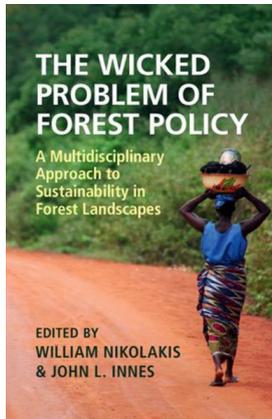




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The wicked problem of forest policy:
A multidisciplinary approach to
sustainability in forest landscapes



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Confronting complexity in forest management

Wicked problems are a feature of the modern world, where more and more people compete for fewer and fewer resources, and where opinions on appropriate ways to deal with this differ widely. Wicked problems are characterised by a lack of consensus among stakeholders and the absence of stopping rules. Wicked problems have no right or wrong answers, and the implementation of proposed solutions often leads to new problems. The global COVID-19 pandemic has recently brought a wicked problem into sharp focus on a worldwide scale, as governments try to strike a balance between imposing restrictions that would slow the spread of the disease, while simultaneously avoiding economic collapse. Achieving the sustainable management of our environment is likewise fraught with wicked problems, not least of which are to be found in the forestry sector.

This book opens with a chapter on why forests matter. It explains that they matter at a local scale to people who live in or close to them, they matter nationally as they contribute a large percentage to the economies of many countries, and they matter globally because they house most of the world's biodiversity and they play a significant role in regulating the earth's climate. Developing effective policies for sustainably managing forests is a wicked problem because it matters to so many different people for so many different, often conflicting, reasons. The world's forests are also rapidly disappearing as humans exploit their many resources and convert the land to other uses. The process of trying to control this destruction, and steering the management of forests towards sustainable conservation and use, has proved to be a fertile breeding ground for wicked problems. This book provides an extensive review of these problems, the policy approaches that have been developed to address them, and how well they are working – or not.

By way of example (and there are many examples in this book), one could look at the issue of oil palm plantations in Sumatra and Borneo. The plantations have brought jobs and development, including health care and schools. But they come at the expense of the tropical forests that they replace, and these are home to abundant biodiversity and iconic species such as the orangutan. Local people tend to support the development, but it is anathema to conservation groups, which oppose it vehemently. Models have suggested that there could be a sustainable balance between the two, but a workable plan to implement this is being delayed by issues such as land tenure and indigenous rights. In the meantime, oil palm plantations continue to expand rapidly, with key decisions influenced by power relations rather than by democratic processes.

In an attempt to address problems like these, several ambitious and far-reaching schemes have been developed. Certification of forest products (for example by the Forestry Stewardship Council, or the Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification) is now applied over more than 500 million hectares (but only 1.4% of this is in Africa). Although started with good intentions, certification schemes have failed, by and large, to achieve their goals. Payments for ecosystem services have perhaps been more successful, but only in situations in which they benefit local people, which is not always the case. A scheme labelled REDD+ (Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Degradation+) was introduced as a policy measure intended to mitigate global climate change. REDD+ has gone to great lengths to avoid problems of competing rights and widespread corruption, but in so doing has created a structure that is 'extremely complex and difficult to implement at local scales'. It has thus remained 'a great idea that has hardly been tried'. There appears to be broad consensus that devolution of decision-making about the management of forests to local governments and communities is the way to go, but in most cases this has been only partial, with central governments retaining key powers.

Forest management is also bedevilled by illegal activities, notably illegal logging. A chapter dealing with this issue notes that, of all forms of environmental crime (for example illegal fishing, wildlife poaching, or dumping of hazardous waste), forestry crimes have by far the largest impact on humanity. Illegal logging is directly responsible for up to 90% of all tropical deforestation, and is valued at over USD100 billion annually, yet the practice hardly features in international forest policy debates, where the subject appears to be taboo. Combined with widespread corruption in many forestry administrations, forestry crimes add a further complicating dimension to wicked problems in forest policy.

These and many other aspects are examined in detail in this book. There are five chapters devoted to 'tools to address wicked problems'. Most propose the devolution of meaningful decision-making to local levels, but note that established governments and corporations with vested interests continue to play powerful roles in determining the future of forests. An argument is put forward that corporate investment by the private sector may fare better in influencing forest policy if such investment is done within a responsible framework. Currently though, this synthesis has shown that existing systems of regional, national and international government have essentially failed. Largely this is because of ongoing forestry crimes, deep-rooted corruption, and a reluctance on the part of governments and corporations to cede power to local actors. Wicked problems are by definition almost impossible to solve, but it would nonetheless be very informative for anyone involved in the environmental policy field to read this book. The treatment is detailed, and this provides the reader with a thorough background to the issues they will be facing, and potentially how they could address them.