

## BOOK REVIEWS

**POLICY THAT WORKS FOR FORESTS AND PEOPLE**

by James Mayers and Stephen Bass

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), London.  
1999. 324 pages. ISBN 10288228. US\$22-50 (Order code 7533IIED)

This book is the seventh in what, to date, is a series of nine limp-covered studies produced by IIED's "Policy that Works for Forest and People" project. Funding for the project is from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UK Department for International Development, while the project itself is part of IIED's Forestry and Land Use Programme. The overall goal of the project is to show how policy can both change things for the better and be itself changed for the better.

The overview of the book and the series, which is printed on the back cover of the volume, states —

*“forest issues often concern large amounts of money, long time frames, huge areas of land and diverse livelihoods...[Although] the issues are complex and vary from place to place ...a pattern of forest problems is common to many countries; continuing loss of natural forests; over-concentrated control and inadequate access to forests; an ill-informed public; and poorly-resourced inflexible forestry institutions. Policy is the root cause of many of these forest problems”.*

In this book the findings from a series of six developing country studies (one in the Americas, two African, two South Asian, and from this part of the world Papua New Guinea) that have already been produced as part of this project are brought together with material from a number of other (mainly) developed country studies. This material, plus reviews of both public and non-governmental international initiatives, is used to give a better understanding of the forces at play in contests over policy. By doing this the authors of the book aim to describe the processes that make for good policy, and reveal the policy instruments that work in various contexts.

I read, or more accurately dipped into, this book because ploughing through it in a single session proved to be impossible, with the current battle over West Coast beech forests in mind. Did this study, even though its focus is on developing countries, have anything to say about these forests and how to approach the question of finding appropriate policy for their management? The answer is yes ... but once I got away from the Executive Summary and into the book proper it wasn't always easy to find the relevant message.

The book, as far as I was concerned, started well. I found myself agreeing with most of the points of the Executive Summary — policy is what organisations do, argument about instruments is healthy, and the choice of policy tools changes the balance of power between

stakeholders. Likewise, I agreed with the seven processes identified as needed to produce good policy and the four critical steps to get there — recognise there is more than one valid perspective, get people to negotiate, allow for disagreement and experimentation, and learn from experience. As for good policy, according to this book good policy:

- highlights and reinforces interest groups' objectives
- provides a shared vision
- clarifies how to choose between different objectives
- helps determine how costs and benefits are shared
- signals to all involved how they will be held accountable
- defines how change and risk will be dealt with (in the context of incomplete information and limited resources)
- increases the capacity to practise effective policy

and finally and perhaps most importantly

- produces forest that people want, and are prepared to manage and to pay for.

These are hard to disagree with — and when it comes to the West Coast beech surely many of the current problems and the argument over what should happen can be put down to a failure of various policy prescriptions to meet some/all of the above, at least as far as some stakeholders are concerned.

So, if I liked the Executive Summary, why am I not completely enthusiastic about the volume itself? This is a point I found myself struggling with as I came to write this review. A lot of the time this book makes a great deal of sense. It is attractively laid out, referencing is good, and when particular works are listed as definitive they are. Summary points, when one gets a summary, are in the main clearly put, while the material and examples presented support the summary. The book is clearly of as much relevance to developed as to developing countries. I should be raving ... and yet.

I eventually decided that it was the presentation and editing which were causing my reservations. These, I believe, make it harder rather than easier to get to grip with book's two major theses — that there are ways of tackling forest problems that are better than others, and that some features are common to all successful policies. But at times the message seems to get lost in a welter of words. For example, given that this is the message and the book is titled "Policy That Works for Forests and People", is an eight-page introduction outlining what the report is about really necessary?

A chapter outlining why people get concerned about forests then follows this introduction. This chapter also introduces the cast of characters typically present in all dramas about forests, people, and power. Then comes a chapter on IIED's project, its perspective on policy, and the methodology used. Having already read the blurb, Executive Summary, Introduction, and synopses of "the play", much of this material appeared to be padding — and unnecessary padding at that. It isn't needed, certainly not at this point, and the new points made here, and there are a few, would have been better for having been made earlier.

All these first three chapters are short (8 to 23 pages long). But the next two, which are the heart of the book — the 99-page Chapter 4 "Policy in the real world — themes in failure and success", and the 49-page Chapter 5, "International policy trends and initiatives: their

implications for forests and people” — are the two which I found the hardest going. Reading them section-by-section is fine but trying to digest them in their entirety proved to be a major recipe for heartburn.

The first of these two chapters discusses a “series of [eight] linked themes” each of which is illustrated by country-specific examples. I confess that I struggled with the linking between the themes — too often themes seemed to be stand alone rather than be linked. Reasons for choice of starting point for the analysis of a particular theme were not always obvious, and the conclusions of some of the themes appeared to be decidedly wishy washy.

A good example of the problem is provided in the first of the themes — Changing Power Over Time. The thesis of this theme is that forest problems don’t simply appear but are a function of a country’s history and the interests of those groups whose views counted in that history. Understanding the present and its problems requires a knowledge of the past, as well as an appreciation of the inertia that past can impart — even when the past and what it represents have, apparently, been rejected. (The theme might loosely be summarised as worked examples of the biblical claim of the sins of the father affecting a number of generations.) The case study examples for the theme are concerned with land allocation and feature Zimbabwe (definitely topical), Ghana (the source of the only error found in the book — independence occurred in 1957 not 1954), Costa Rica, and Scotland. The Zimbabwe story starts in the 1930s, Ghana pre WWII (1939?), Costa Rica (the early 1950s), and Scotland’s goes back to the Highland Clearances at the end of the eighteenth / beginning of the nineteenth century. The basis for selecting an appropriate start date is not discussed, despite the fact that the starting points for the four case-studies span a period of 150 years. Is it possible that by selecting a different start date, a different thesis could be proved?

While I guess most might feel that starting with the colonial period would be appropriate for the two African studies, why not the same for Costa Rica? Why does Scotland’s story start with the land clearances? Why not with the Act of Union in 1776, or with Robert-the-Bruce and the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314? As for the conclusions, well they are that “*change in forestry is brought about through diverse ways in which forestry power changes over time, including: changes in the relative strength of political actors; new consultation processes; the rise of new issues; and changing economic conditions. But few of these changes are quick — policy and power change take time — especially where fundamental assumptions are challenged and political interests are affected. The implied challenge is to accept change as both inevitable and necessary in policy and to commit to dealing with it through continuous and adaptive learning*”. Whee!

There is nothing about managing change, of trying to steer it in a particular direction, or, for that matter, of trying to accelerate/slow its pace. No, emphasis is simply on acceptance and adaptation to change. Reference to other themes and how this theme links with them is lacking — and this criticism applies to the treatment of all themes, not just the first theme in the book.

As the overview volume this book would have benefited from a more ruthless and tighter editing. This would not only have enhanced readability, but would I believe have resulted in a better structure to the volume, and clearer linkage between the themes. This would have enhanced its value. However, despite the problems, problems that could have been avoided, this book will be a valued addition to my stock of books on aspects of policy. As a book to