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Off-farm incomes and new land and commodity markets raise incomes and risk for poor people and forests in Western Uganda

Western Uganda is home to globally significant primate populations, rising numbers of rural households, and expanding agricultural plantations. This setting offers an ideal place to better understand how agricultural land markets can affect imperiled forests, and to learn who prospers and who is excluded as land values increase. Around Kibale National Park, the decade spanning the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s was marked by rising household incomes and declining forest cover (Naughton-Treves, Alix-Garcia, & Chapman 2011). These local trends mirror the rapid economic change and deforestation found elsewhere in western Uganda and the Albertine Rift. I use field data tracking two decades of land ownership history along Kibale's border to explore the degree to which land dynamics are driven by an increasing number of landowners, by changing circumstances for existing landowners, or by new types of owners replacing former occupants. I find that new land markets and wage opportunities have not only altered how the local poor use forested land, but also who owns the land. New land owners are employees of the park, the government, and the neighboring industrial tea estates who are investing their wages in park-edge land and production of perennial cash crops. Many are absentee owners, but many are also 'sons and daughters of the village' using wage earnings to buy out their neighbors. Until recently, park-edge land had low value for subsistence production due to crop-raiding by wildlife, but with increased opportunities for off-farm income the land is newly valuable for production of investment crops like tea and Eucalyptus. This is a two-sided coin for forest conservation; lower reliance on food crops at the forest edge reduces tension between the park and local communities, but at the same time, natural forest fragments outside the park are being converted to plantations. The data set offers an unusual amount of spatial and historical detail about land ownership dynamics bordering an imperiled forest. By shedding light on processes that lead to land cover change around protected areas, this study contributes to conversations about how to maintain habitat connectivity in threatened landscapes (DeFries et al., 2005). It bolsters arguments that it is important to attend to indirect factors shaping forest landscapes, like off-farm incomes and land markets, in addition to the direct interactions of 'the local poor' with forests. It also speaks to an important question for poverty alleviation: as land values rise, are poor people displaced? With what consequences for forest conservation? We suggest that improved income and employment opportunities near parks should be coupled with improvements in opportunities for non-land-based saving and investment to protect forests and maintain land security for the poor.