



Summer 2016

Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico, by Christopher Boyer

Isabella Pacheco

Recommended Citation

Isabella Pacheco, *Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico*, by Christopher Boyer, 56 Nat. Resources J. 397 (2016).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol56/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sahrk@unm.edu.

Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico by Christopher Boyer (Duke University Press; 360 pages; 2015)

Like most people, Christopher Boyer spots patterns. Unlike most people, perhaps, Christopher Boyer spots patterns in the unlikeliest and murkiest of places, particularly in the nuanced mechanisms of Mexican geographical, social, and political history. In *Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico*, Boyer lays out a meticulously documented pattern of political exploitation and tumultuous struggle for control of woodlands in modern Mexico.

Political Landscapes is meticulous and thorough. Boyer provides detailed insight to the historical narratives of the local indigenous peoples, how their way of life is inextricably intertwined with the forests, and the varying schools of thought explaining this relationship. These theories are contextualized with the varying times and social climates, the timeless greed of the foreign mill barons and mestizo elite, and the struggles and compromises of the ever-shifting politicians in charge.

Boyer convincingly traces two cycles of forest use through the twentieth century, and divides *Political Landscapes* in half accordingly. In the first half, Boyer describes a cycle of commodification of rural woodland, led by foreign corporations and aided by a government eager to align itself with big business, along with the revolutionary resentment that grew in the local rural communities because of this. In the second half, Boyer documents a second cycle of control, this time perpetuated by the post-revolution Mexican government, wresting power from foreign commercial titans, and with varying degrees of success, ceding control to local communities.

Throughout the book, Boyer argues for less state interference in forestry, based on his conclusion that it causes political conflicts. Boyer documents conflicting political and commercial interests resulting in abuse of resources and people. By contrast, Boyer documents healthy forestry and environmental activity in periods of communal control.

Although *Political Landscapes* is focused on a very narrow argument, it is not niche. The audience is not required to be expert in the narrow field of Mexican geo-politics. Rather, *Political Landscapes* would appeal to any person with an interest in environmental development and conservation, social history in times of revolution and industrialization, dynamic political regimes in the twentieth century, or anything tangentially related to these topics. Boyer does not use technical language and provides historical anecdotes, perhaps insignificant in the grand scheme of Mexican history, in order to allow this book to be accessible to many. He later uses these anecdotes as examples to make points about the development of Mexican forestry and commodification on a larger scale. The effect is a simultaneous development of rich and complimentary big and small pictures.

Political Landscapes is engaging and easy to follow. Boyer makes great use of organic breaks in historical time periods to organize it into six chapters. The organic division of chapters by time also serves to further Boyer's theory of cycles. Perhaps the strongest draw is Boyer's passion, which is evident through the meticulous research and colorful descriptions. It is this passion that pulls the reader forward, especially in the beginning chapters.

At times, however, the narrowness of the subject matter does work against the effectiveness of the piece. While the historical anecdotes are wonderfully written,

when viewed in light of the larger historical context, they pale in importance. While Boyer does make use of larger contextual themes, such as agrarian land reform, he only indirectly provides context concerning Mexico's quest to forge a post-revolutionary identity—a major theme in the history of twentieth century Mexico. Boyer hints at this context with references to European-educated environmental scientists and preferences for European temperate forests over Mexican tropical forests, but never openly makes the connection. The effects of larger contextual themes are present on the history of forestry; however, Boyer does not explicitly draw them out. These additions would provide a richer and fuller picture of the development of forestry, and would draw strong links between the development of Mexican forestry and the development of Mexican history in general.

For all its meticulous work, *Political Landscapes* leaves us with one large question: what does it all mean? Boyer's points of analysis, revolutionary lands blessed and cursed with a valuable natural resource, and the ebbs and flows of control in those lands, are intriguing. The prominence of agrarian land reform combined with a relatively compact and recent tumultuous political and social history make Mexico a perfect case study for Boyer. However, the questions still remains, what about other similar lands? The cycle so thoroughly illustrated in *Political Landscapes* leaves the reader to wonder whether such patterns exist elsewhere, or whether the unique history of Mexico has shaped it into an anomaly.

Boyer concludes by celebrating the autonomy ceded to the local communities by the Mexican government. However, Boyer also writes of the present day communal demand for state protection and aid, reasoning that state intervention is not inherently dangerous for forestry. The danger lies in the inconsistent and uneven application of state intervention. Considering the present day incursions of "narco-loggers" into rural forests, and the political corruption that turns a blind eye to these incursions, one cannot help but draw similarities between the foreign mill barons and the Porfiriato, or to the mestizo usurpers and the apathetic state machinery they manipulated. So the cycle continues.

Isabella Pacheco

Class of 2017

University of New Mexico School of Law