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"'Water Used to be Scattered in the Landscape': Local Understandings of Soil Erosion and Land Use Planning in Southern Zimbabwe"

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Wilson, K. B. "'Water Used to be Scattered in the Landscape:' Local Understandings of Soil Erosion and Land Use Planning in Southern Zimbabwe." *Environment and History* 1, no. 3, Zimbabwe special issue (Oct., 1995): 281–296. doi:10.3197/096734095779522500 . This article presents some local understandings of ecological history in a semi-arid area of Zimbabwe as an exploration of how changes in land use that reflect both local initiative and state planning have transformed the hydrology of local catchments of heavy clay 'mopani soils' and greatly accelerated soil erosion. Local explanations provide a wide-ranging and challenging analysis of the dynamics of watersheds situated within a complex social and historical context. In conjunction with the spread of ox-ploughing and population growth and redistribution, a range of ill-conceived and authoritarian 'conservation' and 'development' interventions by the colonial state are argued by local intellectuals to be the major causes of accelerated soil erosion. Particular attention is given to how government imposed the deforestation and intensive use of difficult top land soils, and then transformed that uneven heterogeneous landscape into a smooth bare land connected by contour ridges and paths so that water concentrates, erodes, and then leaves the desiccating land to silt the rivers. The existence of sophisticated 'indigenous knowledge' systems in Africa has now been widely accepted, but this case study suggests that their very depth, variability and complexity means that attempts to harness local ecological knowledge for the understanding of—or development action about—environmental change may be more problematic than is often assumed. Researchers, government and conservation and development organisations need to do much more than seek to 'tap' such knowledge. Real understandings and 'sustainable development' can only flow from new power relationships with rural people and their knowledge. All rights reserved. © 1995 The White Horse Press

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