

Vegetation of Central Asia and Environs. Edited by Dilfuza Egamberdieva and Münir Öztürk

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 39(3)

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm241>

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Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018. xxii + 381 pp.
Hardcover: US\$ 179.00, ISBN 978-3-319-99727-8. E-book:
US\$ 139.00, ISBN 978-3-319-99728-5.

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To this day, Central Asia remains academically elusive in conception and presentation. Ex-Soviet scholars may call this vast region Middle Asia or High Asia. Others might describe the area as Inner Asia, the historical Turkestan, or, most commonly, use the geopolitical concept of Central Asia consisting of the 5 “Stans.” This features Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as the recognizable face of the region. Yet an argument based on geography, ethnicity, culture, or history may stretch the definition to include parts of western China, Afghanistan, and even Azerbaijan and parts of Iran. The essence is that, as outsiders, we know little about, and pay limited attention to, this vast mountainous and dryland region. This is reflected in the dearth of academic engagement and scholarly articles on Central Asia. It is in this void that *Vegetation of Central Asia and Environs* is situated.

That little is known of Central Asia in international (English) academia (try searching Google Scholar for your specialism in Central Asia) is a major research void. Think of the cultural and environmental richness, political and social contexts, and climate implications with which the world is unacquainted. Greater awareness involves local engagement and advancement of researchers and scholars from the region. *Vegetation of Central Asia and Environs* provides an entry to the subject from regional scholars; equally, it highlights the challenges of internationalizing a remote and neglected region. Although we are presented with much data and information, we are unable to engage with scholarship, nor are we provided pathways into the topic and landscape. This creates a specialist book without a niche: those who are knowledgeable are in the region, whereas interested outsiders will have difficulty getting through the presentation style and lack of rigor. Such introductory efforts should be encouraged, yet the absence of standard academic writing practice makes the book difficult to read.

Edited volumes such as this are episodic by nature. In *Vegetation of Central Asia and Environs*, the linking framework is, loosely, vegetation within a broad geography—and the theme conveyed is that any information in this category is

relevant and printable. A more cohesive approach could have linked topics, data, and results. Chapters, even on the same topic, such as medicinal plants in Kazakhstan, are stand-alone pieces and often repetitive, rather than an integrated presentation of the subject based on data and evaluation. The authors and editors, perhaps aware of the lack of information in English, take a simplistic approach that considers that chapters, once available in English, are ready for publication. This is a disservice to the efforts of regional experts. The research, if effectively presented, could encourage engagement and knowledge in the region. Instead, the uncritical presentation of information undercuts the potential value of the book, which reads as a draft of loosely related topics rather than a finished product.

At its heart, the book conceives of presenting data on Central Asia, not developing an academic text, as its *raison d'être*. Rather than learning, we are informed about the region in a report-like fashion. This didactic approach will not gain converts; in fact, it presents a cautionary tale about how research is undertaken and presented in the region. In this way, the book sets back the case of Central Asian study. The concept is reasonable, but the structure and execution defeat its aim. The writing structure is at times baffling, with one paper featuring a single 14-page table. Engagement with current literature, clear identification of research and methods, context, applicability of findings, and basic discussion would have strengthened the chapters and the book. Citations are dated, weak, or missing. Central Asia research is not placed in a regional or global context.

There is too much detailed information, too often presented in dictionary-like form. Themes of medicinal plants, land degradation, vegetation change, deforestation, and plant diversity are relevant and may be of interest. To document vegetation and land dynamics can be useful to experts, yet only a specialist can engage with much of the material. We are presented with plant names, maps, and tables that at times overlap, or writing (eg “the geography of Central Asia is...”) that repeats across chapters. What the reader craves is awareness of the broader research world, a clear research objective, rigor and robustness, and acknowledgment that the writing identifies work and study that are being presented to a global audience.

Throughout the book, important themes emerge. Key is the influence of human activity on vegetation, landscapes, environmental resources, and water. Authors stress how changes in land use, not climate, affect and threaten plants and degrade the steppe. There is clear concern for management and policy, yet these topics are not focused on. Data are methodically presented, but sources are unclear. Rather, the research content appears to be republished from other sources. The book tallies up quantity over quality: the material could be presented in half the number of pages. Grammar and writing style, although challenging, would have benefited from such simplification. Repetitive parts of chapters (area description, plant names) could have been presented once, with experts then tying themes and locations together. More attention to structure and editing

would have been essential to effectively convey the worthwhile message.

The positive side is that *Vegetation of Central Asia and Environs* provides an entry into specific topics in the region. It should encourage authors to take the next critical steps of analysis and evaluation. Some chapters, such as on Kazakh medicinal plants, land degradation, and remote sensing assessment, show potential. Specialists will benefit from the

presentation of information in English. The book draws attention to issues of interest and concern, and serves as a point of contact with the regional legacy of national academies of sciences and universities that are more actively joining the global research world. The idea and effort should be encouraged; the hope is that a future volume will more effectively and succinctly convey the effort and research to a wider audience.