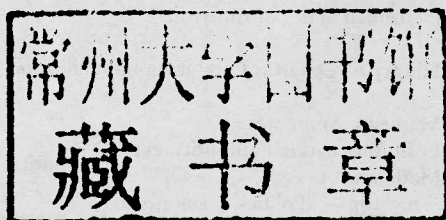




Instituting Nature

Authority, Expertise, and Power in Mexican Forests

Andrew S. Mathews



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Series Foreword

As our understanding of environmental threats deepens and broadens, it is increasingly clear that many environmental issues cannot be simply understood, analyzed, or acted on. The multifaceted relationships among human beings, social and political institutions, and the physical environment in which they are situated extend across disciplinary as well as geopolitical confines and cannot be analyzed or resolved in isolation.

The purpose of this series is to address the increasingly complex questions of how societies come to understand, confront, and cope with both the sources and manifestations of present and potential environmental threats. Works in the series may focus on matters political, scientific, technical, social, or economic. What they share is attention to the intertwined roles of politics, science, and technology in the recognition, framing, analysis, and management of environmentally related contemporary issues and a manifest relevance to the increasingly difficult problems of identifying and forging environmentally sound public policy.

Peter M. Haas
Sheila Jasanoff

Acknowledgments

Anthropologists know that debts can be powerful and that they can establish enduring social relationships. If this is so, I am rich in the many debts that I have incurred in writing this book. Although I alone am responsible for errors and mistakes, I have been influenced by many people, and this book is part of a long conversation with them.

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Glossary of Institutions

CONAFOR *Comision Nacional Forestal*: National Forestry Commission.

EZLN *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional*: Zapatista National Liberation Army, which launched a rebellion against the national government in Chiapas in 1994.

FAPATUX *Fabricas Papeleras de Tuxtepec*: Tuxtepec Paper Factories.

IEE *Instituto Estatal de Ecología*: State Institute of Ecology.

INE *Instituto Nacional de Ecología*: National Institute of Ecology.

INI *Instituto Nacional Indigenista*: National Indigenous Institute. Responsible for development of indigenous communities, founded in 1949.

INIFAP *Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales Agrícolas y Pecuarias*: National Institute for Research on Forestry, Agriculture, and Livestock.

IRA *Instituto de Reforma Agraria*: Agrarian Reform Institute. Responsible for titling lands and ensuring the smooth administration of *ejidos* and *comunidades*.

LEGEEPA *Ley General de Equilibrio Ecológico y la Protección al Ambiente*: General Law of Environmental Protection and Ecological Equilibrium (1987). The first law to require an environmental impact analysis.

NGO Non-Governmental Organization.

NOM *Norma Oficial Mexicana*: Official Mexican Norm, the most enduring and authoritative of the regulations for controlling the environment.

ODRENASIJ *Organización para Defensa de los Recursos Naturales y Desarrollo Social de la Sierra de Juárez* (Organization for Defense of

the Natural Resources and for the Social Development of the Sierra Juárez).

PAN *Partido Acción Nacional*: National Action Party. Center right political party that came to power in 2000, replacing the PRI.

PRD *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*: Party of the Democratic Revolution, a center left party.

PROCYMAF *Proyecto de Conservación y Manejo Forestal*: Conservation and Sustainable Forest Use Project.

PRI *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*. Institutional Revolutionary Party; remained in power from 1929 until 2000.

PROCEDE A land titling program run by the Ministry of Agricultural Reform, active in 2000–2001

PRODEFOR *Programa Nacional Forestal*: National Forest Program: Federal forestry subsidy program, active during 1994–2001

PROFEPA *Procuraduría Federal de Protección Ambiente*: Office of the Federal Environmental Prosecutor.

PRONARE *Programa Nacional de Reforestación*: National Reforestation Program.

SAG *Secretaría de Agricultura*: Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock.

SARH *Secretaría de Agricultura y Recursos Hidráulicos*: Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources.

SEDESOL *Secretaría de Desarrollo Social*: Secretariat of Social Development.

SEMARNAP *Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales y Pesca*: Ministry of Environment Natural Resources and Fisheries (1992–2001).

SEMARNAT *Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales*: Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (2001–present).

