

New perspectives in understanding West African Environmental History: Evidence from the forest region of the Republic of Guinea

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This paper outlines conventional understanding of processes of deforestation in West Africa, and how large areas of what today are savanna lands on the northern margins of the forest zone were thought to have been under forest in recent times. The paper outlines the reasons for this view, and how it is based on deduction not on historical sources. Historical sources (air photographs, oral accounts and archives) combined with anthropological methods to elucidate local resource management practices reveals a very different understanding of this landscape in one Prefecture of Guinea. There has been an increase in forest area during the very periods when scientists and development workers were most concerned that it was declining. This increase is in part anthropogenic. The paper then suggests that there has been a similar misreading of the forest-savanna transition zone throughout West Africa. This false history has obscured not only the more sustainable agro-ecological practices of farmers in this zone, but has also obscured how vegetation is reacting to an 'entangled' combination of this and a longer term process of climatic rehumidification.