

Isle of Fire: The Political Ecology of Landscape Burning in Madagascar.

Christian A. Kull. 2004. University of Chicago, Chicago. Pp. 256, halftones, line drawings, tables. \$25.00 (paper). ISBN 0-226-46141-6.

Those who are familiar with the seasonal tropics know that fires inevitably burn each dry season, filling the air with smoke and lighting up hillsides in the night. Most of the fires have a specific purpose closely tied to the livelihoods of the people who ignite them. They may clean crop fields, clear slashed forests, renew grasslands, and promote woody vegetation in shrublands. Despite fire's position as an essential tool for harnessing ecosystem productivity, ethnographic research documenting the practice and knowledge of its use is limited. *Isle of Fire* by Christian A. Kull goes a long way towards filling this gap. The book offers a comprehensive ethnography of landscape burning across Madagascar while also providing the reader with a political and historical context for the criminalization of these fires. This book will undoubtedly become a leading work in the cultural study of landscape burning due to its sound arguments in favor of fire's permanence in Madagascar and thus fire's importance throughout the tropics.

Kull begins the book by laying out the central argument that an “antifire received wisdom” has inaccurately portrayed fires as purely destructive and has unfairly criminalized the peasant use of fire. The author describes the antifire wisdom as an ideology inherited from colonial times and still in use today, ultimately driving the policies that attempt to reduce landscape burning. Kull’s skillful analysis of the origins and history of this antifire narrative are widely applicable throughout the tropics where there is a colonial history.

The ethnobiological strength of this book is in the second section, which documents the diversity of burning practices across the island’s major ecosystems: high elevation grasslands, dry woodlands, and tropical moist forests. For each ecosystem, Kull demonstrates how fire serves as a practical and efficient livelihood strategy, whether it is for promoting nutrient rich grasses or for clearing a forest plot in shifting agriculture. He also provides detailed accounts of local knowledge surrounding fire behavior and fire’s effects on ecosystems. For example, rice farmers will burn hillsides surrounding their paddies to promote water run-off into paddies. Kull convincingly argues in favor of fire’s central ecological role in maintaining high elevation grasslands and endemic *tapia* woodlands across the island. He uses participant observation and fire mapping to demonstrate that peasants effectively burn wide geographic areas of grasslands by following unwritten management plans based on opportunities in environmental conditions (i.e., fuel and weather). In the case of the *tapia* woodlands, the author compiles historical maps and photographs to demonstrate that these fire-maintained plant communities have not decreased over time as the antifire wisdom would have one believe. However, the author does not demonstrate whether the composition of the woodlands has been degraded as a result of fires. When examining the more controversial slash and burn *tavy* fires, Kull asserts that shifting agriculture is a logical strategy for farmers in these wet and mountainous environments. Most importantly, the author clarifies that though fire is a proximate cause of deforestation, logging and agricultural conversion are more important factors in determining forest and biodiversity loss.

The final portion of the book is dedicated to analyzing the futile and repressive nature of the “antifire received wisdom” throughout Madagascar’s historical transition from colony to independent state. Kull shows that the repressive laws instituted under this ideology are either unequally enforced or unrealistic. Farmers and herders view fire as a necessary tool for their livelihoods, and therefore take advantage of its anonymity to continue burning in the face of antifire laws. After more than a century of attempts to eliminate burning practices, governments and international efforts have been unsuccessful. The author’s perspective is that the antifire wisdom persists, despite its failed policies, because it serves as a justification for external intervention in local resource management.

While I do not view the political ecology paradigm as the biggest strength of the book, Kull does a great job at adapting this approach specifically to fire issues; rather than focusing on resource access, he examines the struggle over resource character or differing opinions of whether the management goal ought to be pristine forest, agriculture, or pasture. The author makes an impressive case

that landscape burning should be accepted as a legitimate management tool and as a dynamic that has always been a part of Madagascar's landscape, particularly since fire itself is oblivious to the conflicts surrounding its use and "it will burn anything given the right ingredients." *Isle of Fire* is an extremely valuable work, not only to ethnobiologists and political ecologists, but also to those practitioners who work in the international development and conservation community where the antifire wisdom still persists. At times the author is repetitive in stating his arguments and outlining the chapters, but such a format will make the book an excellent course textbook.

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