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Looking under the canopy: Rural smallholders and forest recovery in Appalachian Ohio

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Abstract

Political ecologists and other critical geographers have been steadily chipping away at the tenets of forest transition theory, which equates forest return with economic modernization. The role of rural smallholders in post-industrial forest recovery, however, remains largely unexplored. These local landowners are the focus of this work, which we ground in a case study of Appalachian Ohio, formally a hotbed of both underground coal mining and strip-mining. In this tumultuous landscape of ecological devastation and subsequent recovery, we find an ideal landscape to investigate how marginalized rural smallholders have (or have not) facilitated forest return. We also examine how their roles and visions for the forest are conceptualized and perhaps challenged by outsiders. Drawing primarily from interviews, our research demonstrates that local landowners, contrary to their depiction by many foresters and outside interest groups, are highly engaged, active, shrewd, and organized forest stewards. In many ways, the forests of

Appalachian Ohio flourished because of smallholder landowners' management practices and deliberate efforts to resuscitate what was a post-industrial wasteland mere decades ago. But, now that the forest has reached maturity, the battle over the region's ecosystems, resources, and future has begun anew.

Highlights

Local, rural smallholders are the majority forest owners in Appalachian Ohio. Standard narratives depict these smallholders as problematic forest stewards. We highlight how locals have been and continue to be critical for forest recovery.



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Keywords

Ecological recovery; Forests; Appalachia; Political ecology; Rural smallholders; Ecosystem management

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