

BOOK REVIEW

Ignition Stories: Indigenous Fire Ecology in the Indo-Australian Monsoon Zone. 2013. By **Cynthia Fowler**. Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, USA. 274 pages. Paper. US\$38. ISBN 978-1-61163-115-9

As Indonesia's forested areas are continually threatened by unsustainable forestry practices and fires, *Ignition Stories* contributes to our understanding of anthropogenic fires within the region. Cynthia Fowler, an anthropologist, presents the narratives of fire in the Kodi region on the island of Sumba, Indonesia. The text is described as an ethnography of fire amongst the Kodi people. Stories of fire are interspersed amongst the author's narratives from the times she spent with the Kodi in 1997 and 2007. Two visits, ten years apart, have enabled Fowler to interpret changes in practice and story over this time period. These stories unfold across 14 chapters, which include topics ranging from fire history to the governance of forests and fires. Fowler has set out to establish an understanding of the fire use practices and knowledge of the Kodi in hopes of elucidating national and international policies that seek to minimize burning. Like many indigenous populations, the Kodi struggle to maintain their cultural use of fire throughout the history of settlement and policy development.

Fowler provides comparisons between the burning practices amongst the Kodi, other Indonesian populations, Aboriginal populations of Northern Australia where many shared plant taxa ex-

ist, and fire management in North America. She is critical of existing fire ecology research in Indonesia and asserts that a broader analysis, inclusive of indigenous practices, is necessary to understand the role of fire in the region. Key differences emerge in the narrative regarding how the scale of fire differs in these regions amongst the indigenous populations; in Kodi, the fire size is very fine grain. Fowler details local scale burning for agricultural management in gardens and, to a lesser extent, the burning of savannas. She illustrates that social networks of men, women, and children are all involved as part of the burn implementation process, and that fire is a routine part of life. Through story, she relays how fire was acquired by Kodi ancestors and shared with neighboring groups, and how fire is often shared or borrowed in contemporary times. Various reasons for burning are provided and an exploration of the spiritual relationship between burning and the burners is discussed. The classification of fire types and discussion of human-fire feedback mechanisms will be of interest to readers working with other indigenous communities and thought-provoking for other readers.

While the book provides important background on indigenous burning in Kodi, there are several areas that might leave a reader unsatiated. Foremost, the book does not contain maps, sketches, or comparable depiction of the areas being discussed; this is somewhat interesting given a chapter titled, "Fire Mapping" (the narrative along with support-

ing black and white photos serve as the map). Occasionally there is also need for interpretation of how Fowler utilizes certain ecological terms, such as mosaic, to describe the matrix of vegetation in the landscape. In some sections, the narratives provide tangential information that detract from the key point; in one instance, an entire grocery list was provided to illustrate how food is provided to burn participants.

Overall, the provided narratives demonstrate the connection between traditional burning practices and the contemporary lives of the Kodi people. *Ignition Stories* contributes to a broader understanding and appreciation of indigenous fire ecology and, more importantly, what role such indigenous fires play in the bigger scheme of burning in Indonesia.

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