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Redeeming REDD: Policies, Incentives and Social Feasibility for Avoided Deforestation

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Redeeming REDD: Policies, Incentives and Social Feasibility for Avoided Deforestation by Michael I. Brown (Routledge; 344 pages; 2013)

Because forests are major carbon sinks and deforestation accounts for roughly 17 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, international climate change tribunals and governments have looked to forest conservation as an “easy” way to reduce carbon emissions. From this thinking REDD was born. REDD, or Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, is an international initiative that seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, with a secondary goal of protecting diversity and alleviating poverty by combating deforestation. Under REDD, developed countries offer incentives to forest communities in developing nations to preserve their forests from destruction and economic exploitation. These incentives also act as carbon credits; by “paying” for reduced carbon emissions elsewhere, developed countries can continue their own carbon emissions more or less unhindered.

Despite sounding promising in theory, the program has been the subject of much criticism, and, according to Michael Brown, the current approach to REDD is destined for failure. Brown’s chief criticism is that REDD fails to address social feasibility: indigenous communities in developing countries are not seen as crucial stakeholders in the program, and are not provided with a seat at the table when REDD projects or incentives are formulated. These are the communities that will be directly impacted by the initiatives, yet under REDD’s current methodology they are not only ignored in negotiations and bargaining, they are effectively considered threats to the program. While REDD does contain some protections for forest communities, Brown argues that the program fundamentally does not address these communities’ values or develop meaningful incentives to ensure that they embrace conservation. As it presently stands, REDD’s top-down approach permits governments to negotiate conservation initiatives and then impose them on forest communities, regardless of whether those communities consent to them.

Redeeming REDD lays out in technical detail the sweeping changes Brown believes are necessary to salvage REDD’s fading chances at success. In essence, he proposes restructuring REDD so that local forest communities play as important a role in steering the program as the formal institutions that are currently calling all the shots. Perhaps because so much is riding on REDD’s success as a climate change, biodiversity protection, and conservation initiative—and because so much time, money, and faith has already been invested in the program—Brown appeals to the reader directly to keep an open mind about his rethinking of REDD.

While Brown claims to have written *Redeeming REDD* for a general audience, the text is anything but a light read. Brown attempts to break up the dense discussion of REDD's history and policy failures with anecdotes centered on his personal experiences with indigenous peoples and conservation projects, but even these short stories do little to break through the technical complexity of the book. However, Brown does an admirable job of organizing a very complex topic for those already familiar with the nuances of REDD, and for them, *Redeeming REDD* is a well-supported and persuasive call for a ground-up solution. As Brown says, "there is time to right the ship," and those involved in the policy-shaping and implementation of REDD should heed Brown's warnings before REDD itself is irredeemable.

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