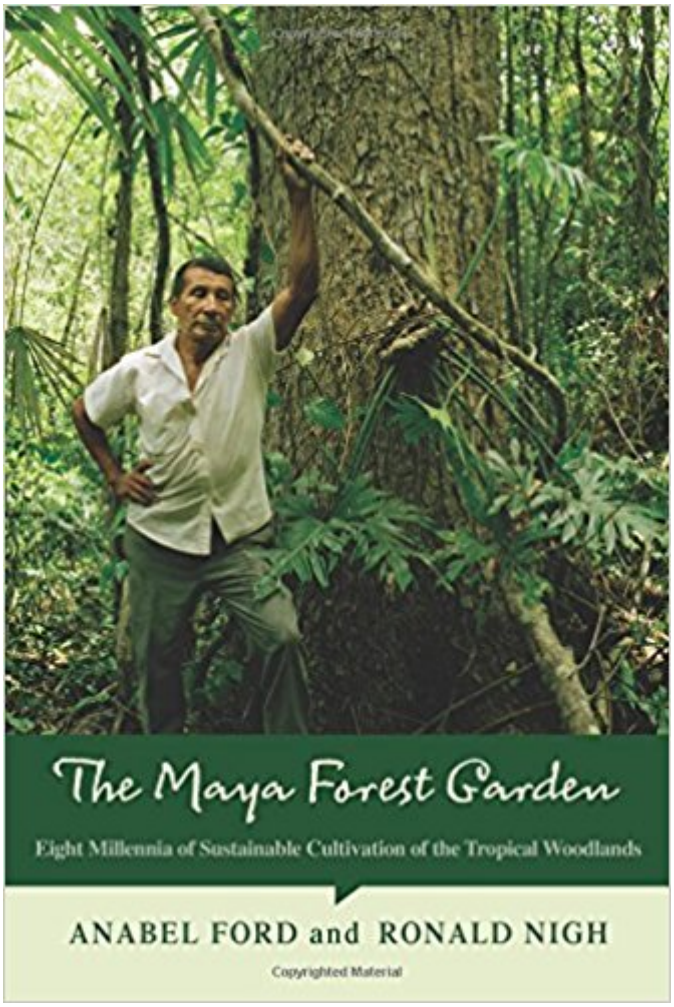
The Maya Forest Garden: Eight Millennia Of Sustainable Cultivation Of The Tropical Woodlands (New Frontiers In Historical Ecology)



Synopsis

The conventional wisdom says that the devolution of Classic Maya civilization occurred because its population grew too large and dense to be supported by primitive neotropical farming methods, resulting in debilitating famines and internecine struggles. Using research on contemporary Maya farming techniques and important new archaeological research, Ford and Nigh refute this Malthusian explanation of events in ancient Central America and posit a radical alternative theory. The authors-show that ancient Maya farmers developed ingenious, sustainable woodland techniques to cultivate numerous food plants (including the staple maize);-examine both contemporary tropical farming techniques and the archaeological record (particularly regarding climate) to reach their conclusions;-make the argument that these ancient techniques, still in use today, can support significant populations over long periods of time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Ford and Nigh bring decades of field research to this book and draw on ethnography, agroecology, ethno- and paleobotany, archaeology, historical climate data, and ethnohistory.Ã Â Even today, Maya forest gardeners cultivate sustainably but are threatened by Euro-informed models of agriculture that view tropical lowlands as suitable mainly for destructive pasturing.Ã Â Scholars interested in tropical swiddeners and Mesoamericans in particular should read this discussion. Summing Up: Highly recommended." - A. E. Adams, Central Connecticut State University, CHOICE

"The book is a timely multidisciplinary exploration of not only the rich historical ecology of the Maya

