

Lisa Elena Fuchs. 2023. *A Political Ecology of Kenya's Mau Forest: The Land, the Trees, and the People*. New York: Boydell & Brewer. 404 pp.

Located in the lush Rift Valley region of Eastern Africa, the Mau Forest is Kenya's largest closed-canopy montane forest, with over twenty rivers stemming from the region. In *A Political Ecology of Kenya's Mau Forest: The Land, The Trees, and The People* Lisa Elena Fuchs provides a thorough examination of the management of the Mau Forest. Spanning approximately 416,543 hectares (or 4,165 km²), an estimated 430,000 people are directly reliant on the forest and millions more reap the benefits of its natural resources in the surrounding areas. From a global ecological perspective, the Mau Forest functions as a carbon sink vital in the fight against global warming. The Mau is also a biodiverse tropical forest with immense ecological, economic, social, and cultural value. The Kenyan government's official move to classify the Mau Forest as a Water Tower brought the importance of conserving this forest area to the forefront of public attention, with later movements such as the 'Save the Mau' campaign turning the world's eyes to the critical need to conserve the area. The world benefits from protecting the Mau Forest, especially in the long term. As Fuchs argues, however, the initial strategy developed to address numerous and compounding issues regarding the conflicts over the Mau Forest was conceived only for short-term problem-solving.

Poorly conceived governance resulting from political pressures led to the non-protection of the Mau Forest and its inhabitants, which started with the British colonization of Kenya. The forest's bountiful and diverse ecology has long served the forest-dwelling people who have called the forest home and have spiritual attachments to parts of the Mau Forest. The fertility of the land is now what makes it valuable for various commodities such as tea plantations and timber. It also serves essential ecological functions; Lake Victoria, the Nile River Basin, Lake Turkana, and Lake Natron are all fed by the rivers originating in the Mau Forest. Under British colonial rule, nature in Kenya became commodified and the indigenous groups became a source of labor to feed the treadmill of production. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Mau Forest became a protected area, with the lines of demarcation closing off the once-open space used by semi-nomadic and hunter-gatherer peoples. The potential economic value of the Mau Forest attracted white colonial settlers who, in turn, pushed out the indigenous Ogiek people, one of the last hunter-gatherer groups in Kenya. Despite being semi-nomadic, the British colonial powers sought to give the Ogiek land rights wherein their way of life was transformed to sedentary on a plot of land to keep them from using and intruding on the parts of the forest the colonials were commodifying. Then, other forest dwellers were also pushed into these plots of land, which led to the continued movement of indigenous peoples and evictions. The use of land tenure resulted in further conflicts in the Mau Forest, especially contemporarily for the Maasai.

Through the insightful lens of political ecology, Fuchs provides a history of the subjugation of forest-dwelling peoples in the Mau Forest, their settlement of the forest, and the structural causes of the continued its deforestation. Crucially, Fuchs' keen analysis reveals where conservation efforts have gone wrong. Prior framing of the 'Mau crisis' omitted the political lens because of how the crisis's conceptualizations were classified (e.g., land use). Fuchs's multi-scalar analysis allows for a valuation outside of merely the commodification of the forest but

includes its value socially and culturally, such as its spiritual importance. Throughout the book Fuchs examines the discourses and the phases of conservation. Lastly, she critiques the techniques implemented and justifications used in the governance of the Mau Forest. Ultimately, the question of how to rehabilitate the Mau Forest will be difficult to address without considering why there has hitherto been a failure in saving the Mau. The governance of the forest is still a highly discussed political point. Through the work of Fuchs, we can glean a novel and multi-faceted analysis of the Mau crisis and learn lessons from past initiatives that have failed, like the Save the Mau campaign.

Fuchs critiques a past approach to managing the Mau Forest, the Mau Forest Rehabilitation Programme, because, according to her, the analysis comes from the Poverty-Environment Nexus. The failure of the efforts starting in the 1990s by the Kenyan government is because the premise it is based on is flawed; “given the analysis presented, deconstructing the Mau crisis might first require shifting away from the Poverty-Environment Nexus, where poverty is directly equated with destructive environmental behaviours, to a perspective where social reality is understood as a function of what *is* rather than what it is *not*” (p. 307). Evictions from Maasai Mau have continued with human rights abuses being reported through the COVID-19 pandemic. Fuchs’ call for a novel approach is needed as this complex problem, culminating from the unfolding of colonial history, requires nuance and complex solutions to address the intersections of multiple cultural identities, interests, and stakeholders.

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