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Response to Toledo et al. 2000. "The multiple use of tropical forests by indigenous peoples in Mexico: a case of adaptive management"

Tropical Multiple Use

[E. N. Anderson](#)

University of California, Riverside

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This excellent and important article (Toledo et al. 2003) adds another case to the many now on record that indicate that tropical shifting cultivation can be sustainable, intensive, and highly productive. This is especially true when, as in the present case, a very large variety of end products is extracted from the landscape and a variety of methods is used to extract them. The high diversity both reduces the stress on any one product and provides a major incentive to preserve the whole forest, rather than sacrificing everything in favor of one commodity. The authors' broad conclusions are substantially the same as the ones I drew from my work with the Yucatec Maya in Quintana Roo and from observations in Southeast Asia. There is a need for more detail on which social institutions maintain such fine-tuned, sustainable systems. As the editors of this journal have repeatedly pointed out, traditional societies typically have religious or ideological rules that govern ecological management and forbid overuse. In this way, long-term management is subsumed under religiously coded morality. This is true for the Yucatec and is also reported for the Huastec by Alcorn (1989); I would like to see more on how the Totonac get the job done.

Finally, the authors speak of markets but do not say much about the policies of the Mexican government. Cattle ranching has been heavily subsidized, both directly and indirectly. Orange planting was a government program in Quintana Roo, not a spontaneous response to the market. Such market imperfections interfere with the maintenance of diversified systems, whether traditional or innovative.

None of the above is intended as a negative criticism of the article, which is a wonderful piece of work! I merely wish to raise a few side issues for the future.

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RESPONSES TO THIS ARTICLE

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Address of Correspondent:

E. N. Anderson
University of California
Riverside, California 92521 USA
Phone: (909) 787-5523
Fax: (909) 787-5409
eugene.anderson@ucr.edu



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