

This is a must-read book from noted academic and public intellectual Helena Varkkey, who reminds us of the dangers of seeing only the trees (or ‘the palms’) and missing the bigger picture. Her extensive research and on-the-ground fieldwork on the haze and oil palm cultivation over the past decade have provided us with important scholarly insights, crucial policy implications and invaluable public education on a pressing and complex problem. Her work reveals the intricate ramifications of the palm oil political economy for economic growth and trade, development and smallholder welfare, and environmental integrity, health and social justice. This book makes it absolutely clear that governments must find the political will and foresight to address the problem holistically by looking at the ‘forests’ rather than just the ‘palms’ alone.

—Helen Nesadurai

Professor of International Political Economy
School of Arts and Social Sciences
Monash University Malaysia

Why does toxic air pollution from biomass burning in Southeast Asia, colloquially and legally known as haze, still exist after at least four decades? Helena Varkkey, a political scientist at the University of Malaya, has been asking a similar question for almost as long as she can remember. No definitive answer is provided in her latest book, *The Forests for the Palms*. But at least the book’s series of concisely written commentaries written between 2013 and 2020 allow the haze to clear sufficiently for the reader to appreciate fully the problem in all its complexity, at national, regional and global scales.

—David Taylor

Provost’s Chair and Professor of Tropical Environmental Change
National University of Singapore

This book could not have come at a better time, with the world facing the COVID-19 pandemic, as both transboundary haze pollution and the virus outbreak share certain similarities. They both damage the human respiratory systems, and the clearing of forests by burning may also increase the chances of diseases of animal origin like COVID-19 coming in contact with human beings and then spreading to others, making it a double whammy situation. It also points to the need to take a more holistic approach to tackle development challenges that are interlocking and systemic in nature and to nip the problem in the bud as soon as possible. Dr Varkkey’s book takes such an interdisciplinary approach and is thus a must read.

—Mr Apichai Sunchindah

Independent Development Specialist on Southeast Asian affairs

The
Forests
for the **Palms**

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The
Forests
for the **Palms**

*Essays on the Politics of
Haze and the Environment
in Southeast Asia*

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Foreword

The Southeast Asian transboundary haze has resulted in severe environmental, health, political and economic impacts in the region since the 1970s, and has resurfaced time and again in the past decades. During the episodes of 1997, 2013 and 2015, forest fires and haze brought damage on the scale of tens of billions of dollars to the affected countries—Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia itself, and even to the rest of the world—through carbon emissions and climate change. Mainly the result of agricultural slash-and-burn practices on peatland in Indonesia, the pollution problem remains largely intractable and complex despite repeated efforts to mitigate it. Resolving this cross-border issue is critical, and yet is more insurmountable than it appears.

It fundamentally is a classic problem of public good and common property, where everyone owns the commons that is the atmosphere and yet no one is compelled to be fully responsible for it. Standard economic tools such as Pigouvian taxes or a simple Coasian solution cannot be applied. Indonesia can be pressured but not forced to reduce this pollution. The problem is complex to address, primarily because of its transboundary nature, which has made it difficult to assert extraterritorial jurisdiction without infringing on the sovereignty of the culprit nation. For Indonesia, the processes of enacting land use statutes, changing regulatory institutions and enforcing laws are complex and tedious. Plantation owners often deny using fire to clear land and blame shifting cultivators for starting fires in their smallholdings that later spread to plantations. Proof of negligence must be shown, which is susceptible to delays and transaction costs. Moreover, related to the enforcement problems is the complicated

nature of Indonesia's decentralized governance system. The coordination of responsibilities for forest fires and haze is spread unevenly across many central and local agencies, with many overlaps.

It is important for all affected countries to undertake the valuation of negative impact costs of the haze such that a form similar to international aid can be offered to Indonesia and assistance provided to targeted sectors hurt by the haze. One approach could be to spend a sum not exceeding the costs of the haze to enhance the ability of Indonesian authorities to detect, locate and respond to the fires, as well as strengthen their ability to prosecute those responsible. Another approach could involve victim countries paying subsidies to Indonesian plantation owners and farmers to encourage land clearing by non-burning methods as a form of external or international development aid. We must continue to require the involvement and coordination of all stakeholders and to search for interdisciplinary solutions from the fields of economics, business, law, environmental science, engineering, political science, geography and others.

