Assembling the 'Field': Conducting Research in Indonesia's Emerging Green Economy

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New forms of environmental governance, such as the green economy, premise reconfigurations of social relations and rearticulations of scale, which raise myriad questions for field researchers, not least of all, what actually constitutes 'the field', and where it is to be found. These questions – practical, methodological, political, and personal – are integral to research itself and can tell us much about the dynamic forms that social organization and emerging governance structures take in practice. This contribution discusses the methodological challenges associated with 'doing fieldwork' in the amorphous networks of an emerging environmental governance assemblage – the green economy. Drawing on my fieldwork in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, I argue that by interrogating the positionality of different actors in relation to this assemblage, while remaining critically reflexive about one's own role in this production, field researchers can capture something of the rich embodied practices through which knowledge is produced and exchanged. Moreover, this relational focus on networks of knowledge, actors, and policy can help us to explore the processes of translation and negotiation that underlie the implementation of new forms of environmental governance.

Keywords: Assemblage; Fieldwork; Green Economy; Indonesia; Methodology

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INTRODUCTION

I came to the district of Berau, East Kalimantan, Indonesia two years ago, intending to conduct ethnographic research on the experiences of local Dayak communities facing land enclosure from oil palm plantation expansion, while also negotiating new market-based forms of conservation, particularly REDD+[1]. However, after spending a month traveling around the district conducting interviews and trying to understand the forces shaping peoples' lives, it became clear to me that the questions I really wanted to ask could not be answered by sitting in a village for a year, or *only* by sitting in a village.

The Province of East Kalimantan, and the district of Berau specifically, have been fore-runners of a discursive and material shift towards a 'green economy'

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1   REDD refers to a mechanism developed in international climate talks which is designed to reduce emission of greenhouse gases through enhanced forest management in developing countries, and is being implemented by the UN-REDD Programme and the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF). REDD+ is a more recent evolution of the REDD program and includes considerations beyond emissions reduction, including environmental and socioeconomic benefits and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

paradigm in Indonesia. 'Green economy' is meant to decouple continued economic growth from environmental destruction, while reducing emissions and poverty (UNEP, 2012); the much-lauded 'triple-win'. I became interested in not only *what* this thing being called the 'green economy' actually is in practice – the heterogeneous policies, projects, concepts, metrics, forms of nature, values and valuations, and actors being brought together at a particular spatio-temporal conjuncture, but also *how* it is becoming — the processes through which the 'green economy' is being translated, negotiated, contested, and territorialized by both state and non-state actors, and the social relations and networks through which these processes are taking place.

THE FIELD, SCALE, AND ASSEMBLAGE

These new questions required me to rethink what my field site would look like. The selection of a field site generally begins with spatial and discursive practices that bound a specific space as the 'field' of enquiry (Katz, 1994, p. 67). However, in order to take the 'green economy' on its own terms as an ostensible 'thing', it became necessary to develop a methodology that began with the project of the 'green economy', rather than a specific 'site', and took account of its emergent and diffuse nature. While I argue elsewhere (Anderson, Forthcoming) that the 'green economy' is the name for a particular set of social relations that requires active production to be rendered as a separate, apolitical, and rational space, in my fieldwork I have tried to take this 'thing' on its own terms – tracing the process and "following the policy" (Peck & Theodore, 2010) as it traveled between cities and villages, through the offices of government agencies, NGOs and donors, from policy and project documents to presentations and into the thoughts and actions of forest patrols and spatial planners. While I have maintained a focus on the specific conjunctural emergence of the 'green economy' in the district of Berau, I have attempted to trace the constitutive elements of this 'green economy', drawing from the methodological tradition of "multi-sited ethnography", which "moves out from the single sites and local situations . . . to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). This focus has required a shift not only in how I think about 'the field', but also how I understand scale.

Anthropologists and other social scientists have traditionally used spatially nested levels of analysis to address links between macro and micro phenomena (Markowitz, 2001, p. 41), yet in my research I found that a hierarchal understanding of scale obscured the ways that different actors and organizations formed relationships, and presupposed a linearity of influence that did not resonate with my own observations. Instead, I chose to conceptualize Berau's 'green economy' as an assemblage, tying together different actors, objects, ideas, places, metrics and forms of 'nature', across space into material and discursive relationships, at a particular moment in time. As Li (2007) notes, the analytic of assemblage emphasizes emergence, and thus is attentive to the appearance of new units of analysis and fresh linkages between them (Markowitz, 2001, p. 42). While the roll-out of the 'green economy' will have a unique and contingent form wherever this discourse gains traction, in Indonesia an assemblage analysis is particularly well-suited to describing the complex social relations and patronage networks documented by other scholars (e.g., Aspinall & van Klinken, 2011),

and the ways that these relations and networks complicate the distinctions between state and non-state actors, legality and illegality, and business versus public interests.

