

From Improvement to Extraction: Locke, Sacred Forests, and the Ecological Limits of Property

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Abstract

The theory of property developed by John Locke in the classical theory of property is still used in contemporary interpretations of property ownership, improvement, and development of land. But as his story is read in the context of current ecological disasters and in the context of sacred-forest traditions in Africa, its limits are made evident. This paper proposes that the labour theory of appropriation and the theory of improvement as propounded by Locke create a productivist quantification of the value of land that overlooks forests whose value lies more in the ecological, spiritual and social than in the agricultural or market value. This issue is brought to the fore in sacred forests in most African settings. They tend to be controlled by taboo, ritual, customary power and collective restraint, and they are not only biocultural landscapes but also biodiversity reservoirs, carbon storage and order in the community. Although Lockean natural-law system has some proto-sustainability provisions, particularly in the spoilage restriction and the enough-and-as-good clause, the emergence of money undermines these boundaries and assists in sanctioning enclosure, commodification and extraction. The paper also suggests that controversies of sacred forest borders shed light on a peace aspect that is usually ignored by the theory of property: forest controversies are not simply territorial controversies but controversies between incompatible legal and moral regimes of land management. In putting Locke into conversation with the sacred-forest traditions, the sustainability ethics, and environmental peacebuilding, the inadequacy of Lockean property theory is demonstrated in the article as well as the enduring impact that Locke continues to have.

Keywords: Locke; property; sacred forests; sustainability ethics; environmental peacebuilding; Africa.

Introduction

The Second Treatise of Government by John Locke has had a highly unusual intellectual and political afterlife. His theories on property being gained as people combined their labour with resources through the commons served to fuel the contemporary liberal ideals of property ownership, development, productivity and rights (Locke, 1689/1988). One of the strengths of the argument is its simplicity. When labour is the property of the individual, and labour modifies what nature gives, the resulting product seems to be rightfully his own. But this simplicity has also contributed to the theory's influence in practise: Lockean language has been applied time and again to warrant enclosure, agricultural incursion, colonialist occupation, and the raising of productive use over other forms of relation to land.

The implication of this argument has been quite challenging to disregard in an era characterised by climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and struggle over natural resources. More recent scholarship has thus revisited Locke not just as a canonical figure in the history of

political theory, but as an ongoing presence in contemporary discussions regarding the issue of environmental responsibility, ecological damage, and the extent to which the state may act in response to climate crisis (Hallenbrook & Reed, 2024; Pierer, 2024). Given that Locke is still applicable to the modern environmental politics, the theory of property should be put to the test against the types of land whose value cannot be measured merely based on productivity.

Forests offer such a test. Forests are not cultivated agricultural land like farmlands. They control climate and biodiversity, store carbon, stabilise soils, support livelihoods and in most cultures, they have had cultural and spiritual importance. In many African contexts, some forests are seen, not as a resource to be exploited, but as a spiritual place that is ruled by customary rules, ritual duty and shared custodianship. These forests do not stand idle; they are managed by moderation. Their integrity frequently depends on resisting their transformation into a common economic space.

The current paper suggests that sacred forests reveal the main shortcoming of Lockean property theory. Locke commences with natural-law restrictions, which seem to favour preservation and anti-waste, yet the theory is being structured more and more around improvement, productivity and accumulation. However, in that context, preserved forests as opposed to converted ones can look worse, less used, or even morally vulnerable to exploitation. Sacred forests challenge this decision, revealing that land can be normatively ordered, ecologically worthy and socially significant without being adjusted to the Lockean ideal of productive change.

The article follows six steps. First, it re-creates the natural-law scheme of Locke with the emphasis on the natural-law spoilage-provision and the natural-law enough-and-as-good clause. Second, it explains that the labour principle redresses the theory to a productivist valuation of land. Third, it maintains that sacred forests in African practise signify other ecologies of value based on custodianship, taboo and intergenerational responsibility. Fourth, it investigates how money contributes to the relaxation of the natural boundaries of Locke and an extractive accumulation. Fifth, it links sacred forests to peace through the analysis of the boundary conflicts and legal pluralism as the clashes of the rival systems of land governance. Lastly, it claims that sacred forests ought not to be interpreted as peripheral exceptions, but as normative oppositions that can assist in reconstituting a more satisfactory sustainability ethic than the Lockean property can offer per se.

Conceptual Review

Property and improvement, sacred forests, sustainability ethics, and environmental peacebuilding are concepts central to the argument this article proposes. Although they come from different intellectual traditions, these concepts agree on questions of legitimacy, value, and what kinds of relationships with land are worthy of protection.