UCFAS *Unidad Comunal Forestal y Agropecuaria y de Servicios*: Community Forestry, Agriculture, and Services Unit—the organization responsible for managing Ixtlán's forests.

UNAM Mexican National Autonomous University. Until the 1980s, this was the preeminent educational institution in Mexico.

Contents

Series Foreword	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Glossary of Institutions	xi

1	Introduction	1
2	Building Forestry in Mexico: Ambitious Regulations and Popular Evasions	31
3	The Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca: Mobile Landscapes, Political Economy, and the Fires of War	61
4	Forestry Comes to Oaxaca: Bureaucrats, Gangsters, and Indigenous Communities, 1926–1956	93
5	Industrial Forestry, Watershed Control, and the Rise of Community Forestry, 1956–2001	117
6	The Mexican Forest Service: Knowledge, Ignorance, and Power	147
7	The Acrobatics of Transparency and Obscurity: Forestry Regulations Travel to Oaxaca	179
8	Working the Indigenous Industrial	203
9	Conclusion	235

Appendix	243
Notes	251
References	267
Index	291

Introduction

Setting the Stage

In the film *Umberto D.* (Rizzoli et al. [1952] 2003), the title character, an elderly, retired civil servant, climbs onto a nearly empty tram. He is carrying a small suitcase and leads a small dog on a leash.

Conductor: *No no, col cane non si può!*

Umberto D: *Prima delle otto si può ...*

Conductor: *Lo insegna a me? Se é cacciatore sí, se non é cacciatore no.*

Umberto D: *Io posso dire che vado a caccia. Perche non potrei avere il fucile nella valigia?*

Conductor: *Va bene ... dove scende?*

Conductor: No, no, you can't travel with the dog!

Umberto D: But before eight one can.

Conductor: You're teaching me? If you are a hunter yes, if you're not a hunter no!

Umberto D: I can say that I am going hunting. Why couldn't I have a gun in my suitcase?

Conductor: All right. Where do you get off?¹

Uncertain Authority

Around the world, the troubles of modernity seem to call for more knowledge, greater transparency, increased oversight by states, or increased inspection of states by active publics. It is often claimed that citizens should want to know more, perhaps in order to call governments and corporations to account, perhaps in order to make financial markets work better and avoid scandals and financial meltdowns. Global climate change, we are told, will be addressed by a transparent system of audit and accounting, which will make visible the stocks and flows of carbon from mines and forests into the atmosphere and oceans, hopefully

preventing the worst impacts of climate change. International conservation organizations increasingly try to make biodiversity knowable to their audiences using brightly colored maps, which make visible where biodiversity is located, who or what is causing it to be eroded, and what, hopefully, might be done to address this predicament. Beyond the environmental field, efforts to produce transparent knowledge proceed unabated, from the calls of Transparency International to heed indices of governmental and corporate corruption, to efforts to monitor commodity chains that produce blood diamonds, to efforts to make high school teachers in Los Angeles accountable to quantitative assessments of their students' progress. Knowledge and transparency are key concerns across multiple cultures and problem areas, one of those things that you can never have too much of, even as you worry about the possibility of authoritarian states peering at the details of your personal life, or of oppressive bureaucracies that loose papers, demand taxes, and make your life complicated.

This book is about the effort to produce a regime of transparent knowledge in the forests of Mexico, and it is about how transparent knowledge was produced not by official declarations or scientific projects of mapping, but from the texture of encounters between officials and their clients, the foresters and indigenous people who manage and own the pine forests of Mexico. I will describe how the science of forestry arrived in Mexico in the late nineteenth century and how it gradually came to inform the lifeworlds of foresters, forestry officials, and indigenous people, and, more widely, how the political cultures of federal forestry institutions and their audiences affect how people believe or disbelieve in official knowledge about forests and about the state. This is a story about how transparency and other forms of knowledge are made; I will argue that when we talk of transparency or official knowledge, we too often assume that these are produced by officials in government offices or by scientists in laboratories. As I will show, in the case of Mexican forestry science, the apparently small scale and particular contexts of indigenous politics, logging in forests, and meetings between officials and indigenous leaders turn out to affect what we take to be very large categories: the credibility of the Mexican state, the stability of official knowledge about forests, the possibility of logging forests for timber. In other places and times, I will suggest, traveling theories are remade in local political performances; other regimes of transparency must deal with the power of publics to remake knowledge, to withhold belief in official beneficence and authority.

