

Making the Forest a Factory: the Political Ecology of Production under Sustained Yield Forestry in New Mexico

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This project investigates the social and ecological impacts of economic restructuring, reshuffled property relations, and non-local management regimes on the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit, an El Rito District timber production area on the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico. In 1948, rangers replaced subsistence agropastoralist production, as practiced by the largely Hispano population, with wage jobs through sustained-yield timber production. They claimed restructuring would both restore severely degraded ranges *and* improve local livelihoods. The Unit neither has improved local ecological conditions nor local livelihoods. This study investigates the historical antecedents, and the social and ecological ramifications of the establishment and administration of the Unit. We examine the historical processes of land grant dispossession on the Unit through archival research of two local land grants made to settlers during Mexican control of the region. In addition, proposed ecological research seeks to rigorously evaluate claims of Hispano ecological illegitimacy made by environmental organizations, forest service personnel, and environmental historians. As researchers have noted, these ecological challenges to local practices in New Mexico are based on claims to scientific authority that have served to legitimize non-local control of previously common-held resources. Despite these claims of scientific authority, preliminary research indicates that little ecological research has been conducted either on the links between local Hispano agropastoral practices and ecosystem processes and function or on the links between current management regimes and range ecology. Further, recent research on the links between biodiversity and agrodiversity indicate agropastoralism may offer sustainable development alternatives for federal lands management. A participatory ecological research project will focus on measuring the impact of livestock production on allotment pastures compared to an enclosure site that has not experienced domestic herbivory for over 40 years.

The following research questions guide the project: First, how did land-grant dispossession transform the subsistence economy and ecology of the area in and around the Unit? Preliminary historical research indicates a host of institutional constraints accompanied the loss of the commons. Second, what has been the socio-ecological impact of sustained yield forestry policies in northern New Mexico? Researchers investigating the social impacts of sustained yield forestry have questioned the ability of such a regime to benefit resource-dependent communities. Similarly, ecological research of the core principles of sustained yield indicates such a regime may be incapable of sustaining timber production without producing ecological problems. Third, what are the factors determining montane rangeland conditions on the El Rito District? At debate are the elements of healthy rangelands. Recent ecological research in range ecology indicates that, contrary to conventional federal lands management, livestock grazing may in fact contribute, rather than detract, from the production of biodiversity. Lastly, what impact do land use and production constraints have on local economic and ecological processes? Specifically, this question seeks to explore the consequences of current production arrangements.