forest garden, but also of Maya culture, history and knowledge Ã¢â ¬â œ and the risk of loosing all of it. The value of explorations like the one offered by this study need to be Ã¢â ¬â ¢ for the future of any form of sustainable humanity and in my modest opinion Ã¢â ¬â ¢ continued." - Alessandro Questa, Anthropology Book Forun (American Anthropological Association) "An excellent contribution to the world literature on sustainable, indigenous land management.Ã Â After rigorous paleo-botanical, archaeological and ecological research and on the ground consultation with existing practitioners, the authors conclude that the widely assumed cause of the collapse of the Mayan civilization due to deforestation and environmental degradation is not true... IÃ¢â ¬â„¢d recommend Ford and NighÃ¢â ¬â„¢s book to anyone interested in permaculture and forest gardens." - Michael Pilarski, Friends Of The Trees Society "A groundbreaking new book co-authored by a UC Santa Barbara researcher... asserts the Maya not only survived their presumed apocalypse, they thrive today using farming techniques that are thousands of years old. The Maya Forest Garden: Eight Millennia of Sustainable Cultivation of the Tropical Woodlands by UCSBÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Anabel Ford and Ronald Nigh demonstrates that the Maya milpa system is sustainable, sophisticated and highly productive." - Jim Logan, The UCSB Current "FordÃ¢â ¬â„¢s book, The Maya Forest Garden: Eight Millennia of Sustainable Cultivation of the Tropical Woodlands, co-authored with Ronald Nigh, a professor at the Centro Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en AntropologÃƒÂ-a Social in Chiapas, Mexico, published in June, is the result of 44 years of excavation and research into El PilarÃ¢â ¬â„¢s domestic architecture, gardens and traditional forest crops." - Joan Koerper, Inlandia Literary Journeys "We have been reading The Maya Forest Garden by Anabel Ford and Ronald Nigh. It tells the tale of a civilization that weathered many climate changes, foreign conquests and failed attempts at cultural genocide. That civilization is still there today, after 8,000 years." - Albert Bates, Resilience "For years, archaeologist Anabel Ford has been arguing the case that the ancient Maya knew well how to manage their tropical forest environment to their advantage, eventually sustaining large populations even beyond the time when many archaeologists suggest the Maya declined and abandoned their iconic Classic period pyramidal and temple constructions and monumental inscriptions during the 8th and 9th centuries CE. She challenges the popular theories long held by many scholars that the Maya declined because of overpopulation and deforestation from increased agricultural production, perhaps aggravated by draught and climate change." - Popular Archaeology "In 2001, I traveled to the Belize-Guatemala border to report on UCSB archaeologist Anabel FordÃ¢â ¬â„¢s many discoveries at El Pilar, the Maya monument complex she uncovered in 1983. ThatÃ¢â ¬â„¢s where she developed revolutionary theories that threatened to rock the academic world, namely that the

Maya did not Ã¢â ¬Å“disappearÃ¢â ¬Â• due to an overpopulation cataclysm, but merely dwindled with time." -Ã Â Matt Kettmann, Santa Barbara Independent Ã Â

Anabel Ford is director of the MesoAmerican Research Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara and President of the non profit Exploring Solutions Past: The Maya Forest Alliance. She has done extensive research on patterns of Maya settlement and ecology, and is recognized for the discovery of the ancient Maya city center of El Pilar, on the border of Belize and Guatemala. Ronald Nigh is a professor at Centro Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en AntropologÃƒÂ- a Social (CIESAS) in Chiapas, Mexico. He is the author of numerous studies and articles on agricultural, ecological, and environmental issues of concern to indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean.Ã Â He is also director of Dana, A.C. a non-government organization that coordinates an experimental garden in San Cristobal de Las Casas for training and support of young Maya farmers in transition to agroecological technology.

This is a really important and well-researched book for everyone in the sustainability world, revealing that the Maya's indigenous practices of agroforestry/forest gardens and Milpa cycle sustained large populations for centuries. Permaculturists have been advocating "food forests" for decades and this book detailing the exhaustive work in Belize by UCSB archeologist Dr. Anabel Ford and her partners adds support to their idea that in the future we may be able to rely on this kind of perennial food forestry for survival in lieu of current industrial agriculture practices. All the writers who have focused exclusively on the monuments of the 1% missed the real treasure. The Maya didn't disappear or destroy their own food supply when the ruling elites fell. The monuments were abandoned and they went back to the land that had always nourished them.

This book tells the tale of a civilization that weathered many climate changes, foreign conquests and failed attempts at cultural genocide. That civilization is still there today, after 8,000 years. There are more children born and raised in families today whose first language is a Mayan dialect than during the Classic period 1400 years ago.When the first two-leggeds arrived in Mesoamerica over 10,000 years ago, the region was cool and arid ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ akin to the Great Plains of central Canada. Over the next 2,000 years, as the Hemisphere continued to emerge from the great Ice Age, Mesoamerica became a warm and wet tropical region, reaching an early heating peak during the Holocene Thermal Maximum before settling back to the wet tropics we find there today.Land use changed over time based on social constraints. In ancient times, smallholders who produced a

variety of goods and services from the forest were at times compelled to increase production to pay taxes and to feed the elites and their armies. This process continues today. Greater demands for exports from the forest require denser populations, because working hilly terrain without machines or animals requires hands and feet. Today it may imply imported labor, a form of economic slavery not much different than in the Classic Maya era. To the extent that human labor for cultivation and transportation has been replaced with fossil energy, the requirements for human slaves have diminished.One barrel of oil has 5.7 million BTUs of energy, or 1700 kWh. An average adult can, in hard labor, generate 0.6 kWh/day. That's 11 years of human labor packed into each barrel of oil. Put another way, fifty dollars currently buys you eleven petroleum slaves working year-round at hard labor. What would those slaves cost if they were human? Ten thousand dollars? Half a million dollars? It depends on where you get them and what tasks they perform for you.Thanks to petroslavery, we have higher wages, higher profits, really cheap products and more people doing little to nothing. The average USAnian uses 60 barrels per year (or equivalent coal, gasoline and fracked gas) or roughly 660 fossil slaves standing at the beck and call of each and every citizen. Those numbers are quite a bit less in the Mayan world today, but nonetheless significant, and growing. Farmers don't have to carry corn and mangos to the city on their backs, although no one has yet found a way to machine-harvest cacao or spray-pollinate vanilla vines.Nonetheless, extraction costs for fossil fuels are rising -- 17% per year for the past 10 years. That drives up energy costs and as that price goes up, its like having to pay your slaves. Profits decline, and some slaves get laid off.As we lose our energy slaves, will we go back to sending our army to snatch human slaves from weaker or less militaristic neighbors? The Classic Maya were something like that. With cheap slave energy gained by conquest they paved roads and built pyramids. Many historians assume they overran their resources or had a slave revolt, but Ford and Nigh have eliminated ecocide, because food resources never diminished. Slavery has its limits and the Maya's slaves may have reached theirs.Misleading assumptions about Mayan ecological demise, and climate over 10,000 years, came from paleoclimatic reconstructions based on lake sediments and pollen counts. Ford and Nigh point out that the pollen data emphasize windborne pollen, and yet, in the tropics, all but about 2 percent of plants are pollinated by bees, birds, bats and butterflies.Ford and Nigh picked up clues from ramon trees and grassland forbs, which were better indicators of the milpa cycle. While climate perturbations, sometimes severe, occurred repeatedly, the heaviest climate changes came in the Early Holocene, before the appearance of the Maya. The milpa system evolved in that era, as proof of concept for climate-resilient agriculture. They conclude that the Classic Era, while it was not without impact -- evidenced by high phosphorus lake sediment loading