Locke's theory defines property as the legitimate appropriation of resources that were previously held in common. Locke links this process to labour; that is, when an individual mixes labour with resources in nature, a claim over them can arise (Locke, 1689/1988). Closely connected to this notion is the idea of improvement. Improvement refers to making land more productive through human labour and transformation, especially through cultivation and increased economic use. This understanding of improvement is relevant to the present article because it can make improved or cultivated land appear more valuable than land intentionally left uncultivated. The article therefore considers not only physical change, but also the normative assumption that productive transformation represents a better use of land.

By comparison, sacred forests are forest landscapes where the preservation and use is affected by cultural, spiritual, customary and communal values and norms. They may be important due to their connection with ancestors, gods, rituals, healing, community identity or customary

authority. These forests can also perform critical ecological functions, like biodiversity conservation, biomass production, and carbon storage (Adeyanju et al., 2022; Onyekwelu et al., 2024; Sinthumule, 2024). They are interesting to this study because they challenge the notion that value is only evident when land changes and money is made. Restraint, limited access, and preservation can be as important as utilisation in sacred-forest systems. This does not imply that sacred forests in Africa constitute a single or uniform institution. Instead, the article uses specific African examples to illustrate alternative relationships among land, community, authority, and ecological responsibility.

It is through the lens of sustainability ethics that these conflicting relations with land may be assessed. Sustainability ethics concerns ecological limits, responsible resource use, intergenerational responsibility, resilience, and the maintenance of conditions for continued human and ecological flourishing (Norton, 2005). In this article, sustainability ethics is used to question whether property rights and economic productivity should be treated as the only valid indicators of legitimate land use when ecological integrity, biodiversity, cultural continuity, and future generations are also at stake. In this regard, sacred forests are important because they show how restraint and long-term preservation can be socially institutionalised rather than treated merely as constraints on productive activity.

Lastly, environmental peacebuilding examines how environmental resources, ecological pressures, and systems of resource governance can influence both conflict and cooperation. Contemporary environmental peace and conflict studies increasingly recognise that conflicts over natural resources concern not only scarcity and territory but also institutions, authority, recognition, and claims to legitimacy (Ide et al., 2023; Krampe et al., 2024). In relation to sacred forests, this concept is particularly relevant where customary boundaries and spiritual jurisdiction encounter state legislation, commercial development, or alternative systems of land administration. Environmental peacebuilding therefore extends the critique of Lockean property by highlighting that conflicts over sacred forests may also be conflicts between competing legal and moral understandings of how land should be governed.

Locke Natural Law: Common Ownership, Preservation and Limits

Locke does not start with full-fledged private property. He starts with a world that is entrusted to men in common and with the inherent responsibility of preservation (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 285). This is an important point to start with since it implies that appropriation has to be justified. Nature does not come in the first place in parcels. The ethical issue that Locke must address is that of the ways in which individual rights against external things can emerge in a world that is originally common and geared towards the survival of humankind.

The response he gives is limited, at least, in the first place, by natural law. Two components of the said moral structure are particularly significant to the ecological readings of today. The first one is the spoilage limitation. One can only appropriate what the commons offer, as much of it as he or she can consume before it is ruined. Waste is unacceptable as it goes against the reason why nature was entrusted. The second is the provision of enough and as good. One can only objectively appropriate as long as there are enough resources of similar quality to be used by other individuals (Waldron, 2002). Combined, these limitations appear to place ethical limitations on gathering and to provide an indicator of concern not only about equitable access, but also about avoiding waste.

That is why, proto-environmental resources have been discovered by some scholars in the theory of Locke. Hallenbrook and Reed (2024) are an example, as they state that the broader Natural-law structure of Locke can motivate great state action in response to climate crisis due to the existence of government to enforce the law of nature to protect life in circumstances of danger. It is not very far to push Locke, however, to say that his early argument is full of a

language of preservation, sufficiency, and restraint. In that sense, Locke is not merely an unrestricted acquisition theorist.

Nevertheless, the environmental potential of these boundaries is weak. The theory of Locke does not stick on the idea of common ownership or preservation obligation. It looks into work, value production, and betterment. Preservation ceases to enjoy that normative privilege once that step has been made. The ethical impetus of the theory is no longer the common natural law, but rather the activity of the individual that transforms. The main question is thus not whether Locke is limited in any way, but whether those limitations can withstand the logic of the process of improvement which his account eventually favours.

