
Land cover changes (– forest transition) over fifty years (1968-2019) in Thua Thien Hue Province, Vietnam: Illustrations and insights on aspects of ‘sustainability’

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Résumé

Vietnam has been noted as the first country in Southeast Asia which has gone through a ‘forest transition’ (FT), with allusions of an associated ‘successful transition’ towards ‘sustainable forest management’. In this presentation we take a close look at the forest cover (and other land cover) changes in the Central Vietnamese province of Thua Thien Hue (TTH). Based on this case study we query some of the inherent assumptions in general FT theorizing, such as 1.) a ‘conventional’ pattern of pre-industrial forest degradation, 2.) pure economic drivers of ‘modernization’, and 3.) verifiable ‘forest regrowth’ as an actual ‘event’.

With respect to point 1: Many open spaces of ‘forestlands’ (i.e. open/destroyed/degraded forest alias ‘wasteland’) already existed in TTH before 1968, were further created through massive war effects until 1975 (e.g. air strikes and arboricides such as Agent Orange), and were consolidated through resource extraction (mainly intensive logging and local land clearing) during the immediate post-war era (– 1975-1990). With regard to point 2: Indigenous communities which had lived in the forest valleys of upland TTH within – historically – relatively stable land use systems were severely affected by the war as well as by post-war political restructuring, state-defined re-territorialization, and economic development. Since the 1990s many communities were resettled from remote areas, i.e. areas which were subsequently ‘developed’ for hydro-electricity production and for ‘nature conservation’ (– tourism). As for point 3: What is actually a ‘forest’ or ‘reforestation’? Since the 1990s so-called ‘forest regrowth’ mainly happened via the widespread development of acacia plantations in various forms (i.e. ‘production forests’ and ‘protection forests’). The tropical natural forest can hardly be said to ‘regrow’ in ways as is usually implied in somewhat ‘euro-centric’ FT theorizing. We conclude the presentation with an overview of land cover changes and some considerations on various aspects of ‘sustainability’.

Mots-Clés: deforestation and forest degradation, Agent Orange, swidden systems, acacia plantations, afforestation, social, ecological resilience

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