My first task was to define the field of my analysis. As mentioned above, I started by following the 'project' of the 'green economy'. However, the 'green economy' as it is emerging in Berau is not one clear project, like REDD+ or community-based forestry, but a collection of disparate policies, projects, and practices bundled together under the names 'green economy' or 'green growth'. The emergence of the 'green economy' in Berau is supported by government-driven efforts to 'mainstream' the 'green economy' to the district and city level in East Kalimantan undertaken by a diverse coalition of actors including the provincial planning agency (BAPPEDA), the provincial climate change board (DDPI), the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ), the international NGOs *The Nature Conservancy* (TNC) and *World Wide Fund for Nature* (WWF), and the *Global Green Growth Institute* (GGGI), with assistance from a number of local NGOs and academics. This 'mainstreaming' is happening in tandem with the roll-out of a series of new donor-driven programs aimed at realizing the 'green economy' in East Kalimantan, through the support of projects that lower emissions while improving 'development' and/or supporting economic growth, for example through improved planning practices, technological improvements in resource extraction, or supporting rural electrification through the use of 'waste' biomass. These shifts are happening against the backdrop of a range of policies developed over the last decade to address sustainable development, environmental degradation, and climate change concerns, first in forest and peatland areas with the national REDD+ program, and more broadly through cross-sectoral emissions reduction programs at the national and provincial levels, in line with the concept of Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs)[2].

As I have moved forward with my research it has been important to see these policies as forces that are dynamic, "productive, performative and continually contested" (Shore & Wright, 2011, p. 1). What I discuss as the 'green economy' in my research is not an ephemeral vision of social and environmental harmony to be reached at some point in the future, but the models, demonstrations, policies, and projects that constitute the 'green economy' at this moment, as it is discursively and materially being experienced in Berau. This includes both new projects and policies that have used the language of the 'green economy' from the outset, as well as existing projects and policies that have become enrolled into the 'green economy' in the course of their implementation.

METHODS AND POSITIONALITY

My observations and understanding of Berau's 'green economy' have come from attending to the embodied practices that produce, and are produced by, this phenom-

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2   Like REDD(+) NAMAs were developed in international climate negotiations, and are designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries and support sustainable development. NAMAs specifically refers to a set of measurable and verifiable mitigation actions developing countries can undertake with financial and technological support from developed countries. These policies and programs are generally more broad than those associated with REDD(+), which are limited to the forest sector, however REDD(+) is often considered to be a NAMA.

enon – situating myself as a researcher "within a nexus of fluid interpersonal and institutional relationships, while simultaneously linking these evolving relationships to variable flows of money and influence" (Markowitz, 2001, p. 41). One of the ways that I have accomplished this has been through my engagement with the practitioner world, both as a part-time research consultant with the *Center for International Forestry Research* (CIFOR) and as a volunteer and friend of TNC's Berau Field Office – two organizations imbricated in the scientific and political discourses supporting REDD+ and the 'green economy'.

Both directly and indirectly, I gained access to the networks of Berau's emerging 'green economy', at least partially, as a result of my association with one or both of these 'known' actors within Berau's 'green economy', and the sorts of interactions I had were often shaped by the perception that I was an 'insider' and already part of the networks underlying Berau's 'green economy'. This has required that I remain critically reflexive about my own positionality, and consequently questions of power have shaped my own access to different spaces and actors and my ability to obtain different types of information, as I entered different spaces carrying multiple layers of privilege and authority. Thus, while I have been able to maintain an independent and critical approach in my research I do not claim that it is objective in the sense of "standing above the fray or of suppressing subjectivity" (Mosse, 2004, p. 666). I view my fieldwork not as a matter of observing and describing Berau's 'green economy' as a static phenomenon, but as a process of documenting the moments and practices of assemblage underlying its emergence, while recognizing my own role in this unfolding, and the 'situatedness' of knowledge that I am producing (Haraway, 1988).

To attend to these 'embodied practices', and my own role in them, I have employed a range of methods, mostly those associated with the ethnographic tradition: participant observation, semi-structured and open-ended interviews, and document analysis. The use of the analytic of assemblage suggests a disposition of engagement and methodological experimentation (Anderson & MacFarlane, 2011; Lorimer, 2010; Swanton, 2010), and thus I have also employed a broader set of methods associated with my shifting understanding of the 'field', such as the analysis of newspaper and media reports, meeting presentations, social media, and images, informal socializing, and Skype and email conversations. Utilizing these methods has enhanced my ability to understand the perspectives and social networks of key actors in an indirect way, and allowed me to triangulate the information received in more formal interviews and through direction observation and interaction (Markowitz, 2001).

