

Laborers Becoming 'Peasants': Agroecological politics in a Sumatran plantation zone

David Edward Gilbert

S.V. Ciriacy Wantrup Fellow, Department of Environmental Science, Management, and Policy
University of California, Berkeley



Starting in 1996, a group of one-time plantations laborers on Sumatra's Aren Volcano joined with a self-proclaimed 'peasant' union to occupy, reclaim, and rehabilitate a nearly one hundred year-old industrial ranch and plantation. With direct action land squats, letter-writing campaigns, blockades, and protests in front of government offices, women and men defied the plantation company's state-sanctioned land concession and worked the land themselves. The group claimed collective control of the land, and organized more than two hundred fifty individuals, families, and cooperatives to cultivate diverse, economically-valuable agricultural forests in this erstwhile plantation zone.

With their land reclamation, Aren's one-time plantation laborers transformed themselves into agriculturalists, and the land into a smallholder agroforest landscape. These rural workers acknowledged industrial agriculture's many problems, but also moved beyond them with an especially modern way of relating to the land. I find that an 'agroecological politics' underpinned workers' transformations, transformations that challenge many normative ideas of rural development. This land reclamation is agroecological because rural workers harnessed ecological process to create their smallholder plots, and political because they created collective forms of land control, work, and identity. It is the linkage of these two concepts, ecologically-attune diversified farming and social mobilization, that allowed Aren's one-time plantation workers to create new and durable attachments to the land as smallholder agriculturalists.

David Gilbert is a S.V. Ciriacy Wantrup Fellow in the Society and Environment Division of the Department of Environmental Science, Management, and Policy at University of California, Berkeley. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from Stanford University. His research focuses on the political economy of environmental change in Indonesia, with special focus on rural social movements and the long history of Sumatra's plantation agricultures. He has published articles in *Human Ecology*, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, and *Journal of Peasant Studies*.

Wednesday, October 24

12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue