
Thailand: Displaced peoples wrongly blamed for forest destruction

A research undertaken by the NGO Friends without Borders shows that refugee communities living along Thailand's border areas and displaced by war and civil strife from neighbour countries, are being unfairly accused of forest destruction in Thailand.

Since 1984, mass exodus of Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan ethnic peoples fleeing from war and human rights violations by the military dictatorship in Burma, have settled in Thai border areas, totalling 10 border camps with some 115,000 refugees in the year 2000. Additionally, some 100,000 Shan people, who have not been granted refugee status, are living and working as migrant labourers. Most refugee camps are located in national forest reserves, which provide food and shelter to the communities.

This has led to accusations that refugee camps are to blame of forest destruction in Thailand. However, the study shows that as the refugees are indigenous people, they maintain customary sustainable forest management practices that prevent them from collecting forest resources beyond the carrying capacity of the forest. They have been able to self regulate their collection practices in an efficient and sustainable way, employing selective cutting methods --rather than clear-cutting-- such as leaving red bamboo shoots that taste bitter in every cluster and not digging young bamboo shoots that are underground. They know cutting bamboo shoots potentially degrades forests more than cutting stalks because more shoots can be carried from the forest in a single trip than stalks. The camps surveyed are also trying to reduce firewood consumption in several ways, like promoting fuel efficiency with clay stoves. Collection of dead branches and dry wood from the forest areas for firewood also serves as a method of fire prevention.

In areas surrounding the refugee camps surveyed, commercial agriculture is being practised under the predominant scheme of intensive cultivation characterised by the use of imported, genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and the exploitation of refugee labour. In the areas surveyed, low-lying hills have been completely cleared of forest in the past ten years, to give way to fruit plantations. In those cases, commercial agriculture --and not refugee people-- has been the main cause of deforestation.

Large scale forestry production --with additional finance from the pulp and paper industry-- has fuelled both illegal logging and commercial reforestation promoted by the government. Refugee involvement in logging has not only been found to be insignificant, but also the high profile of refugee camps has protected surrounding forests from illegal logging. Thai village people and refugees are concerned about the impact of reforestation programmes on biodiversity, soils, water resources and customary land tenure --commercial timber would attract competition against their fragile land tenure rights and fallow fields may be claimed to plant trees. The official promotion of alien species to replace native trees has added to the disruption of the forest balance.

The research concludes that refugee protection is not causing environmental degradation beyond the carrying capacity of the forests in Thailand. When degradation occurs, it is linked to commercial agriculture and commercial forestry production --not implemented by refugees-- or to forms of

subsistence agriculture induced by state restrictions on customary land tenure and traditional farming practices. In nearly all of the refugee populations surveyed, village people have established community forests to manage the conservation and use of public and private lands sustainably. In spite of the high density refugee populations, the forest collection practices of refugee peoples are still sustainable and biological diversity is not threatened.

Significantly, although refugee people and local people have not been the main agents of forest degradation, these groups are suffering the most from the social and political consequences of forest destruction, which have resulted in official forest policies that place restrictions on the communities' use of forest areas --such as rotational cultivation and collection of non-timber forest products-- thus threatening their livelihoods, food security and housing requirements.

When it comes to biodiversity, whenever it is disrupted sooner or later people will be affected. Sooner for the poor, indeed. In this case, refugees and local communities in Thailand know it well.

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