UC SANTA BARBARA

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# Rainforest Cowboys

Anthropologist Jeffrey Hoelle is as great an advocate of the Amazonian rainforest as the most ardent environmentalist. However, he argues, understanding the issues related to deforestation — or development, depending on how you look at it — requires a broad view that takes into account not only political and economic factors, but also the culture of the area.

"Deforestation is a byproduct of a lot of other factors," explained Hoelle, an assistant professor of anthropology at UC Santa Barbara who conducts research in the remote state of Acre in Brazil. "But the principal reason people cut down the forest there is to prepare the land for cattle. To understand that, we have to understand the policies and economics, as well as the sensibilities of the people involved and how they are shared within the region."

In his new book, "Rainforest Cowboys: The Rise of Ranching and Cattle Culture in Western Amazonia" (University of Texas Press, 2015), Hoelle examines the complex social and cultural forces driving the expansion of cattle raising in the Amazon. Through research featuring a complex and contradictory host of characters he describes as "carnivorous" environmentalists, vilified ranchers and urbanites with no land or cattle, he shows that cattle raising is about much more than beef production or deforestation.

As Hoelle notes in his book, the opening of the Amazon to colonization in the 1970s brought cattle, land conflict and widespread deforestation. In Acre, rubber tappers fought against migrant ranchers to preserve the forest they relied on and, in the

process, these “forest guardians” showed the world that it was possible to unite forest livelihoods and environmental preservation.

Nowadays, many rubber tappers and their children are turning away from the forest-based lifestyle they once sought to protect and becoming cattle-raisers or even “caubois” (cowboys).

This cattle-centered vision of rural life builds on local experiences and influences from across the Americas, according to Hoelle, and even resembles East African cultural practices.

“I’m trying to connect this knowledge with a broader scientific framework,” he explained. “The way deforestation in the Amazon is studied is through remote sensing images and broad level analyses. And to some extent that makes sense. It’s difficult to compile a bunch of ethnographies or descriptive accounts and put them together in a meaningful way that speaks to climate scientists or policymakers.

“With this study I wanted to include the description that is vital to understanding the culture and how it is experienced, but I also included quantitative methods so the findings would be useful to a broader policy and science audience,” he added.

According to Hoelle, culture is as common a driver of deforestation as politics and economics. “Our understanding in the U.S. of what it means to own cattle, and the desire of wealthy professionals to reconnect with the countryside or to buy a ranch or a farm — all these things are linked even in the Amazon,” he said.

“People are raising cattle there because it’s worth more than the forest, but you can’t separate that from what it means to be someone who — especially in the forest — is able to control or cultivate that,” Hoelle continued. “It acquires an even greater significance in terms of masculinity and nature control.” With “Rainforest Cowboys,” he looks to show how the cowboy sensibility drives land changes and deforestation.

“If you don’t clear your land, it looks like you aren’t using it and others can claim it,” he said. “But also important is the idea that clearing your land shows you’re a masculine person; you’re developed; you’re progressive compared to the Indians living in the forest. These ideas of nature connect with cowboy popular culture and music, and the frontier experiences of landowners to create a context in which raising cattle — and cutting down the forest — makes sense.”

These cultural beliefs and ideas drive deforestation, Hoelle said, but they cannot be understood without recognizing the economic and political factors that also contribute to a situation in which the forest still is not valued either economically or culturally.

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