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"Deforestation, Erosion, and Fire: Degradation Myths in the Environmental History of Madagascar"

Kull, Christian A.

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Mention of the island nation of Madagascar conjures up images of exotic nature, rampant deforestation, and destructive erosion. Popular descriptions of the island frequently include phrases such as "ecological mayhem" or "barren landscape." This paper compares this common wisdom and conservation rhetoric about the environmental history of Madagascar with the results of recent research by paleoecologists and others. Deforestation and erosion, while very real trends, are exaggerated due to mistaken ideas about pre-settlement forest extent and the eye-catching red soils and erosion gullies. The role of fire, principal tool of landscape change and pasture maintenance, is unnecessarily demonised. Blame is placed on the Malagasy people and problems of poverty and population growth, ignoring economic interests, historical political contexts, community politics, and the potential of the people to manage their resources positively. Finally, drawing from the recent school of thought that recognises the role of narratives, discourses, and representations in the politics of conservation, this paper concludes by illustrating the political nature of the oft-repeated story of environmental degradation in Madagascar.

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