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with planetary health”

Mindsets shaping landscapes? Social values and land use attitudes across countries in the southwestern Amazon

NELL DANA RICHTER

University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Inst. for Environmental Sciences, Germany

Abstract

The Southwestern Amazon, and particularly the MAP triangle – comprising Madre de Dios (Peru), Acre (Brazil), and Pando (Bolivia) – undergoes significant land use changes largely driven by human decisions, often resulting in deforestation. Although these neighbouring regions share historical, environmental, and socio-economic commonalities, they differ in colonisation patterns, land use policies, and cultural identities, all of which have led to the adoption of different livelihood strategies. These means of subsistence mainly include rubber extraction, palm fruit gathering, agriculture, and cattle ranching. While industrial, infrastructural, and policy-related drivers of land use have been extensively studied, the role of human dimensions – such as value orientations and attitudes – remains underexamined, despite their importance in shaping environmental decision-making.

This contribution aims to address this gap by exploring how human values shape land use attitudes, using the unique comparative case of the MAP region to help unravel the mindsets of rural populations. Applying a mixed-methods approach grounded in social-psychology, the study draws on data from a three-country household survey ($n=772$), a dweller values-attitude survey ($n=171$), and key informant interviews ($n=9$) conducted during three months of fieldwork. I hypothesise that across the MAP region, social values are reflected in environmental attitudes and, therefore, land use decisions. If value orientations are understood as a society's key cultural characteristic, I further assume that, despite their geographic proximity, the cross-border countries exhibit culturally grounded distinctions. Preliminary findings indicate that higher “conservation” and “self-transcendence” values are more closely connected with pro-forest attitudes than values emphasising “openness to change” and “self-enhancement.” These relationships manifest differently across countries. For example, Bolivia stands out with particularly high social values for “security,” “conformity,” and “tradition” (conservation), as well as “universalism” and “benevolence” (self-transcendence), while these are less prominent in Peru. This aligns with perceptions of the forest – and its resources of palm fruits, wood, and rubber – as more closely tied to concepts of “beauty” and “happiness” in Bolivia than in Peru. Understanding these value-based differences in attitudes, which go beyond cost-benefit or pragmatic motivations, offers helpful insights for designing more effective strategies in sustainable land use management and promoting environmentally friendly practices.

Keywords: Amazon, attitudes, culture, decision-making, land use, values