This book has been put together with the aim of providing a holistic set of perspectives to aid the understanding and possible resolution of the Indonesian forest fires and transboundary haze. Dr Helena Varkkey has been at the forefront of this research, primarily from her expertise as a social and political scientist observing and analysing the intricate issues connected with this perennial problem. The essays range from historical analysis, in-depth and technical deliberations, to a balanced exploration of key issues suitable for classroom discussions and case studies, as well as for the interested general public. This collection of articles will also increase the understanding and implementing of public policies and regulations to make informed decisions. Her work includes the facts and history of the forest fires and haze, challenges in achieving the twin goals of economic development and environmental conservation and preservation, and the complex political economy arguments. You will also find perceptive analysis through the multifaceted lens of the free-rider problem, the international law and cooperation, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze, technological innovations, corporate social responsibility and public-private partnerships, industry-specific initiatives, the role of government and environmental governance, environmental economic valuation and damage assessments, forestry management, the road to sustainability, complex political economy, climate change impacts, and more, including nature's role in this.

From these articles the reader will be able to develop a clearer understanding of the complexity and magnitude of the transboundary haze problem and realize some possible or feasible approaches to

this persistent cross-border problem. And with optimism, it is in this combination of proposed measures and strategies that we hope to find the elusive solution we have always been searching for. Dr Varkkey's work to date value-adds this. Understanding the nature of the difficulties and complex socioeconomic and political business relationships in addition to the needs of various stakeholders is a first important step to the solution or mitigation of this issue.

Professor Euston Quah
Albert Winsemius Chair Professor of Economics
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Preface

Being born and bred in Malaysia, haze was an unavoidable part of growing up for me. With the massive 1997–98 haze episode coinciding with my formative years, this transboundary puzzle seemed an obvious research topic of choice during my undergraduate studies. Little did I know that a small student conference paper would somehow snowball into fifteen immersive years and counting of research.

The title of this book is directly lifted from the title of my academic blog, which I have maintained since 2015. The blog title was, in turn, inspired by the popular phrase “to miss the forests for the trees”, which is defined by Merriam Webster’s Dictionary as “to not understand or appreciate a larger situation, problem, etc., because one is considering only a few parts of it”.

Indeed, over the years, as I do more fieldwork, speak to more people and collect more personal experiences, I am even more appreciative of how large and complex the haze situation in Southeast Asia truly is, and how impossible it is for one to consider and understand all the different aspects of the problem.

As an academic who focuses on an issue that is very much in the public eye, I have enjoyed the privilege of being able to share my research, hypotheses and opinions with an interested public audience beyond academia, at a pace more-or-less reflective of the rapid development of this issue on the ground. Thus, this book is a collection of my commentaries, some solicited and some not, previously published on various media platforms, on various facets and various stages of the regional transboundary haze problem and its links to unsustainable agribusiness practices.

My view from Malaysia is, as expected, somewhat myopic in that my research, and by extension this book, focuses on the fires and haze in the southern ASEAN subregion and its connection to this particular subregion's "golden crop"—palm oil. Hence, I should caution that the issues discussed within this collection, while not entirely dissimilar, should not be easily generalized to apply to the Mekong subregion.

The commentaries featured in this collection were originally published between 2013 and 2020. They are divided into four broad topics and are arranged chronologically within each of these topics.

I do not dare to profess that this book might contain the answers and solutions that we all so desperately seek. I hope, however, that this collection can at least provide some clarity, thinking points and discussion starters for scholars and stakeholders in the region to continue to work towards lasting solutions to transboundary haze.

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My family deserves all my love and appreciation for their support and understanding in this endeavour, particularly my husband, who claims to have read all my commentaries, my father, who actually reads them for proofreading purposes, my mother, who proudly “likes” and shares them on social media, and my two children, who will hopefully read this book some day.