk, 2009), the present study is systematic and multi-method in its approach. We find that noncompliance issues in Peninsular Malaysia are more unevenly distributed across its policy standard than has been reported elsewhere with MTCS-certified FMUs incurring a greater number of noncompliance issues in the ecological portions of the policy standard. That being said, we also found evidence of significant improvements having already occurred in the forest management systems of Peninsular Malaysia. In assessing these improvements, we confirm others' conclusion that such improvements are only possible when the allocation of resources as well as overall institutional capacity increase over time.

2. Study context

Amid growing international concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the world's forest resources, Malaysia has long struggled to have its forest management practices recognized as sufficient evidence of the country's stated commitment to sustainable forest management (MTC, 2007; MTCC, 2009). After early attempts to collaborate with the FSC on a national forest certification scheme failed to materialize in the late 1990s, Malaysia opted instead to forge its own path toward certifying the forest management practices of the forest management units (FMUs) located within its borders (Lewis, 2011). The Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) was established in 1998 with the objective of developing, implementing, and governing a place-based timber certification scheme in Malaysia (NTCC, 1999). By January 2002, the MTCS was officially launched with initial audits of forest management systems occurring the following year (MTCC, 2009). Despite being one of the first countries to successfully operate a place-specific forest certification scheme (Lewis, 2011), Malaysia would face intense international scrutiny in the next decade. One of the most direct challenges regarding the legitimacy of the MTCS came in 2004 when Greenpeace International labeled the MTCC "sustainable certification imposters" (GPI, 2004, p. 1). Yet, despite this potentially serious allegation, Malaysia remained undeterred by such criticisms, dismissing Greenpeace International's claim as a yet another attempt by outsiders "to undermine the MTCC timber certification scheme and promote [their] preferred certification scheme [FSC]" (MTCC, 2005, np). After this initial setback, Malaysia pressed forward in its efforts to gain international recognition for its place-based timber certification scheme. In May 2009 the country's dedication to its goals appeared to finally pay off when the MTCC and its scheme were officially endorsed by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification schemes (PEFC) (MTCC, 2009). Not only did PEFC's endorsement of the MTCS boost

the scheme's reputation abroad but it also began to solidify Malaysia's position as a potential leader in tropical forest certification (Lewis, 2011).

Today, MTCC continues to make headway in establishing its scheme as a viable alternative to the FSC system. As of December 2014, a total of 4,649,913 million hectares (ha) of permanent forest reserves (PRFs) in ten different FMUs have been certified as meeting the requirements of the MTCS forest management standard, the *Malaysian Criteria and Indicators for Forest Management Certification [MC&I(2002)]*¹ (www.mtcc.com.my; 31 May 2014). As such, Malaysia serves as a compelling context in which to study the impacts of certification on forest management systems.

3. Research design

3.1. Data collection and analysis

Rather than solely relying on secondary data, this study employs a mixed methods approach that combines archival/document research with data collected during one of the author's 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Malaysia from February 2009 to March 2010. In September 2011, we began collecting the secondary data contained in reports resulting from MTCS audits. In line with the requirements of the MTCS, the findings of both main assessments and subsequent surveillance visits are available on the MTCC and certification bodies' websites. A total of 35 public summaries were compiled from the two main assessments, which were completed in 2006/7 and 2009, and three surveillance visits completed in 2007/8, 2010, and 2011. With the exception of two surveillance visit reports not being publicly available, these data comprise a nearly complete record of audit outcomes since the first main assessment under the *MC&I(2002)* occurred in March 2006.

By April 2013, we began coding our primary and secondary data using *Atlas.ti*. In an effort to begin to analyze the significance of particular noncompliance issues over space and time, initial coding consisted of distinguishing "major" CARs (i.e., significant issues that must be resolved within three months of an audit) and "minor" CARs (i.e., lesser issues that should be resolved within one year of any audit). As we proceeded, additional codes were added to better suit the themes emerging from the data. It was at this time we began to delineate the 47 criteria in the *MC&I(2002)* as falling within one of the three following thematic areas: ecological, economic or social. While we recognize that our classification of CARs across the three pillars of sustainability is subjective (for more on this topic, see Pena-Claros et al., 2009), this step was necessary for us to be able to draw comparisons between MTCS audit outcomes and those reported for FSC-certified FMUs elsewhere in the world.

Simultaneous to qualitatively coding our data, we also compiled our data into a series of Excel spreadsheets in order to quantitatively analyze spatial and temporal patterns in our data set. In line with other researchers' use of CAR analysis, we calculated two measures: frequency (percentage of times a given criterion is mentioned in a specified time period) and distribution (percentage of FMUs that incurred at least one CAR associated with a given criterion). In doing so, we determined both the annual and aggregate (i.e., five-year study period) frequencies and distributions so that we could differentiate when and in which areas the MTCS-certified FMUs may be considered to have experienced measurable changes in their forest management systems.

Following these initial CAR analysis-driven steps, we then employed a combination of content analysis and discourse analysis to determine

¹ While a newer MTCS forest management standard [i.e., the *Malaysian Criteria and Indicators for Forest Management Certification (Natural Forests)*] is now in place for certifying forest management systems under the MTCS, FMUs have yet to undergo a new round of certification audits. Thus, our study only reports findings concerning audits conducted against the requirements of the *MC&I(2002)*.

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