I have a confession to make. This is a book about forestry bureaucracies in Mexico written by an Anglo-American anthropologist, but I bring to bear on these social worlds a rather different sensibility. Growing up partly in Italy and partly in Mexico, I learned to see bureaucracies not as authoritative institutions that their clients obeyed, but as something quite different, as the sometimes dangerous, sometimes farcical and blundering instruments of the state. Everyone knew that a bureaucracy could be placated by a sufficiently persuasive performance, everyone had numerous stories to tell about their own encounters with bureaucracy, and everyone had better stories to tell than I did. In Italy I learned that if you could only present yourself as a peasant farmer, you might be able to secure tax exemptions and benefits from the state; I learned that the best way to approach an official was to secure his help in filling in forms or perhaps in avoiding forms and regulations entirely. Far from being an aberration or imperfection in the law, finding a bureaucrat to help or collude with you was the best possible way of negotiating with the state.

Years later, already in graduate school and studying Mexican forestry bureaucracies, I came across the wonderful films of Vittorio De Sica, the Italian neorealist film director. I came to realize that my sensibility of bureaucracy as an oppressive and malign fiction was imbued with an appreciation of the kinds of performances, collusions, complicities, and evasions that appear in many of De Sica's films. In the brief vignette I quote above, an old, unemployed official accompanied by his dog negotiates with a tram conductor in order to collude in producing a representation of a hunter leaving home early one morning with his dog. Somewhere the paper ticket that accompanies this story will leave a paper trail, and national statistics will refer to the number of hunters who use public transport. Documents here become potentially dangerous fictions, officials can be partially domesticated accomplices, and the state is far from being all knowing. This book recounts my travels within and encounters with the Mexican forestry bureaucracy and with indigenous forestry bureaucracies in the state of Oaxaca, but my point of departure was affected by the humorous or terrifying stories with which I grew up. Throughout this book, I describe bureaucracy as performance, as a public fiction, which can only be sustained by a skillful collaboration between apparently authoritative officials and their audiences, in a kind of public intimacy. I will argue that understanding forestry bureaucracies in this way radically transforms our understandings of modern states, of science, and of power. It is not that bureaucratic simplification and abstraction are the opposite of intimacy and collusion but rather that

bureaucratic knowledge is always underpinned by collusion and intimacy, not just in Mexico but in other states and institutions. Official knowledge always silences other forms of knowledge, but this is not just a vice of bureaucrats: The literature on the sociology of knowledge teaches us that making shared public knowledge always involves silencing or suppressing alternative forms of knowledge. What is particular about bureaucratic knowledge-making is that it seeks simultaneously to perform official knowledge and knowledge of what kind of thing the state is. Officials silence opposition by claiming to speak for the state as thing and by claiming to translate generalized knowledge to local contexts, seeking to imprison their audiences in a slot of local knowledge.

Much anthropological study of conservation and development has assumed that these are powerful discursive forces that transform societies and environments around the world, through such projects as dams, road building, industrial agriculture, or the creation and policing of new parks. This is clearly a part of the story, but in this book I will argue that such accounts make conservation and development too powerful and fail to pay attention to the paradoxical authority and vulnerability, to the uncertain authority of conservation and development institutions and of modernist bureaucracies more widely.² Environmental anthropologists have given too much assent to the omnipotence and apparent omnipresence of conservation/development, perhaps framed as neoliberal conservation or neoliberal development, where it appears still more pervasive, more omnipotent, and still harder to oppose, both analytically and practically.³ Often anthropologists frame their opposition to global forces as being a kind of speaking from the local, arguing always that local contexts are profoundly important and that globalizing projects are always reworked and transformed in local contexts. Valuable though this is, it imprisons the social sciences in a "local slot" that all too easily accepts the power of global generalizations and the institutions and actors who claim to speak for them. One way out of this conundrum is to pay close attention to the lives of the powerful, to look at how conservation officials, developers, or bureaucrats constantly juggle between local context and sweeping generalization, between the locality of their audiences and the global knowledge, general regulation or national policy they claim to speak for. This is what I call "uncertain authority": Officials may speak authoritatively, but they are haunted by a sense of vulnerability, as translating between the general and the local makes them vulnerable, worried about their lack of local knowledge. This book then is about Mexican forestry bureaucrats who juggle the tension between sweeping

