Ursula Münster

Whose Forest is it? The Political Ecology of Forest Conservation in Wayanad, Kerala, South India

My current research project is an ethnographical account of the complex and contentious workings of environmental law and governance in the forests of Wayanad District in Kerala, South India. In my work, I focus on the interplay of cultural, social, political, economic, and ecological processes which are set in motion by historical and contemporary environmental conservation measures.

Drawing on recent advances in the fields of political ecology, cultural politics, the anthropology of globalization, and of the ethnography of nature conservation, I see the forests of Wayanad as sites of conflict where divergent cultural, material, and political interests collide as multiple groups lay claim to its natural resources, lifestyles, and space. My ethnographic research will explore how recent and historical efforts of resource conservation are received, negotiated, and contested by a variety of actors at different societal groups, ranging from state officials, environmental activists, Adivasi-leaders, and heterogeneous communities living near or in forest areas, to "wildlife lovers", resort owners, and tourists, etc.

Wildlife Warden, Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary   Adivasi-'encroachment', Wayanad

I argue that conservation efforts in Wayanad have to be examined in light of recent trends in India's Scheduled Tribe Development policy. While the Kerala Forest Department and local environmental activists were promoting the protection of Wayanad's forest land, India's government passed (December 2006) a key piece of forest legislation, popularly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). This law recognizes the rights of forest-dwelling communities to land and other resources which were denied to them for decades as a result of the continuance of colonial forest laws in India. In Wayanad, the implementation of the Forest Rights Act has been marked by "bureaucratic confusion," interdepartmental conflicts, as well as inter- and intra-village conflicts (about who is eligible to obtain rights under the act). My project aims to empirically explore these conflict-ridden local negotiations of recent environmental projects in the context of indigenous policies in India.