

## **Review: In Search of the Rain Forest**

By Candace Slater (Ed.)

Reviewed by [Elery Hamilton-Smith](#)  
*Charles Sturt University, Australia*

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Candace Slater (Ed.). *In Search of the Rain Forest*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 318 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3205-1 (cloth); 0-8223-3218-3 (paper). US\$79.95 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

This book, which grew out of a six-month seminar that included a field visit to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, challenges most of the prevailing assumptions and discourses about the rain forest. The extent to which the Yucatan has come to be widely identified (not by the authors) as rain forest highlights the growing ambiguity of the very concept.

The first essay focuses upon the X-Caret mega-theme park of the Yucatan. This is a spectacular nature-based amusement park with a well-integrated blend of authenticity and carefully contrived and executed romanticized falsehood. It has had many positive effects upon the conservation of various aspects of the environment, widespread awareness of environmental values, and the socio-economic development of the region. Yet it also raises a number of ethical and other problems. Its overwhelming dominance of the regional tourism industry causes some deep concerns for more humble operators, many of whom have a sincere commitment to authenticity and genuine conservation. I certainly enjoyed and appreciated my personal experience of X-Caret, but I sympathize with those who express concern. Any serious examination of it will inevitably generate ambiguity and ambivalence.

Other essays deal respectively with wildfire in forested areas, apparently responsible oil extraction in Ecuador, the appropriation and industrialization of herbal medicine in the forests of Belize, a critical history of the Mayan rain forests, Indian preservation of tigers through protected areas, the generation and control of violence in the indigenous peoples of Kalimantan, and the viral forests of Africa as a horror spectacle.

Interestingly, several essays develop and discuss, as a sub-theme, the way in which protected forests often provide a splendid environment for crime. The resources of the forest, both fauna and timber, are subject to poaching or other illegal harvesting; the environment also provides a haven within which such activities as distribution of illegal drugs can proceed without effective control. Regrettably, as a sub-theme, the complexities of illegality in this setting are not thoroughly explored and none of the authors appear to

be aware of Jacobi's seminal analysis. There is also little mention of the extent to which being a park ranger is increasingly becoming a dangerous occupation—a major agenda at the last International Ranger Federation Conference.

Perhaps the most exciting contribution of the book is the description of the way in which the Gujar people have developed and maintain a positive relationship with the tigers of the Sariska reserve in India. They are pointing to new directions in tiger management which is resonant with the monastery at Kanchanaburi with its happy population of "tame" tigers. It also is a great example of the immense contribution of indigenous populations to forest protection highlighted by the recent report of the Forest Trends organization. At a less significant level, it brings Yann Martel's wonderful *Life of Pi* into the real world and recalls my personal experience of having twice met a tiger face-to-face while walking alone through tropical forest.

At this stage, anyone concerned with forest management would do well to read this book—it is an excellent demonstration of the value of a consciously-managed process of inter-disciplinary dialogue. Perhaps further discussion would do well to include both an ethicist philosopher and a contemporary neurologist.

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Elery Hamilton-Smith, AM. <[elery@alphalink.com.au](mailto:elery@alphalink.com.au)>, Adjunct Professor, School of Environmental and Information Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Albury, New South Wales, Australia.