
Thailand: two opposite approaches to forest conservation

By Ricardo Carrere

What has been happening in Thailand during the past years has developed into a showroom of some of the best and worst practices as respects to forest conservation. Local people and their allies have been fighting -in many cases successfully- against powerful actors who are denying them their rights and destroying their means of subsistence. At the same time, they have been creating an alternative approach to forest conservation and use. What follows are some comments from a field trip which took place last November to the Northeastern provinces of Thailand, hosted by the Project for Ecological Recovery, a Thai NGO affiliated to the WRM. These comments are restricted to observations in the visited areas and do not pretend to give an overall view of the problem as a whole.

The logging ban and "reforestation"

After years of large scale logging, forest cover in Thailand declined from almost 60% to only 25%. Such extensive destruction derived in devastating floods, which in turn resulted in the loss of human lives and the destruction of villages and people's means of subsistence. In answer to public outcry, the Thai government approved in 1989 a logging ban which is still in force. At the same time, forestry academics came up with the idea that the country needed to increase its forest cover to 40% and began working in that direction. However, what they understand by forest cover is completely different to what most people understand as such. For these -and most- foresters, forest cover means simply to have a canopy of trees -any trees. So they chose one tree from Australia to increase Thailand's forest cover. The chosen tree was the fast-growing species *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, the activity carried out was called "reforestation" and the result was "planted forests".

At the beginning, villagers didn't have any opinion about this tree, so there was no opposition. In short time opposition began to grow due to different factors. In the first place, because eucalyptus started to be planted in the communities' lands, thus depriving them of a number of vital resources such as grass for grazing, food from wildlife and flora, medicines, fibres, fish, etc. Secondly, because plantations began to modify the environment in a way that resulted in impacts on their production, particularly due to a decrease in the availability of water for their crops and animals. It thus became very clear to villagers that "planted forests" were not forests, because these provide water and a number of other products and services which these plantations not only do not provide but on the contrary they deplete. Now only foresters believe -or try to- that they are "reforesting" the country.

The pulp and paper industry

Plantations are however not only being implemented with a stated environmental objective of increasing forest cover: there are other more concrete interests at stake. Northern forestry consultants (particularly the Finnish Jaakko Poyry) and "aid" agencies (for instance, Australian), as well as local and transnational actors working with and for the pulp and paper industry, as well as the

pulp industry itself have played a major role in the expansion of this type of plantations. The main objective is to produce large amounts of cheap raw material to feed an export-driven pulp industry.

As elsewhere in the world, the Thai pulp industry is highly destructive, both in terms of pollution and in terms of the dramatic social and environmental changes it imposes on the surrounding area. The industry needs to feed its mills from nearby sources because the cost of transport is a limiting factor, so plantations are concentrated in the surrounding area. Pressure is put on the local people to either sell their land or plant it with eucalyptus or suffer the consequences. If people have no land titles, then they are simply dispossessed. It also applies the same policy of initiating its activities with no pollution control. Over the years, organized opposition forces the industry to implement some measures with the least costs possible and then tries to show them as an example of corporate responsibility over the environment. In the case of Phoenix Pulp and Paper in Khon Kaen, the latter is shown through something they euphemistically call "Project Green", where eucalyptus planted in small holdings are irrigated with effluents from the mill. While eucalyptus grow very fast, other existing trees and vegetation die and the polluted water contaminates the water table and reaches the surrounding paddy fields destroying the crops. Certainly not a very "green" attitude.

The unpopular national parks

The "increase forest cover" policy is complemented with national parks aimed at ensuring the preservation of forests. The approach is however that people are seen as outside dangerous actors, which need to be excluded. The boundaries are defined by the government, with no consultation with the people, who see that their lands are being encroached by government officials. But people don't see forests in that way. They see forests as part of their means of subsistence and they don't view -as foresters do- forests as only composed by valuable wood. When I asked the people we met why forests were important to them, they seldom mentioned wood, except for firewood. Vegetables, mushrooms, ants, medicines, meat, fruit, water, were always mentioned before wood.

Absurd as it may seem, monocultures of eucalyptus and teak are also being planted inside the boundaries of the national parks. The intention is probably twofold: to increase "forest cover" and to plant what they consider to be "valuable" wood. Although perhaps the reason is even more simple: eucalyptus and teak are easy to grow and the technical package is well known by foresters, who know little about the majority of the numerous species which grow in Thailand's diverse forests.

The peoples' struggle

Local people have suffered and resisted imposed "solutions" such as exclusive national parks and eucalyptus plantations. The pattern has been similar in all areas. Firstly, the government tries to convince people that its projects are either not going to affect them negatively or that they will benefit from them. The second stage is when people begin to realize that they are being affected and try to do something about it. The third stage implies organization and capacity building (where NGOs have played a major role.) Finally, the affected communities get together and carry out a number of actions to defend their rights. These actions have ranged from dialogue to confrontation and from local to regional and national. Cutting, uprooting and setting eucalyptus plantations and nurseries on fire have gone hand in hand with meetings, peaceful demonstrations and discussions with government officials. Numerous meetings have been held at village and regional level and huge demonstrations have been held for many days in front of the provincial government house. They have created a wide range of networks on different issues. They have travelled to the provincial capitals and to Bangkok to hold meetings with government officials and private enterprise managers. They joined their different struggles in the Assembly of the Poor, which organized a nationwide demonstration in Bangkok.

