

Laudatio for Gregory Thaler by Jürgen Scheffran

Science Prize of the Hans-Günter-Brauch Foundation
Laudatory speech for Gregory M. Thaler (USA/UK)
Mosbach, 10.10.2024

Dear guests, dear Hans-Günter and especially dear Gregory,

It is my pleasure to give the laudatory speech for Prof. Dr. Gregory M. Thaler today as a 2024 recipient of the International Science Prize for Peace and Ecology in the Anthropocene awarded by the Hans-Günter-Brauch Foundation in Mosbach.

This year's theme of the award is "Ecocide: Focusing on the political and legal concept and on Impacts of Wars and/or Climate Change on Food Security since 1945". Going back to the use of defoliants (Agent Orange) by the US military in the Vietnam War, ecocide is understood as "the criminal liability for massive damage to or destruction of ecosystems through human actions as a serious crime", causing "widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment". The issue of ecocide is increasingly relevant because of environmental destruction, for instance by climate change and current wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Gregory Thaler has demonstrated outstanding knowledge and abilities in research on the connections between ecology and peace in general and ecocide in particular. This is evidenced by his scientific work to date, which has succeeded in achieving a high level of international recognition and a number of qualified publications.

Before addressing his awarded book, I will first provide a few comments on key aspects of Prof. Thaler's work as an interdisciplinary environmental social scientist with a specialisation on anthropology, sociology and agriculture. The broad range of research subjects include political ecology and political economy of development, global environmental governance and agrarian politics.

Gregory Thaler holds an MA from Cornell University (2014) and a BA from Yale University (2007). Following a Fulbright Fellowship with UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, he received his PhD in Government from Cornell University in 2017. After working as an Assistant Professor of International Affairs at the University of Georgia in Atlanta (USA) from 2017 to 2024, he started in September 2024 as an Associate Professor of Environmental Geography and Latin American Studies at the University of Oxford (UK). Currently he is co-director of the Brazil Natural Resource Governance Initiative

Several aspects are making the work of Gregory Thaler remarkable:

- A deeply interdisciplinary perspective connects a broad range of disciplines in geography, anthropology, environmental sociology, ecological history and conservation science.
- The scientific breadth allows to combine research in environmental and climate change with peace and conflict studies.
- The creativity and originality of research is facilitated by interests and strengths in comparative and ethnographic methodology.

- Regional case studies focus on Latin America and Southeast Asia, in particular the Brazilian Amazon and Indonesian Borneo.
- A critical perspective questions unjustified claims and allows alternative responses and solutions.
- Going beyond mere academic research, the work is embedded in a community of people who recognize that human well-being is inseparable from ecological relationships, and who strive to develop responses to a socially and ecologically unjust global system.

These aspects are combined in a number of peer-reviewed publications on relevant issues, such as green frontiers, forests and land change; environmental governance and justice; global environmental discourses with smallholders and non-governmental organizations. Well-respected journals include: Environment and Planning, Geoforum, Comparative Politics, PLOS ONE and World Development which is quite impressive for a young researcher.

The quality of Gregory's scientific work is also reflected in the awarded book publication "Saving a Rainforest and Losing the World: Conservation and Displacement in the Global Tropics", which emerged from his PhD at Cornell University and was published in 2024 by Yale University Press, a top scientific publisher.

In the following I would like to mention a few results to highlight the importance of this book for the prize award.

- The book addresses a relevant question: Can we feed the world without felling the forest?
- It covers the topic of agricultural expansion as the primary driver of tropical deforestation, aggravating climate change, biodiversity loss and livelihood destruction for forest peoples.
- Such developments undermine global food security, contrary to the claim of producers and companies in industrial agriculture to guarantee the global food supply.
- To conserve tropical forests, in the past two decades, the concept of "land sparing" has been developed which aims to save tropical forests by increasing the productivity of existing agricultural land.
- It is promised that this land intensification helps to "spare" land that otherwise would have been converted to agriculture, reconciling agricultural development and food security with environmental conservation and climate change mitigation.
- The author comes to the conclusion that the land-sparing promise is false, based on six years of research regarding the social and ecological effects of political contests on agrarian frontiers.
- He discusses several case studies and field research in oil palm plantations of Indonesian Borneo, cattle ranches of the Brazilian Amazon and Bolivian lowlands to government ministries in Jakarta, Brasília, and Santa Cruz de la Sierra,
- The book explains why land sparing appears successful in some places but not in others, and shows that successes of land sparing are an illusion achieved by displacing deforestation to new frontiers.
- The failure of land sparing exposes the harsh truth behind green capitalism leading to ecocide.
- To end this ecocide, according to the author we must refuse industrial capitalist geographies, adapt bioregional approaches to the needs and values of a particular "life place" and accept the responsibility of belonging to a place to ensure a livable climate and food-secure planet.

These results are quite convincing and demonstrate the overarching issue of ecocide. In this context it provides an in-depth analysis of concrete cases which question the false success story of land sparing and presents ways out of ecocidal forest degradation and exploitation, moving towards sustainable and peaceful land use.

Based on these points, I can only agree that awarding the Science Prize for Peace and Ecology in the Anthropocene to Gregory Thaler is well justified. Congratulations from my side and best wishes for future research!

