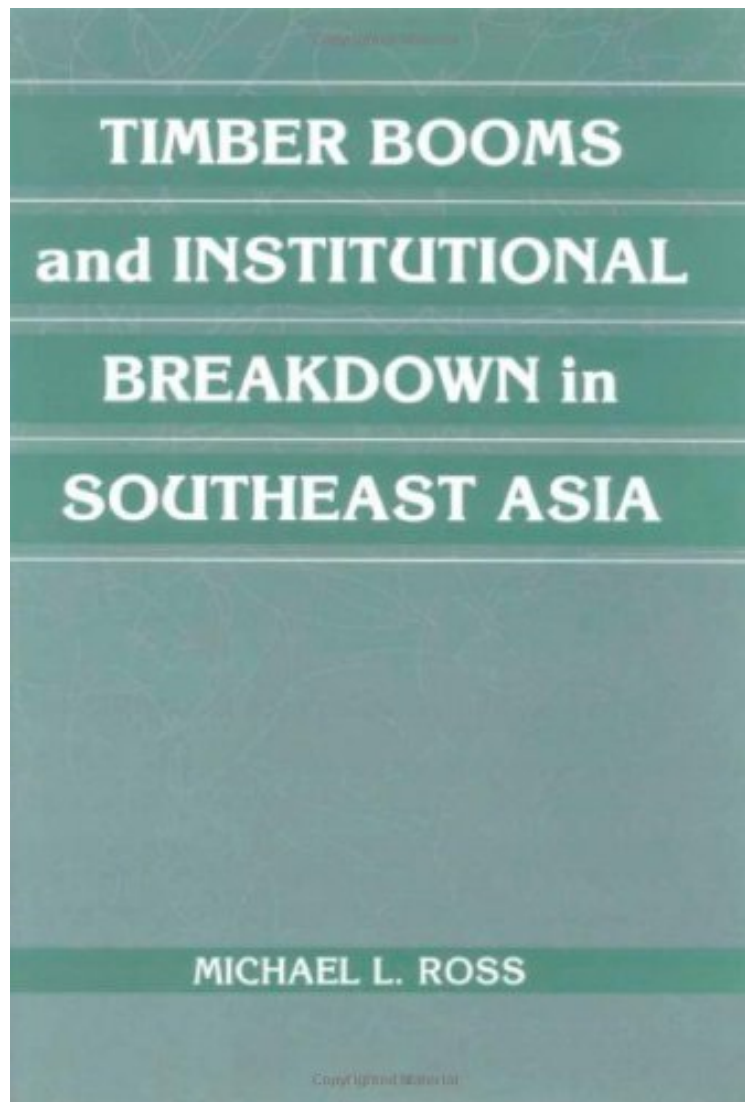


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Timber Booms and Institutional Breakdown in Southeast Asia (Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions)

Michael L. Ross

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Michael L. Ross : Timber Booms and Institutional Breakdown in Southeast Asia (Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Timber Booms and Institutional Breakdown in Southeast Asia (Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions):

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Why Conservation Breaks DownBy E. N. AndersonThis is an

excellent case study of the failure of conservation policies. It describes the destruction of the forests of the Philippines, Malaysia (specifically Sabah and Sarawak), and Indonesia. Each has gone from largely forested to almost totally deforested in 40 years; SCIENCE magazine in May called for desperate last-ditch attempts to saving the last lowland forests of Indonesia, where only the national parks are left and even they are now being illegally logged. Yet all these countries--especially the Phils and Malaysia--once had excellent forestry policies and departments. There are very few good case studies of the breakdown of conservation and resource management; this is one of them. In fact, it is one of the very best I have seen on forest destruction in the Third World. The author introduces the concept of "rent seizure": Seizure by government personnel of the power to allocate resources and/or income streams therefrom. This is, to some degree, just a values-neutral word for "corruption," but it applies to some cases that are not so much corrupt as simply foolish and expedient. He shows that insecure bosses are more apt to rent-seize than secure ones; they need the support, NOW, of backers that they can pay off with logging rights. He does not apply his concept to the US or Canada, but one can easily substitute "Idaho" or "British Columbia" for "Philippines" or "Malaysia" in the conclusions of this book. There are some problems with the book. Ross minimizes the role of other nations, explicitly letting Japan off the hook. Yet Japan not only provided a vast and unregulated market, but pressured these countries to export round logs, discouraging their processing industries--and thus the value-added that would have made it more worth while to manage sustainably. Also minimally mentioned is the role of the World Bank and IMF. Yet these entities played their part. They continued to give loans to the countries in question, even after they knew that the loan money would be misappropriated and the loan paid back by running down the country's resource base as well as its education and health care institutions; this was particularly notorious in the case of Marcos' Philippines, where World Bank loans went into Imelda's shoe collection. Ross is also rather less hard on the national government of Malaysia than he might have been; he blames local politicians in Sabah and Sarawak, but much blame should be attached to the national government as well. On the other hand, emphasizing the local scene is a useful corrective to the excessive emphasis on "globalization" that has distorted so much recent literature. If the human race survives the 21st century, the destruction of the world's tropical forests will be seen as one of the worst crimes in history. Not only were the forests and their resident people destroyed; the benefits were almost nil. Southeast Asia's forests went into disposable chopsticks, temporary siding for concrete-pouring, and other throwaway trash of the consumer society. The orang-utan, the Indonesian rhinoceri, and thousands of other animals are extinct or will soon be, all so that rich people did not have to wash a few dishes. The indigenous peoples of these countries are driven from their homes and livelihoods, all to produce some trash. Ross shows us how this could happen--how governments and firms could wind up systematically and calmly working for two generations on such an insane project.

This book was first published in 2001. Scholars have long studied how institutions emerge and become stable. But why do institutions sometimes break down? In this book, Michael L. Ross explores the breakdown of the institutions that govern natural resource exports in developing states. He shows that these institutions often break down when states receive positive trade shocks - unanticipated windfalls. Drawing on the theory of rent-seeking, he suggests that these institutions succumb to a problem he calls 'rent-seizing' - the predatory behavior of politicians who seek to supply rent to others, and who purposefully dismantle institutions that restrain them. Using case studies of timber booms in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, he shows how windfalls tend to trigger rent-seizing activities that may have disastrous consequences for state institutions, and for the government of natural resources. More generally, he shows how institutions can collapse when they have become endogenous to any rent-seeking process.

"Ross's work is an important documentation of the process by which political and economic elites invented new institutions and introduced new forms of patronage. This documentation is a valuable contribution to knowledge." Pacific Affairs "This is an important contribution and makes the book one that will garner much attention from those interested in natural-resource management and economic development." Governance "...Ross's book makes an important contribution to our theorizing of the effects of natural resources exports on the mostly negative trajectory of institutions. Its clear and readable prose, cogent argument, and detailed histories of political parties and institutions should make it a useful addition to instruction on the politics and economics of timber in Southeast Asia and natural resources more generally." Society and Natural Resources