knowledge claims and mundane local concealments, between ambitious regulations and routine rule breaking. The power of these officials is different than we had thought bureaucratic power to be; it is a curious, halting, and vulnerable power, always made in performance, always subject to being undermined. This is an ethnographically observable, local, institutional power, which draws on the coercive and material power of a state that never reaches as far as it claims or would like to. State power rests on officials' ability to enact a distinction between the local and the global or the national, between a regulation and its specific local case, between the political and the technical. An attention to the detailed where, when, and how of bureaucratic lives and practices shows a more halting, less seamless, and more collaborative form of power, a power that seeks the assent of its audiences even as its performers doubt it. Seeing state power in this way calls upon us to rethink where, when, and how it might be fruitful to engage in remaking the state.

Following this insight, this book moves back and forth between the offices of the forest service in Mexico City and the regional capital in the state of Oaxaca, and the forests and the indigenous communities who largely control them. In chapter 2, I trace how the science of forestry first came to Mexico, how it was inscribed into national forestry laws and policies over the last hundred years, and I pay particular attention to the eminently material institutions and offices where particular officials were entrusted with the task of bringing forestry into forests. Forest policies and official forms of knowledge did not encounter a blank slate, and the new science of forestry encountered a landscape that had been partially transformed by histories of state-making and by past political economies. The details of colonial rule through indigenous municipalities and the struggles of indigenous people who engaged in warfare, trade, and state-making set the stage for the encounter between state science and popular understandings of forests, between forestry bureaucracies and indigenous municipalities. In chapter 3, I describe some of this stage setting, recounting how the landscapes and forests of the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca were folded into economies of cochineal growing and mining in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literally defining who would own forests in the twentieth century. The detailed histories of particular towns and forests turn out to matter a great deal for the credibility of forestry institutions in the present. I therefore focus particularly on the indigenous community of Ixtlán de Juárez, a small Zapotec town about a two-hour drive from the City of Oaxaca. Ixtlán was militarily powerful in the nineteenth century and came to be a leading forest community in

the twentieth century. The details of ecology, landscape, and political history affect how indigenous forest communities like Ixtlán came to control areas of forest and how they brought to bear their ownership of forests in their encounters with the forest service and logging companies in the present. It is this experience of political action and of living and working with imperceptibly mobile forests and fields that indigenous people brought to their encounter with the new forest service in the 1930s.

In the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1911–1920), the expanding Mexican state brought the science of forestry and bureaucratic practices of paperwork to the City of Oaxaca and, haltingly, into the forests of the Sierra Juárez. Chapters 4 and 5 trace these moments of encounter, first when a relatively feeble forest service tried to directly control loggers through complex regulations and, from the 1950s onward, by subcontracting state authority to large parastatal companies that logged the pine forests of the Sierra Juárez and employed local people as forest workers and technicians. Working as employees of the logging companies taught indigenous people the theories and working practices of industrial forestry and gradually produced a popular movement that secured the cancellation of logging concessions in the mid-1980s. This marked a significant advance in the power of indigenous communities that owned forests, and it brings us to the present moment, when apparently authoritative state forestry institutions must deal with the mundane realities of limited resources, complex regulations, and intransigent local communities.

Paying attention to the daily work of officials allows us to see the curiously halting and hesitant power of officials and the power of their audiences. In chapter 6, I move from moments of encounter between officials and their indigenous audiences to the offices of the forest service in Mexico City, and then in chapter 7, I return to the lifeworlds of forestry officials and foresters in the City of Oaxaca. Crucially, I show that state power does not rely on knowledge alone but also on ignorance, and I argue that official knowledge and various forms of ignorance are coproduced in encounters between officials and their audiences. Local contexts and apparently local details turn out to matter a great deal for the content of official knowledge and for the legitimacy of government institutions. The power of forests and forest workers is further explored in chapter 8, where I describe how indigenous people in the community of Ixtlán are able to form alliances with government officials and with official knowledge, not because the state imposes legibility on them, but because a relatively powerful community is able to call community elites and government officials to account. Working in the forest becomes a political