Improvement, Labour and the Productivist Turn

The most renowned Lockean claim is that each individual holds a property in his own person and thus, work is self-owned (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 287). Based on that, he reasons that in case a person removes something the state nature gave, and combines labour with it, it becomes a private property. Between common property and title property lies labour.

The most compelling power about this move is not the fact that labour is justifying appropriation, but rather the fact that labour is also reported to produce value. According to Locke, labour is the one that places the distinction of value on all things (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 289). He makes his argument clearer by comparing cultivated and uncultivated land on the idea that improved land is incredibly prized compared to land that is lying waste (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 297). The outcome is that the hierarchy of land relations is in place where transformation has been counted as moral and economic improvement.

The coherence of this argument has been long disputed by philosophers. Nozick (1974) poses a famous question as to why combining what I possess with the one I do not should result in my being the owner of the latter, instead of my losing what I invested. Simmons (1992) provides a more sympathetic interpretation to the fact that labour need not be seen as any kind of crude physical mixing but rather as intentional action that publicly establishes an ownership claim. However, despite the softening of the labour-mixing metaphor, the normative structure still exists. It is labour that renders property legitimate and visible change that renders land valuable.

This is where Locke makes his theory productivist. Improvement is not a neutral one. It carries with it assumptions of what is proper human relation to land. Nurture, fencing, increased production and the commercial usability is an indication of moral and political development. A territory that is not structured according to such terms may seem wanting, despite it being either ecologically rich or culturally controlled.

There are direct implications of that productivist turn on forests. A forest that is conserved by taboo or ritual ban or communal restraint does not obviously qualify as a better place in Lockean terms. Use of such land can be made, managed, and appreciated but since it does not have its value calculated by visible change, it is at the expense of being judged as a waste or underutilisation. This is the issue that has been highlighted in recent environmental philosophy. According to Saetra (2020), the environmental thought of Locke is highly anthropocentric due to the fact that nature comes to the theory primarily via the anthropocentric motives. Pierer (2024) also argues that the labour-based idea of property by Locke assisted in establishing the contemporary idea of the nature as changeable matter, which during the Anthropocene conditions becomes even more unstable.

Sacred Forests and Alternative Ecologies of Value

The African sacred forests help recognise what cannot be easily identified by Lockean productivism. The reason why they are frequently put under protection is not because these are maximising, but they are morally distinguished. Their limits can be ensured by the help of oral memory, taboo, ritual authority, and community responsibility. These can be related to the ancestors, gods, shrines, rites of passages, and healing, or group identity. Although these arrangements differ greatly with regard to regional and community divisions, they tend to have a common orientation; forests are not a resource to be transformed, but are areas that one observes relationships of obedience and moderation.

This is not just so that it can be described culturally. Ecologically important is also the sacred forests. This is consistent with the systematic review of African sacred forests conducted by Sinthumule (2024), which concluded that sacred forests serve as major repositories of the local biodiversity and as the protectors of ecological integrity. Adeyanju et al. (2022) demonstrate that sacred groves are maintained through a set of socio-economic and religio-cultural profit, and that protection of the community against their desecration or illegal use is at the centre of conservation results in southwestern Nigeria. Onyekwelu et al. (2024) also reveal that the sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria are involved in the conservation of biodiversity, production of biomass, and carbon storage.

This has philosophical significance since it dismisses the Lockean equation of value with productive alteration. The sacred forests are not worthless or uncontrollable socially since they are not highly cultivated. Their usefulness is in part in preservation. Non-extractive use is not non-use in such situations. Rejection to clear, harvest, or privatise a forest may be a mode of fulfilling ancestral obligation, community order and ecological systems. Such land cannot be termed as waste as it is not only inaccurate, it is actually misleading. It is an expression of a limited theory of legitimacy.

Sacred forests also confuse the ownership model which provides a great deal of Lockean thought. The main connection is not the personal ownership, but, collective custodianship. Access can be differentiated, rights can be nested and power to control the space can rest on the heads of lineage, priests, councils, age grades or other traditional institutions instead of on holders of private titles. These orders are not immune to conflict or transformation but they indicate that land may be managed via collective moral worlds and not individualised exclusion.

This is very important under sustainability ethics. Sustainability has been defined in the abstract as ecological limits, intergenerational justice, resilience and responsible use (Norton, 2005). Sacred forests impart those ideas to social form. They demonstrate how restraint may be institutionalised by belief, practise and common duty. They also demonstrate that a viable environmental ethic does not necessarily have a starting point with current-day private property. In that regard, sacred forests do not just complement sustainability ethics, but help to make it tangible.

