Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

ANGELA EASBY

BA (Huron University College, 2012)

“Exploring the Impacts of Sugarcane Expansion in La Montaña, Guatemala: A Feminist Community-based Research Project”

School of Environmental Studies

Wednesday, December 2, 2015
10:00AM
University Centre Building
Room A207a

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Jessica Dempsey, School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. James Rowe, School of Environmental Studies, UVic (Co-Supervisor)

External Examiner:
Dr. Juanita Sundberg, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Carol MacDonald, School of Nursing, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Sugarcane cultivation is expanding throughout the Pacific coast of Guatemala, with political and ecological consequences for subsistence communities. The majority of sugar production occurs in the departments of Santa Rosa, Escuintla, Suchitepequez and Retalhuleu on the Pacific coast. As sugarcane expands into fincas (large plantations owned by an agricultural elite), the amount of land available for rent to landless or land-poor farmers is reduced. Sugarcane expansion provokes various forms of environmental degradation, including deforestation, air pollution, water contamination, and draining of rivers and wetlands. Sugarcane cultivation also provokes health problems for workers and those who live near these sites, including kidney failure, dehydration, and respiratory and skin problems. As sugarcane expands, subsistence communities in the surrounding area are subject to these detrimental effects of sugarcane cultivation. Building academic knowledge on the impacts of sugarcane expansion is necessary in order to be better equipped to be in solidarity with, or support subsistence communities facing this expansion. It is crucial to meaningfully involve subsistence communities in this process of knowledge production since it is the inhabitants of these places, not researchers, who are the experts on these issues.

In this thesis, I describe a feminist community-based research project in the community of La Montaña, Guatemala, on the impacts of sugarcane in their community. The key goals of this research were to 1) collaboratively identify with participants specific areas of interest regarding sugarcane impacts, and investigate these areas; 2) analyse data with an awareness of gender and 3) share research findings with the community to facilitate the possibility of action or critical reflection. I used public group discussions, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and drop-in sessions to collect data. Through this process, the issues of political inaction (as a response to sugarcane) and deforestation (driven by sugarcane) emerged as two key areas of interest which I explore in this thesis. The main finding of my research was that sugarcane cultivation is a divisive force in La Montaña: while community members agree on the negative aspects of sugarcane cultivation, they disagree about how to address this issue. As I find, these divisions occur along the axes of gender and age. These divisions also constitute an obstacle to a collective political platform to address sugarcane expansion, and a potential site for intra-community violence as sugarcane continues to expand. These findings were presented to the community in a public presentation in February 2015, to provide a space for critical discussion of these issues.

Overall, this research identifies a key difficulty that subsistence communities face in the context of agroindustrial expansion: as the importance of collective action grows, so too do intra-community divisions. This research highlights the need for long-term solidarity-building work in communities on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, in order to be able to achieve the changes that community members feel powerless to enact alone.