[Have small farmers deforested West Africa?](#)

Not according to British researchers James Fairhead and Melissa Leach.

Their recent book 'Reframing Deforestation, Global Analysis and Local Realities: Studies in West Africa', published by Routledge Press, uses extensive historical evidence from archives, travelers' reports, and oral accounts for Benin, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Togo to show claims of massive forest loss in these countries have been greatly exaggerated.

Specifically, they find that:

* These countries have lost some 10 million hectares of forest since 1900, not 25-50 million hectares as previously claimed,

* Much of the so-called 'forest zone' has probably never been forest,

* Forest has expanded into savanna in many places along the forest zone's northern margins,

* Farmers occupied many supposedly 'primary' forests during recent history,

* Historically, population decline has been as important in regional forest cover change as population growth,

* Farmers do not only destroy forests. They frequently help create them,

* Bush fallow and isolated forest patches and trees often indicate farmer enrichment of landscapes, not degradation.

The authors do not deny significant deforestation has taken place or that small farmers sometimes degrade their environments. They simply argue the extent of destruction has been over stated and farmers' positive roles largely ignored.

Existing myths persist, in part, because forestry and conservation agencies find them useful. By claiming small farmers threaten forests they did not create these groups can justify their own control over forest resources and limiting farmers' access to those resources. Exaggerating the extent of deforestation and forest degradation can help obtain political support and funding.

If you would like to send comments about the topic of this message to the authors or find out how you can purchase a copy of their new book, you can write Melissa Leach at: M.Leach@ids.ac.uk

Source: David Kaimowitz