Rather than privileging dominant national level and international actors, I have considered how the concerns and actions of a broad spectrum of actors are shaping the roll out of the 'green economy' within the landscape of Berau, while also attempting to develop relationships with key informants over time, allowing me to cross-check information and discuss significant issues over multiple occasions. The selection of informants began with the identification of primary actors in the main government and non-governmental organizations operating in Berau, and more broadly in East Kalimantan. These organizations included various government agencies related to resources and the environment, the governor's office, the district regent's office, the provincial climate change board, the provincial and district spatial planning agencies, the provincial and district REDD+ working groups, local and international NGOs,

various donor organizations, and local universities. Informants were asked to list their most frequent collaborators, the organizations that they actively support, and other important actors working in support of 'green growth' in Berau. These data were used to identify specific hubs of knowledge and power within East Kalimantan's environmental governance networks, as well as the geographic flows of knowledge, expertise, and funding within these networks.

Equally as important to these interviews and the various documents I have collected has been the 18-month period I have spent embedded in and acting as part of the communities, networks, and organizations I discuss in my research. The knowledge and social familiarity I have gained from this intense period of participant observation has been critical to my ability to figure out who to talk to, what meetings to attend, and what places to visit, but also what questions to ask, how to ask them, and how to interpret and situate the answers. As Mosse (2004) details, I have been "part of the world described" (p. 666), and thus my analysis is an attempt to add my own interpretations to those of the actors whose experiences I have shared.

EAST KALIMANTAN'S ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE NETWORK

One initial observation that this methodology has allowed me to uncover is the importance of institutional history in preparing the social and political landscape of East Kalimantan for the advent of the 'green economy', and the continuing impact of social networks that have developed over the last thirty years. While my research has made me skeptical about the environmental and social justice outcomes of the 'green economy' as it is developing in Berau, and East Kalimantan more generally, it is undeniable that both the province of East Kalimantan, and the district of Berau, are unique in their long-term engagement with 'green' initiatives, the openness of the government to environmental conservation, and the capacity and robustness of the local NGOs and activist communities. At the provincial level, the Forestry Faculty at Mulawarman University (Fakultas Kehutanan UNMUL), the largest university in East Kalimantan, has played a critical role in facilitating the rise of a strong civil society and activist community that has been extremely active in social justice and indigenous rights issues in East Kalimantan since the mid-1980s, particularly as they relate to natural resource management.

While many of the student activist organizations that emerged from Mulawarman University faced oppression under the Suharto regime, individual activists and organizations remained active. With the fall of the Suharto regime in May 1998, a number of these organizations banded together, with indigenous peoples, academics, and international donor staff to form the *Alliance of Natural Resources Policy Observers* (APKSA) as a place for civil society organizations and individuals concerned with environmental issues to share concerns and advocate for better natural resource management policies in East Kalimantan. For various reasons AKSPA is no longer active, however its legacy, and the influence of Fakultas Kehutanan UNMUL, lives on in the network of practitioners and activists active in climate change and environmental governance issues in East Kalimantan. At present, the majority of the managers of almost every international NGO and donor agency active in East Kalimantan were trained at the Fakultas Kehutanan UNMUL, as were a number of the government

actors working on resource management and environmental issues. The *Provincial Climate Change Board* (DDPI), which houses the provincial REDD+ and 'green economy' working groups, is led by professors from the Center for Social Forestry at Mulawarman University, a research center of the Fakultas Kehutanan UNMUL.

Thus while projects, organizations, and conservation 'fads' come and go, these individuals have maintained their networks and are able to mobilize support across organizational divides, linking in their colleagues as new funding becomes available, sharing knowledge, and collaboratively deciding how to best engage with new discourses and projects as they emerge. Any discussion of the 'green economy' which focuses on the technical and economic aspects of project implementation and policy design without taking into account these networks and the political and social relations of policy transfer will be destined for failure.

As my field work has progressed, I have become more attentive to the subtle ways in which actors align with or resist this thing called the 'green economy', and transform it to serve their own objectives and the goals of their existing social and political networks. While the 'green economy' is presented as a technical and apolitical approach to environmental governance based on ecological and economically rational planning and cost-benefit analysis, my research has shown that the rollout of this assemblage is inherently contingent and political, shaped as much by the unexpected and the personal as by the 'best laid plans' of those tasked with policy design. The research methodology and personal reflexivity with which I have approached my research has allowed me to capture something of this richness and complexity, while recognizing my own role in the unfolding of the events I have documented.

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