Hum Ecol (2008) 36:135–136
DOI 10.1007/s10745-006-9094-1

Savannas and Dry Forests. Linking People with Nature. Jayalaxshmi Mistry and Andrea Berardi(eds). Aldershot: Ashgate. 2006. 274 pp. ISBN 0-7546-4507-X

Tor A. Benjaminsen

Published online: 6 January 2007

During the last 20 years, there has been a tremendous increase in the amount and quality of drylands research leading to the creation of new knowledge and the questioning of old 'truths.' Research on African savannas and dry forests has in particular been leading the way. This increased research effort has for instance resulted in a paradigm shift in range science from equilibrium to non-equilibrium ecology. But new insights on people–nature relationships have also been gained on issues of deforestation, the use of fuelwood as domestic energy, the role of bush fires in savanna ecosystems, land tenure, soil fertility, and agricultural development in general. In addition, the recent post-structural influence in environment and development studies has contributed to uncover how hegemonic policy discourses are closely linked to the interests and values of powerful actors be they multinational institutions, national governments, aid bureaucracies, or environmental organizations. The various studies have contributed to the elaboration of 'political ecology' as a leading interdisciplinary field within environment and development studies.

In contrast to the focus on power in environmental governance in the political ecology literature, the editors of this book call for a 'holistic approach' viewing the world as a 'socioecological system.' The book consists of chapters which nicely summarize and generally contribute further to debates in the field of interdisciplinary dryland studies. It arose from the Human Ecology and Development theme of the International Conference on Tropical Savannas and Dry Forests held in Edinburgh in 2003. Nine case studies—six from Africa and three from Latin America—deal with topics such as deforestation, biodiversity conservation, the 'overgrazing' debate, fire management, and adaptation to climate change. The book may in particular serve as a great resource for students as it includes many accessible and cutting-edge chapters on various dryland issues. Chapters that stand out are Wardell and Reenberg's impressive interdisciplinary approach to forest history in Burkina Faso, Igoe's strong and well-argued critique of conservation practice in Tanzania, Smith's informative assessment of 'overgrazing' in savannas, and Laris' detailed investigation of savanna fire ecology and practices in southern Mali.

However, I have some doubts about the general framework chosen by the editors of this volume. The holistic systems theory they propose as the main tool to help us meet the challenge of understanding the complexity of savanna and dry forest systems seems to be a rather mechanical approach, and it tends to stay at a fairly general and superficial level. This approach 'emphasizes the view of integrated wholes, whose essential properties arise from the relationships between component parts. It emphasizes connections and feedbacks, and that understanding of systems comes from examining how the parts operate together, not from looking at them in isolation' (p. 4). The approach chosen by the editors has been developed by the Systems Department of the Open University in the United Kingdom. It uses diagramming techniques as a key conceptual and analytical tool. Each contributor in the book was asked 'to represent their perspective through three diagramming techniques: Systems Mapping, Influence Diagrams and Multiple-Cause Diagrams' (p. 9). However, many of the same figures with more or less the same components reemerge in the various chapters.

While many of the chapters in this volume are excellent contributions to our knowledge creation on dryland management issues, the diagrams presented in the individual chapters are not. They are generally too shallow and do

T. A. Benjaminsen (✉)
Norwegian University of Life Sciences,
Ås, Norway
e-mail: torbe@umb.no

not add much to the text, not even as an overview of 'the most significant components' (p. 9), which is one of the stated aims of this approach. It does not, for instance, increase our knowledge to read that the Sudano-Sahelian savanna and parkland system is comprised of 'Biophysical factors' (rainfall, temperature, fallows, parkland etc), 'Institutional/social factors' (land tenure, market, population growth etc), and 'Uses' (firewood, grazing, farming etc) (Fig. 9.1, p. 229). And it is not very helpful to learn that 'Economic policies' and 'Deficient infrastructure' are among the root causes of deforestation in Honduras (Fig. 3.4, p. 68) or that the institutional and social factors behind biodiversity loss in hilltop forests in Kenya are land tenure, formal and informal institutions, and economic development (Fig. 8.1, p. 189).

However, some of the chapter contributors seem to have reluctantly conceded to use the systems approach. For instance, Igoe's chapter also comes across as a critique of the systems approach used in this book. His 'primary concern with systems models is that they unfailingly simplify complex problems and relationships. This simplification is partly a reflection of the medium of the models themselves. Too much detail makes a model muddled, thereby reducing its effectiveness as a tool of communication' (p. 96). Another of his concerns is that systems models 'can be easily used to represent problems according to proposed interventions instead of the other way around. In doing so there is a danger that they may obfuscate the real causes of the problems rather than clarifying them' (p. 97).

All in all, this kind of systems approach lacks the 'political' analysis introduced to environment and development studies through political ecology and which tends to be crucial to understand natural resources management conflicts or the causes of problems in this field. For instance, the politics of land tenure is a key related issue, which is not easily addressed through systems diagrams and which therefore tends to be neglected. The result is likely to be a human ecology without actors and without power relations reproducing uncritical, unfocused, and generalised reports. Parts of this book fall in that trap, while other parts are strong enough to stand alone.