Money, Commodification and the Change to Extraction

The ecological hope of the natural-law limits of Locke is fading away, when money gets into the bill of exchange. The spoilage provision limits accumulation as long as value is pegged on perishable goods. Money changes this. It is nonperishable and durable and therefore it is possible to store its value by not spoiling it. Locke admits that humans agreed by consent to disproportional and uneven distribution of the earth with the help of money (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 292). That is not a weak addition to the theory; it is the key to it. It is possible to go beyond the natural boundaries since hoarding is not a waste anymore.

The criticism of Macpherson (1962) cannot be overcome here. The language of natural law and self-ownership used by Locke is made agreeable to the possessive individualism and capitalistic accumulation. What seems to be an idea constrained in its scope by conservation leads to the idea capable of explaining vast inequalities of property and vast concentration of land.

Modern extractivism literature provides this shift with a new meaning. According to Nygren et al. (2022), global extractivisms are defined in the context of resource access and control, governance and recognition, socio-environmental harms, and justice struggles. The usefulness of their account is the fact that it demonstrates that extraction is not merely an economic process. It is a political and ethical possession of land where the ecosystems are turned into commodities and the costs of environmental degradation are arbitrarily spread out.

Read in this light, it can be understood that Locke has shifted from restricted appropriation to monetary accumulation, an early philosophical authorisation of extractive modernity. Forests no longer read as sacred or even ecologically part of the world but as timber property, plantation boundaries, carbon, or hypothetical land banks. The need to become better turns into the need to become converted. What is valuable is not that which makes life viable in a thick sense, but that which can be alienated, bought and sold as well as heightened.

The violence of that transition is made that much more noticeable through sacred forests. With extractive logics, their sacredness does not hold much water unless they can be converted into state-recognised heritage, ecological services or legal title. The more recent research by Bamidele and Pikirayi (2026) on sacred land in Nigeria demonstrates that sacred sites are under increasing pressure due to urbanisation, the state land-use schemes, and rivalry between official and informal authorities. It is not merely a competition over land-use. It is also the collision of competing systems of value: the one based on spiritual government and administration, the other on commodification and administration.

Boundary Conflicts, Legal Pluralism and Ecological Peace

Boundary conflict is the best way of seeing the peace dimension of the argument as it applies to sacred forests. Conflicts over sacred forests are not often simply a matter of lines on a map. They tend to be battles about who has the right to draw lines, who can use the land, what can be considered a valid use and what can be seen as more than ecological, as well as sacred and economically desirable.

Within most African situations, sacred-forest borders are incorporated in custom and ritual memory and local discourses of belonging. These boundaries need not fit well with cadastral maps or legal categories. Conflict may thus arise when states, developers, and neighbouring communities or even communities or sub groups within a community resort to the various regimes of legitimacy. According to Bamidele and Pikirayi (2026), the sacred lands in southwestern Nigeria can be viewed as biocultural landscapes facing the threat of speedy urbanisation and the state land management. The ensuing tensions are not of an administrative nature. They are conflicts between statutes and spirits, between what is written on paper and what is passed down by blood.

This issue of legal pluralism is important to peace and conflict studies. It has become clearer through environmental peace and conflict studies that ecological degradation, resource stress and disputed governance may increase social tension, and equally environmental governance may open avenues of cooperation in cases where institutions are inclusive and legitimate. The field itself is mapped by Ide et al. (2023) as a collection of streams that are partially disconnected, such as climate-conflict research, environmental peacebuilding, political ecology, and decolonizing environmental security. Krampe et al. (2024) claim that climate

change and peacebuilding are to be researched together due to the ecological stress that influences the livelihood, water, food, and the governance of the conflict-affected societies.

Sacred forests can be placed in this research agenda. They can be controlled using regimes of restraint that limit excessive use and organise access. This is where the systems are identified and they have the ability to stabilise both intra and inter-community relations. Where they are overpowered, conflict may be aggravated. In that regard, sacred forests are not conservation areas but also social order institutions. According to Adeyanju et al. (2022), community enforcement that prevents desecration or unauthorised access is used to preserve some sacred groves, and degradation occurs where customary rights are not accepted. That is where the relevance of peace is found. Customary custodianship is not just cultural respect to be recognised. It may be conflict mitigation as well.

This does not imply that sacred forests would necessarily generate peace. Boundaries can be contested internally, elites can seize power and exclusions can have grievances themselves. The greater argument is that in the context of sacred forests boundary fights indicate that peace is partly tied to the legitimacy of land governance. When land is viewed solely as a commodity or even as administrative territory, then regimes of restraint and belonging that hold communities together can be eroded. On the other hand, conservation and governance arrangements that pay serious attention to local norms may transform forests into arenas of collaboration and not conflict.

