Global Visions, Local Landscapes: 
a Political Ecology of Conservation, Conflict, and 
Control in Northern Madagascar

photographs, bibliography, index. $26.95 (paper) and $72.00 (cloth).

Book review by C. Kull

A major trend in recent decades has been the proliferation of international conservation 
projects in biodiversity hotspots around Africa. This book is an excellent antidote to the all-
too-common conceit that such projects are the dominant forces of change in the areas where 
they work. Through a rich ethnographic analysis of two villages adjacent to the limestone 
Ankarana massif in northwestern Madagascar, Lisa Gezon shows how global conservation 
efforts – embodied in the actions of local project agents – are just one force among many 
contesting access and control over territories and the natural resources they harbor.

The Antankarana are rice farmers and cattle herders sandwiched between conservation 
areas, shrimp farms, sugar cane plantations, and artisanal mines. Comprising both long-term 
residents and migrants, villages in this area recognize numerous layers of authority: clan 
elders, a traditional politico-religious leader, state administrative layers, and, newly, the 
conservation project. In Part I, Gezon places dense descriptions of two such Antankarana 
villages (land use, social structures, history) in the context of broader regional and national 
trends of social and political history.

The book’s strength lies in describing and analyzing the detailed dynamics of local politics. Part II highlights several specific events of conflict over access to natural resources: 
between farmers and herders, between the traditional leader and the conservation project, and 
between the traditional leader and different constituencies. In each case, Gezon shows, the 
outcomes reflect struggles over authority and jurisdiction, with participants calling on 
different ideological norms rooted in historical conflicts, kinship ties, identity claims, or 
modern day state structures. In her own words (p. 185), “visible landscapes result from many 
levels of deliberation – including contests by individuals over social position and the rights 
those positions entail.” The cogent analysis of these political factors in landscape formation, 
however, underplays the importance of underlying forces, like subsistence needs, export 
economies, or resource ecology, that create and shape the contested resource demands.

As Gezon chronicles the tensions between local residents, the traditional leader, and 
the WWF-sponsored park project, it becomes clear that conservation projects are far from all-
powerful in disputes over resource access. Instead, conservationists must bring their global 
goals into the complex arenas of local politics, just as Antankarana villagers must react to
new ideological norms and material opportunities from outside. Gezon highlights this interpenetration of the categories ‘global’ and ‘local’, usually seen as separate, as a contribution to recent discussions on globalization and local places. She backs this theoretical discussion—on this and other topics like political ecology, the anthropology of conservation, and the conjunctural approach of social anthropology—with exhaustive reviews of the literature.

The book’s analytical contributions, together with its colorful ethnographic portrayal of a unique corner of the island, will make it useful to a variety of readers. Unfortunately, I was occasionally frustrated by the writing style, or by the presentation of certain unclear or incomplete details. For example, discussions of Madagascar’s history (folded into separate chapters on conservation, agricultural development, political change, and ethnic identity) are silent on the 1947 rebellion and on 1960s and 1970s conservation efforts. Such very minor details aside, Global Visions and Local Landscapes opens a much-needed window onto the local politics into which conservation projects unwittingly (or unwillingly) step.

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