

Air photo evidence of historical land cover change in the highlands: Wetlands and grasslands give way to crops and woodlots.

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Abstract

Madagascar's high plateau – where people farm, graze cattle, and set periodic fire in a grass dominated landscape – has received disproportionately little conservation attention. An aerial photograph-based analysis of land - cover change over the last century, based on a stratified random sample of twenty eight sites, reveals dramatic trends associated with population growth and agricultural expansion. At the sites, about 23 % of grassland areas present in 1949–1950 were converted to crops fields, farm trees and other structures. In all land - cover transitions, the most dramatic changes included the loss of approximately 60 % of wetlands and riparian forest. These land covers, which are dispersed along the fine - grained dendritic stream network, are habitats for many species, yet are also prized locations in the rice - based Malagasy agricultural system. The results of this study have implications for highland grassland, wetland and riparian forest ecosystem restoration and conservation; however, any conservation strategy should incorporate respect for local needs and allow sustainable use of these ecosystems, given their importance.

Full Text:

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