
Thailand: People, not state, protect forests

Can people co-exist with forests? This nagging question will come to the fore once again if the controversial community forest bill makes it to Parliament for a final vote. This is a case of asking the wrong question. If we really want to protect the remaining forests that have survived a series of state plundering, a different question must be asked: Can our forests survive state mismanagement and exploitation if we don't allow people's participation and public monitoring?

For that is the heart of the original version of the people's draft bill. No matter what the opponents say, their arguments boil down to their belief that the villagers - particularly the hill peoples - are forest destroyers. And that the forests will remain in good hands under state control.

Sadly, this myth also runs deep among the city middle-class who have been brainwashed by mainstream education and mass media to blame deforestation on the hill peoples and poor forest settlers.

But who really are the bad guys?

Within only 40 years, Thailand's forests which once covered half of the country have dwindled to just about 20%. This should be no big surprise.

Although commercial logging was banned in 1989, illegal logging supported by men in uniform continued unabated. Meanwhile, the policy of successive governments to expand cash crops for export has caused massive land-clearing and deforestation. The same can be said with the military's counter-insurgency policy to destroy guerrillas' strongholds by building roads and human settlements in forests. More forests also fell prey to big dams, commercial tree farms and encroachment by big-time land speculators.

To cover up their failure, the forest authorities increased the figures of forest cover by speeding up the number of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries while barring human activities there.

The fact is, all forests have long been inhabited, both by the indigenous forest dwellers and by the more recent settlers who first came with state endorsement. But the 1962 National Park Law has since then turned more than one million poor families into criminals and subjected them to the misery of eviction.

Meanwhile, the forest authorities continue to turn a blind eye to illegal logging and forest encroachment by influential people while renting out good forests for peanuts to commercial tree farm investors.

Exactly 25 years ago, Ban Huay Kaew in Chiang Mai became the first village to fight for community rights to protect their forests from investors' encroachment. It quickly grew into a nationwide movement demanding state recognition and support for local communities' participation in forest conservation and rights to sustainable use. The demand for community rights to co-manage their natural resources is endorsed in the 1997 charter as a constitutional right. Hence the people's

community forest draft bill.

But the Thaksin government wants to retain the power to evict forest dwellers at will. A new phrase was added into the people's original version to give the authorities sole power to demarcate special forest zones where villagers must be evicted.

Note, however, that the Thaksin government has plans to build more dams in forests as well as open up national parks -- more to the tourism industry and to lift the tourism ban in wildlife sanctuaries. Plans also are afoot to build roads in Thung Yai, a World Heritage site. Strong resistance to these plans comes mainly from community forest groups. It is understandable why the authorities want them out.

Last month, Somyong Oongaew of Petchabun's Nam Nao community forest was the latest in a long list of forest fighters gunned down because they stood in the way of those with money and power.

As long as we make the poor the scapegoats of deforestation, the local communities' struggle to protect their forest homes will remain an uphill battle. Many more forest fighters like Somyong are also likely to lose their lives - thanks to our wrong question, which leads us to the wrong answer.

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