



Development with identity: Community, culture and sustainability in the Andes

Michael L. Dougherty

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BOOK REVIEW

Development with identity: Community, culture and sustainability in the Andes, by Robert E. Rhoades (ed.), Cambridge, CABI Publishing, 2006, 325 pp., US\$153.00, ISBN: 978-0851999494

The United States Agency for International Development funded a series of research projects known as SANREM (Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management) beginning in the early 1990s. These were collaborative research projects between US and host country universities to strengthen sustainable agriculture and natural resource management in targeted regions of the developing world, including Southeast Asia, West Africa, and the Andes. *Development with Identity* is the final and summative publication from the extensive seven-year Andes region SANREM project, which focused on the municipality of Cotacachi in the Imbabura Province of Highland Ecuador. The late University of Georgia anthropologist Robert E. Rhoades led and managed this project and served as editor for this wide-ranging compendium of results.

In the broadest sense, this book is an effort to integrate a variety of natural and social science perspectives on the relationship between development and the biophysical environment in one particular municipality. The researchers selected Cotacachi because of its high levels of biodiversity, indigenous character, and acute environmental degradation and landscape change. For these reasons, along with a progressive and accessible indigenous-led mayoral administration, Cotacachi was an appropriate laboratory for this research.

This study included soil scientists, hydrologists, agronomists, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and others from US and Ecuadorian universities and NGOs. The team had a continuous presence in Cotacachi from 1997 to 2004 and amassed a data-set so vast and variegated that this book only skims the surface. The text is divided into four sections. The first, "Time and Landscape in Cotacachi," serves to contextualize the subsequent sections. This section provides a history of Cotacachi in the context of Ecuadorian history and describes contemporary social life in Cotacachi. This section also seeks to make the case for a unique indigenous cosmology, on the part of the residents of Cotacachi, which is informed by the biophysical environment. Section one covers topics such as land use change, environmental degradation in Cotacachi, fragmentation of ecosystems, and climate change, largely from a qualitative, anthropological perspective.

Section two, "Biodiversity Conservation and Use," roams through topics such as agroforestry, agricultural production, invasive species, and local food culture. It begins with an inventory of biodiversity in the area, which is followed by excellent chapters on local perceptions of native trees versus the introduced and prolific eucalyptus trees, and the meanings and explanations of the loss of traditional agricultural species. These are chapters with evocative analysis supported by robust data, which would make great readings for an advanced undergraduate class on development and the environment.

The third section, "Soils, Water and Sustainability," is dominated by technical studies. Soil scientists and hydrologists evaluate soil and water quality; economists evaluate appropriate local willingness to pay for watershed management; and foresters discuss water system co-management practices.

The final section, “Negotiating ‘Development with Identity,’” foregrounds the discussion of development and backgrounds the focus on the human/biophysical interface that characterizes most of the rest of the text. This section features chapters on rural development, collective action, land-use change, and a discussion of the meaning of place for the citizens of Cotacachi and their rationale for out- and return-migration.

The introduction, together with the final chapter, both sole authored by Rhoades, are the editor’s effort to bring coherence to this sweeping set of studies. He identifies three themes drawn successfully through the chapters, including a framework of “sustainability science,” the integration of social and natural sciences to conduct policy research at the intersection of nature and society; a commitment to privilege indigenous and traditional knowledge; and a research model in which locals participate in knowledge production and benefit materially from the research. In general, the text is more multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. Most chapters read like discrete studies. But this book largely succeeds in carrying these unifying themes throughout.

Altogether, this work is a detailed and vivid portrait of development and environment in Cotacachi; nevertheless, there are a few weaknesses. First, the phrase “sustainability science,” despite serving as the text’s principle cohering theme, is never satisfactorily defined. Nor do the authors entertain the common critiques of sustainability as a conceptual framework. Secondly, there is a tendency throughout this book, as with much work on indigenous identity politics, to romanticize and stylize so-called indigenous cosmology. Third, in explaining social and environmental change in Cotacachi, many of the chapters identify the green revolution – the technification and scientization of agriculture from the 1940s to the 1970s – as the predominant factor. While the green revolution certainly played a role, it is curious that the processes of neoliberal globalization beginning in the 1990s didn’t factor more prominently in the work’s explanatory narrative. Finally, the authors largely overlook the crucial role of local politics and idiosyncratic local conditions in explaining Cotacachi’s progressive development outcomes. Cotacachi is a unique site, with a broad, participatory governing coalition and a progressive indigenous mayor. Further, Cotacachi is adjacent to the national Cotacachi Cayapas Ecological Reserve, which shapes local perspectives on conservation and draws thousands of tourists and expatriates to Cotacachi. Because of this unique set of local conditions, which do not factor prominently in the book’s explanatory framework, extrapolating the book’s findings to other places may be problematic.

This collection of diverse studies is an excellent resource for scholars with specific interests in rural community development in Andean Ecuador. The findings dovetail with the arguments of most community development scholars since the 1990s – top down, externally driven development efforts are intermittently effective and generally unsustainable. Locally driven autochthonous efforts, though more laborious, yield superior results in the long term.

Rhoades is best known for developing the sub-field of agricultural anthropology, and this text is demonstratively informed by that framework. *Development with Identity* reflects Rhoades’ long-standing conviction that culture and agriculture must be understood together, particularly through agricultural technology. Linking agricultural anthropology to sustainability science as Rhoades does here makes this an important book both for scholars of the Andes and the people of Cotacachi.

Michael L. Dougherty

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA

 mdoughe@ilstu.edu

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