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Multiple Use Protected Areas Can Reduce Both Poverty & Deforestation

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Even though protected areas are accurately characterized as restricting forest users' choices, with theory and case evidence we suggest that they can improve the welfare of some actors, in particular poorer land users in forested areas. In effect, we propose that the development baselines typically used to evaluate forest policy have lacked information about not only the variation in deforestation rates across a landscape but also trends in welfare across groups. In short, if poorer land users in forested area tend to lose out over time, in land allocations, restrictive protected areas can represent compromises that benefit those users and a state.

Much work has assessed protected areas' impacts on forests, with some on their impacts on livelihoods too. The latter often are seen as negative – at least if the forests were conserved. However, we believe there is a general story in which some poor land users could benefit. To characterize conditions under which this could happen, we put forward a theoretical model, one which features multiple versions (and we believe suggests the identification of analogs). Such possibilities were suggested to us by multiple cases, though, and we feel that such an argument is greatly bolstered by the inclusion of related evidence from multiple countries. The model and these cases all show that in some conditions the poor and forests can gain.

We believe that such analyses contribute to consideration of optimal conservation policies, especially in a world in which there is significant protest concerning some potentially large financial supports for forest conservation, under REDD. Methodologically, this supports an increased focus on the by-group details of development baselines within the evaluation of impacts (often done in the aggregate – quite specifically in contrast to the attention to the poor suggested recently by the Pope). For policy, this contributes to an already increasing discussion about how conservation can function in a locally incentive compatible fashion.