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Environmentality: Technologies Of Government And The Making Of Subjects (New Ecologies For The Twenty-First Century)



Synopsis

In Kumaon in northern India, villagers set hundreds of forest fires in the early 1920s, protesting the colonial British state's regulations to protect the environment. Yet by the 1990s, they had begun to conserve their forests carefully. In his innovative historical and political study, Arun Agrawal analyzes this striking transformation. He describes and explains the emergence of environmental identities and changes in state-locality relations and shows how the two are related. In so doing, he demonstrates that scholarship on common property, political ecology, and feminist environmentalism can be combined in an approach he calls *environmentality* to better understand changes in conservation efforts. Such an understanding is relevant far beyond Kumaon: local populations in more than fifty countries are engaged in similar efforts to protect their environmental resources. Agrawal brings environment and development studies, new institutional economics, and Foucauldian theories of power and subjectivity to bear on his ethnographical and historical research. He visited nearly forty villages in Kumaon, where he assessed the state of village forests, interviewed hundreds of Kumaonis, and examined local records. Drawing on his extensive fieldwork and archival research, he shows how decentralization strategies change relations between states and localities, community decision makers and common residents, and individuals and the environment. In exploring these changes and their significance, Agrawal establishes that theories of environmental politics are enriched by attention to the interconnections between power, knowledge, institutions, and subjectivities.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Arun Agrawal achieves, in *Environmentality*, something of a breakthrough to new analytical territory where the binaries of state and society, structure and agency, public and private are transcended. He parlays the humble subject of community-based forestry and Foucault’s concept of governmentality into the makings of an original and subtle analysis of modernity and nature.”

James C. Scott, Yale University

“Arun Agrawal has written an amazing book that draws on a very-long-term case study to make general lessons. He analyzes the development of the mentality of citizens and officials related to the environment in a particular setting undergoing major shifts from centralization to a form of decentralization. All of us can take some important lessons from this book about how people’s mentalities change when they have power and knowledge to cope with a problem. That shift in knowledge and power took time and effort, but is one of the rare success stories of recent history.”

Elinor Ostrom, coeditor of *Seeing the Forest and the Trees: Human-Environment Interactions in Forest Ecosystems*

“*Environmentality* offers readers in the fields of anthropology, environmental studies, and history a useful and interesting case study. . . . *Environmentality* is an excellent piece of scholarship, and a valuable addition to the fields of environmental anthropology and history, as well as to the general literature on colonial and postcolonial India.” (Sarah Strauss American Anthropologist)

[A] particularly useful and timely piece of scholarship as it attempts to transgress what are often distant and diverse literatures. This book helps to shed light on the connections between environmental regulation, practice and subjectivity. And in that way, this book illustrates the complexity and connectivity of environmental conflicts and struggles that are often overlooked by more limited or constrained analytical approaches. The book is very clearly organized and well written. . . .” (Michael Mascarenhas *Rural Sociology*)

[I]nteresting. . . . The strength of the book lies in its exploration of agency among the local populations and the serious treatment of the culture that environmental regulation affects. . . . This book offers an insightful critique of the assumptions that both the state and peasant resistance are monolithic . . . and provides a useful starting point to understand the phenomena of community forestry that governments are implementing around the world.” (Gregory Barton, *American Historical Review*)

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environment in a particular setting undergoing major shifts from centralization to a form of decentralization. All of us can take some important lessons from this book about how people's mentalities change when they have power and knowledge to cope with a problem. That shift in knowledge and power took time and effort, but is one of the rare success stories of recent history."--Elinor Ostrom, coeditor of "Seeing the Forest and the Trees: Human-Environment Interactions in Forest Ecosystems"

This book reports a rare success story in Third World conservation: the rise of grassroots-level forest management in Kumaon, India. In the colonial period, the British tried to stop deforestation by increasingly authoritarian methods. This failed; the local countryfolk, prevented from using their forests for subsistence needs, protested more and more seriously, ultimately resorting to arson. Eventually the British got the message and eased off. Fortunately, the Indian government later built on this perception, and gave more and more management rights to the Kumaonese. They rose to the occasion, and now manage the forests reasonably well. Arun Agrawal uses a Foucauldian approach to analyze the development of local management in an extremely fine-grained, detailed, careful way. The benefit of this approach is that it has stimulated a uniquely thorough and fair ethnography. The cost of this approach is its narrow focus on government and "subjects"--there is no independent assessment of how well the forests are actually doing. One wishes for a biologist's input. Still, any success story, even relative, is welcome these days, and this book will be very useful to anyone interested in comanagement of resources or resource conservation in general. We simply have to involve local people and respect their needs, in every conservation project, and this book is notably good at detailing one way a governmental system actually did that.

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Arun Agrawal's book offers a fresh approach to consider how subjectivities change, particularly in terms of how environmentalism happens at an individual and social level. Agrawal borrows from a number of different fields, including anthropology and history, to pursue these questions. His approach differs from several dominant schools that address these issues. One group of scholars, when talking about rural citizens in developing countries, assume that their needs are primarily material and antagonistic to any sense of long-term environmental care. "Environmentalism sensibilities don't make any sense unless their bellies are full" they say. Another group of scholars argues that rural women, because they rely on natural resources for their family's daily needs, are

actually quite environmentally minded. Agrawal does not follow either of these approaches, and questions a number of their premises. To carry out his inquiry, Agrawal examines a region in India that was famous for its resistance to British forest protection during the colonial era. This area resisted British authority by lighting hundreds of deliberately set fires. Surprisingly, Agrawal now finds that a number of villages are forming their own community-based groups for forest protection, and he seeks to discover what accounts for these changes. In his explanation, Agrawal draws on Foucauldian and other post-structural thought, but does so in novel ways. He is trying to examine the process of how subjects change over time, and even over the course of one lifetime. His writing is lively and his analysis is sharp. I highly recommend this book for those interested in social change, social theory, environmentalism, and new interdisciplinary approaches.

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