

[Matthan on Elkin, 'Plant Life: The Entangled Politics of Afforestation'](#)

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Rosetta S. Elkin. *Plant Life: The Entangled Politics of Afforestation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. Illustrations, tables. xxiv + 250 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-5179-1261-1](#);

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News about afforestation projects the world over abound with record-breaking feats—a million mangrove seedlings planted within an hour on a Filipino island, eleven million trees planted across Turkey on National Afforestation Day, and more.[1] But these projects are also replete with record failures. The saplings planted rarely survive to maturity. This is, in part, because of the focus on tree planting rather than tree growing, as Rosetta S. Elkin emphasizes in a sweeping study of major afforestation projects in the twentieth century to the present. But Elkin goes further, arguing that such programs fail not because of improper planning or implementation but rather due to a flawed conception of tree planting as an inherent “good.” This imaginary represents a misunderstanding of plant life as well as of the dryland environments it seeks to transform. Elkin’s book moves beyond this assumption, noting that this uncritical focus on the good obscures fundamental questions of ecological and social context: which trees, where, when, and by whom?

Delving into philosophical treatises, colonial archives, and botanical manuals that span such themes as soil science, plant morphology, and taxonomy, Elkin convincingly argues that planting is a social—not ecological—act that radically reshapes landscapes based on models of standardization and replicability. In effect, afforestation enables deforestation, both by easing anxieties around rampant tree felling and by deflecting attention from it, or, as Elkin puts it, “Exploit here to protect there” (p. 167). Planting new trees serves as a simple solution to the problem of degradation while circumventing the “complications of ending regimes that profit from violent deforestation” (p. 60).

The book is divided into three sections—“Artifact,” “Index,” and “Trace”—each focusing on a distinct tactic deployed to justify afforestation projects, a corresponding exemplar project, and a specific plant species. Common across these tactics and programs, Elkin argues, is a treatment of “plants as tools, specifications, and statistics” (p. 12). While the case studies span historical, geographical, and social contexts, they are connected by a shared focus on landscapes classified as “drylands.” These arid environments that form the context of afforestation are generally less fertile, populated with lower and wider plants, and less hospitable to human settlement, although they are thriving ecosystems. The imperative to plant woody trees in these areas is therefore premised on ideologies of anti-nomadism and an imagination of drylands as lifeless, empty, and unproductive.

The first tactic Elkin discusses is that of rendering the plant as “artifact,” forms of knowledge that dismember plants into divisible parts, and abstracting it from the environment, physically and epistemically. This “scientization” of the plant means that plants are studied and valued as static samples and individual units rather than living organisms and dynamic ecosystems. Exemplifying this tactic is the Great Green Wall project in the Sahara and Sahel, a continental tree-planting plan that traverses eleven countries from East to West Africa, with the ostensible goal of protecting against “desertification.” Elkin traces the genesis of the term to French colonial rule in West Africa wherein tropical rainforests were transformed into savanna and into desert on account of colonial forestry practices. Rather than address the problem of resource extraction, “greening” through planting trees was offered as a preferred solution that continues into the present.

The artifact model is clear in species selection driven largely by considerations of external form rather than behavior, ecology, or climate. Such is the case of the *Faidherbia*, a drought-tolerant tree popular in afforestation projects but one that is resistant to the vegetative propagation and large-scale nursery supply. While the difficulties of planting are blamed on its taproot or erratic weather patterns, it is really the plant’s unsuitability to the plantation form that undergirds repeated project failures. This form of transplanting is revealed to be “just another form of extraction that assumes dominance over plant life”—but one that the *Faidherbia* as a lively organism refuses to cooperate with (p. 78).

The second tactic, “index,” refers to the “accumulation and distribution of planting units,” or the reduction of complex landscapes into metrics and statistics (p. 85). Here, Elkin discusses the Prairie States Forestry Project in the Great Plains region of the United States, developed in response to the Dust Bowl drought. Settlers confronted an apparently “tree-less” landscape and, thus, resorted to planting to advance the settler-colonial and nationalist project. This was an act of replacing unproductive plants with productive and pliant ones, thick grasses with individual tree units. Significantly, tree-planting records became the basis for land claims and ownership rights. Elkin uncovers the fundamental violence of planting as a “state-building project” and “device for territorial dominance,” through which “citizens are armed with plant species as a means to assimilate, to take hold of lands” (pp. 109, 108). The continental transformation of drylands with a “hand-planted forest” was hardly simple, easy, or quick. Ironically, the monoculture formation thus produced—comprising standardized tree units with predictable yield—was itself difficult to replicate, even though it served as a model for similar projects around the world.

The final section, “Trace,” explores the materialization of tree planting in the landscape in a way that is “radically disconnected from context” yet justified in the language of environmentalism and humanitarianism (p. 153). The Three Norths Shelter system in western China illustrates this tactic. Devised to counter record sandstorms and droughts that endanger the ecology and economy of rural communities, this project empowers the state to remove and relocate the sesame villagers to make way for trees. The species that accounts for most of the plantings thus far, *Populus sp.*, is a fast-growing but water-consumptive tree that enacts “slow violence on the social and biotic structure of the land” (p. 182). The species’ continued use despite its obvious problems exposes this case of planting as a blatantly extractive project, geared more toward timber supply than to dust control.

As afforestation programs gain renewed traction as a purported solution to climate change, Elkin’s intervention is especially insightful and crucial. In foregrounding plant behavior, the book encourages

readers to see “plants as living organisms and earthly collaborators” rather than “the desiccated sample, the plantation, or the ecosystem service” (p. 22). For instance, Elkin delves into the fascinating dynamics of roots and rhizomes, showing that much of “plant *living* is done underground,” a fact obscured by the persistent focus on trees as “cover” or “canopy” (p. 97). The vivid scientific and historical details provided are enlightening but also make *Plant Life* particularly dense and challenging to read. Nonetheless, the book offers a provocative account of the impacts of humans as a quintessential “planting species.” Elkin is certainly not arguing against trees per se but seeks to emphasize the vital and continuous work of growing trees rather than the singular act of planting them. The book then asks us not simply to see the forest for the trees but also to look beneath the ground, recognize the many species and processes that constitute landscapes, and perhaps even “learn to love drylands” (p. 5).

Note

[1]. Greg Pearce, "Phantom Forests: Why Ambitious Tree Planting Projects Are Failing," *Yale Environment* 360, October 6, 2022, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/phantom-forests-tree-planting-climate-change>.

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