All this has meant that thousands of people have had to dedicate an enormous amount of their time and effort to defend their rights. They have had to travel long distances to make their voices heard by provincial and national government officials. Many have received life threats and some have been imprisoned. Among these, I would like to mention the following people from one of the villages we visited: Chom Sutponit, Som Jorjong, Visit Rotchanasom, Won Ponpruek, Bunnaaw Pairao, Noopha Mekdon and Sai Jaroen. Although none of them are currently in prison, they still face charges in relation to their anti-eucalyptus campaigning activities and could still face imprisonment. A different case is that of Kam Butsri from Buriram province, who has been in prison for over 3 years and could be kept in prison for 4 more years. His major "crime" was that of cutting down eucalyptus trees that were damaging his community's livelihood. Comparing the offense with the punishment, I tend to see him as a political prisoner, whose imprisonment is meant to serve as an example to bring fear to other possible opposers.

The people's struggle has been successful in many places. In one of them, the powerful Asia Tech company has agreed not only to stop planting eucalyptus, but also to cut them down. In another case, the government has agreed to pay for the removal of the stumps of the eucalyptus. Phoenix Pulp and Paper had had to pay damages to local villagers affected by its effluents. Shell company decided to withdraw from a large scale plantation project. All these are positive examples to show the power of apparently powerless villagers once they organize and fight for their rights.

The people's approach

Widespread deforestation has not only had negative impacts on the environment; more importantly, it has impacted on people's livelihoods. Many local communities are thus striving to bring their forests back, but with a totally different approach from that of mainstream professional foresters. Forest regeneration is not seen as increasing forest cover but as increasing the numerous products and services that forests provide. Forests and agriculture are not viewed as opposed: on the contrary, they constitute an interactive system. People need food and other products, and the forest not only provides many of them, but also supports crop production and cattle raising.

This approach -called community forest management- is completely different from most forest conservation policies and practices. Trees do not have an abstract environmental -and even less commercial- value: what is valuable is the forest as a whole, including water, grass for grazing, vegetables, fruit, etc., all linked to the satisfaction of local human needs. Local people are the decision-makers over their forests and establish democratically agreed rules and regulations on forest use. Shared satisfaction of local needs and shared decision-making and monitoring ensures forest conservation. Such forest management compares favourably with the "biosphere reserve" approach. For example, one of the community forests we visited had a central strict conservation zone, surrounded by what experts would call a "buffer zone", which is in fact the forest production area, where grazing and gathering activities take place. The approach differs, however, in that biosphere reserve management is imposed on communities, while community forest management is decided by them. Such difference is essential, because the latter ensures peoples livelihoods as well as forest conservation, while the former only aims at controlling that local people don't destroy the forest.

The hated tree

As a forester, can you tell us how to kill eucalyptus trees? This question was posed to me by villagers in the province of Sakon Nakhon. In another village, a man put very strongly forward the idea of a world-wide anti-eucalyptus day. An Australian colleague visiting the area with us felt very

embarrassed by questions posed accusingly to him by villagers about this terrible tree from his country. Although a long time opposer of large scale eucalyptus plantations myself, I have never heard such a deeply rooted hatred towards a tree as I felt during my visit to the northeastern provinces of Thailand. Neither Australia nor its tree are of course guilty of the way in which the tree is being used. But given that eucalyptus are being planted in numerous countries in a way that dispossesses local people of their basic resources and in a way that depletes those same resources, it has become a symbol of destructive forestry. People in Spain and Portugal are fighting against this tree in similar manners as in Thailand and India. Hawaian people have recently succeeded in halting a eucalyptus development project. Organizations from Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, Venezuela, South Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Spain and from many other countries are getting together to fight against the spread of this type of plantations. While all this is happening, the FAO, the World Bank, the "experts" and forestry officials continue promoting a forestry model based on this tree and trying to prove that people are wrong. What's happening is exactly the contrary: more and more local people are proving, not only that they are right but also that they have positive solutions to the local and global problem of deforestation.

The message from Thailand

The long and increasingly successful struggle of the Thai people is enlightening and needs to be shared with other people facing similar problems in other parts of the world. The main message is that success is possible. They have experienced failures, but learnt from them. People have learnt to organize themselves at the village, local, regional and national level and to build a shared leadership. They have put an emphasis on capacity building in order to acquire the necessary skills for effective action. They have used different tactics at different stages of the struggle. But furthestmost, they have been convinced, not only that they were right, but that they could succeed. And that's just what they are now doing.

For more information on the plantations' issue in Thailand, you can consult Larry Lohmann's chapter 12 (From "reforestation" to contract farming) in "Pulping the South: Industrial Tree Plantations and the Global Paper Economy", Carrere, R. and Lohmann, L., Zed Books, 1996.