

## Arson on Their Own Land: The Politics of Tracking Fire in Indonesia

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**Speaker:** **Dr Jenny Goldstein**  
Department of Development Sociology, Cornell University

**Chair:** **Dr Massimo Lupascu**  
Department of Geography, NUS

**Date/Time:** Friday, 10 February 2017, 3.30pm – 5.00pm

**Place:** Earth Lab, AS2-02-03, NUS

### Abstract

Peatland-based fires in Indonesia have become a near-annual crisis across much of Sumatra and Kalimantan, affecting the health of millions and release huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. These fires occur only if peat swamps are drained for large-scale agricultural development; once started, they cause permanent ecological and biogeochemical changes in the landscape.

The media, state officials, and many researchers continue to attribute such extensive fires to “slash and burn” agricultural practices of farmers and to plantation companies clearing land prior to planting. However, land-based fires, particularly in peatlands, have become a far more complex socio-ecological phenomenon and are deeply intertwined with the rise of rural rent-seeking activities that have been rendered illegal.

Based on qualitative research conducted in collaboration with a team of biophysical scientists in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, I show that a broader range of rent-seeking, and often clandestine, activities are involved in land burning than “slash and burn” practices or plantation land clearing. These include using fire to deliberately clear land to increase land’s financial value as well as accidental fire ignition resulting from diversified and spatially dispersed livelihood activities.

Second, I will discuss some of the methodological challenges involved in trying to track fire’s origin and movement through heavily degraded rural landscapes, and what the broader implications of this research are.



### About the Speaker

**Jenny Goldstein** is currently an Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future Postdoctoral Associate at Cornell University.

Beginning in July 2017, she will be an Assistant Professor in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell. She received her PhD in Geography from UCLA. She is broadly interested in the relationships between economic development, tropical land use, and climate change politics. She has conducted qualitative research on the political ecologies of rapid landscape change following large-scale agricultural development in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia and is currently working on a new project on the socio-political impacts of satellite-based environmental monitoring for conservation and development in Indonesia and Myanmar.

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