and diminishing soil quality -- did not end from an environmental collapse. And yet, 1100 years ago, the Empire broke down and retreated back into the jungle. Civic centers gradually depopulated and rural farms resumed their ubiquity. Soil quality began to improve and runoff to decrease. The Maya did not disappear, they dispersed.Ford and Nigh disagree with popular myths told by historians of rapacious city-states that denuded their landscape to bake lime for painting temples and then starved. According to their meticulous research, the Maya forest garden was not just an indelible feature that withstood the rise and fall of successive empires, but holds, in its ramblings and roots, a hidden-in-plain-sight way through our present crises.

It is a common belief that the ancient Maya disappeared after their population became too large to be supported with the known traditional farming practices. This would explain why ancient Maya elite centers were neglected. It is now known, however, that the Maya actually did not disappear. They are very much alive and around today! So, if their population thrived, what happened?In their new book, The Maya Forest Garden, Ford and Nigh respond to todayÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s many misconceptions about the Maya civilization. They propose that the Maya balanced farming with elite demands and good stewardship of their resources. You cannot eat the temples and palaces, they take labor to build and keep. A choice between temples or food in the end was no contest. Upkeep was reduced decade after decade, it was a slow process of neglect that left the civic temples and palaces of the centers to the elements. Yet the people continued to rely on traditional farming. When Cortez traveled with his retinue of nearly 100 horsemen and 3,000 Mexica crossing the Maya lowlands, he routinely spent his nights under roofs and he did not complain about supplies. Clearly they were hosted, if reluctantly, by the local Maya, eating their stores and sleeping in their houses.Some would argue that this doesnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t make sense. How could simple farming practices support a civilization? There must be evidence of deforestation or other harmful effects of land exploitation, but Ford and Nigh donÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t see this. Instead, they see flourishing forest gardens; the same as those seen worked by Maya farmers today. Clearing the forest, therefore, was not the reason for the collapse of the Maya. In fact, itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s what has continued to support the Maya in the 500 years since the brutal Spanish conquest. Given the politics of administration and that we know that the Maya neglected their monuments, the claims o the farmer labor went to their fields.What is the evidence? Ford and Nigh present years of interdisciplinary research that point to the benefits of the Maya forest garden. Adapting a method called the milpa cycle, the diversity and complexity of useful of flora and fauna are naturally encouraged. Moving for forest to field and growing back to the forest, generations of Maya selected

and nurtured plants that served their needs. Today the dominant trees of the Maya forest are all useful! And the cycle of field to forest is integrated into the environment. Animals that the ancient Maya ate all live in todays threatened landscape. And the traditions that have sustained the Maya over the millennia survive among the farmers.If this technique has supported people for thousands of years, then it can support future populations. Ford and Nigh argue that the Maya forest garden is a conservation strategy that could solve the environmental destruction of the tropics, easing global warming with shade, promoting food supply with crops and fruit trees, and stopping deforestation. Developed in the tropics, the Maya forest garden is a sustainable way to cultivate and conserve biodiversity.Many have praised The Maya Forest Garden for presenting new paradigm that challenges popular perception. According to Popular Archaeology, Ford and Nigh give readers the idea that the Maya were not destroying, but were creating their environment. Ford and Nigh also see sustainability and forest conservation of the Maya forest as one that required the skill of local ecological knowledge. Dr. Steve Gliessman of UC Santa Cruz states that this bookÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“epic accountÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• of Maya environmental history contains a message that deserves attention. James Nations of the National Parks Conservation Association calls this book ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“engagingÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• and innovative in the world of contemporary conservation. Permaculturalists advocating ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Food ForestsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• have taken note of this millennial agroforestry system that enriched the forest and the Maya.This book successfully links the Maya present to past and, with Ford and NighÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s ideas, we could move to a much more environmentally successful future.

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