Seeing the Wood for the Warblers
Practices, Perceptions and Power driving tree cover change in Pepease, Ghana

A Research Collaboration between the University of Cambridge\(^1\) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds\(^2\) (RSPB)

PhD Candidate: Clare Bissell\(^1\) MSc
Email: ceb213@cam.ac.uk

Supervisors: Prof. Bill Adams\(^1\) and Dr. Juliet Vickery\(^2\)

---

Research Problem

The RSPB speculates that tree cover change in the transitional forest zone of West Africa may be a contributing factor underpinning declines in the populations of migrant birds, including the wood warbler (Vickery et al. 2014, Mallord et al. 2016). Tree loss is often explained by simplified narratives of human population growth, intensified farming practices and illegal logging (Fairhead and Leach 1996). There are misconceptions and gaps in the conservationists’ understanding of local socio-ecological systems and the political, economic and cultural factors which influence how people manage trees on their land (Mortimore and Adams 1999).

Findings

This project uses a political ecology case study of a forest-farming community in Ghana to explore the drivers of tree cover change. Results suggest multi-layered and interconnected drivers of change including:

- Unsustainable legal and illegal logging
- Uneven and market-driven development
- Insufficient regulation and enforcement of tree-cutting practices
- Commodity demand (timber, cash crops and land)
- Uncontrolled wildfires
- Incompatible land use pressures
- Farming and livelihood practices
- Unequal distribution of power and representation in decision-making processes.

Methodology

We combine qualitative and quantitative data collection using household farming surveys, semi/unstructured interviews, community meetings, participant observation, and multi-stakeholder workshops. The qualitative analysis of data seeks to understand the differential agency, both real and perceived, of individual and grouped participants – for example various types of farmers, government officials (forestry, agriculture) and NGOs.

Analysis – Practices, Perceptions and Power

The multiple drivers of tree cover change can be understood through three interconnected dimensions:

**Practices:** actors living and working in Kwahu East interact with trees in farmland areas in different ways. Practices that contribute to tree cover change include farming techniques, tree felling for timber, non-timber forest products, land clearance for development, and allocation of land.

**Perceptions:** actors have different perceptions of the drivers of tree cover change, and therefore multiple views about who is responsible and what can be done about it. Perceptions are influenced by dominant narratives relating to identity, historical events and the sense of individual, group and collective agency.

**Power:** actors whose livelihoods are most affected by tree cover change often feel least able to address it. Those with the most perceived/actual power are limited by broader political complexities. These structures include market forces, government policy, climate change, and inequalities relating to identity (e.g. gender, social status). This case study shows that, even at a small scale, the drivers of tree cover change are complex and multi-layered. As such, any intervention intended to address elements of this issue requires a holistic approach.

---

References


