Environmental change is anticipated to transform patterns of migration in the Global South, with potentially significant consequences for forests. However, recent analyses have highlighted the complexity of migration decision-making, demonstrating a need for more detailed investigation into how environmental factors influence migration choices. Additionally, it has been proposed that in-migration increases forest degradation by undermining traditional institutions, but this theory has been subject to relatively little empirical investigation in Southern Africa. The objective of this study is therefore to explore the two issues of environmental migration and the adherence of in-migrants to traditional forest management rules in central Mozambique, drawing upon qualitative thematic analysis of 84 semi-structured interviews across 3 villages in Manica Province. We find firstly that environmental factors including rainfall predictability and soil fertility are important drivers for the permanent relocation of whole households, but that the temporary migration choices of individuals have greater sensitivity to labour market characteristics in source and destination locations and to the spatial distribution of social networks. We also find that high access barriers such as land scarcity restrict in-migration to some of the most environmentally desirable areas, and that the migration of women and female-headed households is heavily constrained by strictly defined local gender roles. While respondents recognised population growth as a driver of deforestation and forest degradation, we find little evidence that in-migration undermines traditional institutions in this context; clearance of forest for agriculture was carried out with permission from local traditional leaders, and in-migrants were several times described as showing greater respect for customary laws on forest burning and livestock grazing because of their more precarious standing in communities. Our findings contribute to the emerging literature on the complex links between migration and environmental change, and the equally complex outcomes for forest ecosystems.