



Tropentag, September 17-19, 2018, Ghent

“Global food security and food safety:
The role of universities”

Seeing Only What Is Productive: the Resource Frontier in the Disappearing Nicaraguan Rainforest

CHRISTOPHER RICHARD HANSEN¹, ANNA SOFIE STARUP ANDERSEN²

¹*University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, Denmark*

²*University of Copenhagen, Dept. of Anthropology, Denmark*

Abstract

Based on ethnographic research in Nicaragua and inspired by anthropologist Anna Tsing's (2005) conception of the frontier as a place where resources are made to be extracted, this paper explores the working and consequences of the resource frontier in the disappearing Nicaraguan rainforest.

The forests of the Southern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua have traditionally been inhabited by the indigenous Rama people, but during last couple of decades large numbers of the majority Mestizo population have migrated to the area and converted the forest into agriculture and grazing land for cattle. This has led to changes in the local environment, which has had many negative consequences for the Rama. The paper argues that around the moving frontier, some aspects of the environment are made into resources to be extracted, while others, that are not seen as resources, are destroyed. Only what is agriculturally productive is seen by the new resource extractors, who also see the Rama as unproductive because they do not “use” all their land. The moving resource frontier has led to current environmental degradation experienced by the Rama including declining fish populations, drying rivers, soil degradation and loss of wildlife. All factors related to food — and more generally livelihood — security.

This development has caused conflicts between the Rama and Mestizo population. A conflict that we argue is not merely about two groups competing for the same resources - i.e. increasingly scarce land — but about different ways of seeing and appreciating the environment. In making this comparison we do not attempt to present the indigenous Rama as “noble eco-savages” (Sowa 2013) that are inherently more in harmony with nature than others. Indeed, many of the Rama also contribute in different ways to environmental degradation. However, the ethnographic data does point to a different way of seeing the environment, that does not only appreciate it as resource but also in and of itself, even if it does not have any productive value for humans. In doing this it points to the role of the perception of the environment in resource sustainability and livelihood security.

Keywords: Environmental conflicts, perception of environment, resource frontier