The Nature and Culture of Rattan
Reflections on Vanishing Life in the Forests of Southeast Asia
Stephen F. Siebert

The Nature and Culture of Rattan is a story of vanishing life, of the world’s most valuable non-timber forest product, of tropical forests upon which they depend, and of societies that flourished by utilizing and managing these remarkable plants. It is also a chronicle of hope that describes how some households and communities are crafting productive and sustainable futures based on rattan and tropical forests. Rattan is the common name for a diverse group of climbing palms found throughout Old World tropical forests. They have been used for binding, basketry, home construction, food and numerous other non-market purposes for centuries while the canes of some species are gathered for the multi-billion dollar furniture, handicraft and mat-making industries. Simply put, rattan is vital to the culture and economic well-being of millions of collectors, artisans, and laborers throughout tropical Asia and Africa.

Author Stephen F. Siebert provides a personal and engaging review of rattan plants and people whose lives are centered on their collection and use. He explores rattan use, biology and human culture, and challenges in tropical field research and conservation through the knowledge, practices and lives of cane collectors and artisans in three forest villages in Southeast Asia where he lived and worked over a 25 year period. Most uniquely and delightfully, Siebert integrates personal stories and experiences he shared with rattan collectors to illustrate the often stark conditions households and communities confront. These stories pull the reader into the personal lives and choices individuals and communities face as their social and ecological world is transformed around them.

The author’s style is scientific, yet accessible, humble and empathetic. He poignantly conveys the challenges confronting rattan households and communities in a manner that reaches both student and non-specialist audiences. The reader will be engaged in the process of discovery, the importance of this research, and the personal dynamics of international collaboration and friendship. We witness the journey and discovery of common world views, issues of family and income, and shared experiences and concerns.

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