Recent research on forest conservation and environmental peacebuilding confirms this opinion. Alusiola et al. (2025) propose the so-called peace pathways according to which forest conservation may help peacebuilding of an environment, such as common institutions, collaboration, and less pressure on disputed resources. That kind of research can be used to further the philosophical assertion of the article: forests are not merely important due to their carbon-storing or species-protecting capabilities, but rather the manner in which they are managed can determine political structure.

Property Reconstruction by way of Sustainability Ethics

The implication of this criticism is not that Locke should be abandoned. Critical normative intuitions, however, still exist in his theory. The concept of anti-waste is still morally strong. The same is true of the demand that appropriation should always be accountable to others and not only explainable through the sword. These are genuine merits. The problem is that they become dependent on the scheme where labour, productivity and money become defining value and validity.

An improved property ethic would have to rebuild, and not only reject, what Locke initiated. On the one hand, improvement should be redefined. It cannot always be productive change alone. Preservation, restoration, and culturally based restraint should also be taken as valid and worthwhile options in relation to land. Sacred forests bring this home to the point: they are made better, so far as it must be used, by being maintained through generations by practises which safeguard the ecological wholeness.

Second, the enforcement of the proviso of enough and as good should be reconsidered ecologically. Others do not qualify as having nominal access to land when ecosystems are destroyed, biodiversity is annihilated or the sacred landscape is turned into a thing of the past. Adequacy should be with regard to the quality and permanence of common ecological realities as opposed to formal access to land.

Third, the purpose of money should be ethically constrained instead of being discussed as eroding the natural boundaries. In case monetization would cancel anti-waste restrictions, then Locke natural-law paradigm will no longer have as much ethical impact. Sustainability ethics

dictates that there should be a limit to accumulation even in the cases where value is in monetary form. The collapse of biodiversity and climate change has rendered that fact inevitable.

Fourth, theories of property require a more expansive description of value. Sustainability ethics has acknowledged ecological resilience, intergenerational responsibility, biodiversity, cultural continuity and non-market relations to nature to be morally significant. This plurality of value is represented by sacred forests. They demonstrate that land can be important not only spiritually or ecologically but also politically simultaneously. Theory that devalues output will be in a constant systematic failure to comprehend such landscapes.

Sacred forests according to this perspective are not exceptions which remain on the fringes of modernity. They are counterexamples to the normative assumption that valid relations of property have to be individual, productive and commodifiable. They unveil the historical and cultural parochialism of Lockean property and contribute to envisioning a model based on custodianship, ecological boundaries, and coexistence.

Conclusion

This theory of property by Locke is both fundamental and ecologically inadequate. It is foundational in the sense that it still shapes assumptions concerning ownership, improvement and the right to transform land to benefit people. It is inadequate since the assumptions fail when challenged by forests whose worth is ecological, sacred and communal as opposed to productivist.

This criticism is intensified by sacred forests in African environments. They demonstrate that it is possible to socialize land without privatizing it, that restraint may be an important and productive ethical activity and that non-extractive relationships with forests can support biodiversity and community order. They also unveil a peace aspect that the property theory usually overlooks. Boundary disputes involving sacred forests are not merely disputes of land, but rather of conflicting legal and moral jurisdiction of land.

However, a final assessment of Locke should not reduce his contribution to the ecological limitations identified in this article. Despite the difficulties created by his emphasis on labour, improvement, and accumulation, Locke's theory remains an important philosophical basis for thinking about property, preservation, obligation, and the justification of appropriation. Its continuing significance lies in the questions it raises about the relationship between individual claims, the rights of others, and the maintenance of shared conditions of life. In this sense, Locke's work provides a useful starting point for further intellectual development, particularly in environmental ethics and socio-political philosophy.

For Locke's theory to continue to have value and make a substantial contribution to environmental ethics, it needs to be rebuilt through sustainability ethics rather than reiterated as a justification for extraction. Such a reconstruction would retain the principles of anti-waste and preservation while rejecting the exclusivity of productivist improvement. It would acknowledge sacred forests not as unproductive land to be converted into commodities, but as a testament to the fact that stewardship, restraint, and ecological peace are meaningful alternatives to extractive use. In that way, sacred forests do not merely seek a place within Locke's understanding of property and land; they provide a broader dimension to sustainability and intergenerational justice.

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