

The Coexistence of People and Forests: The Royal Thai Government's Forestry Policy

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Thailand's natural resources

Thailand has been blessed with abundant natural resources and these have been the basis of employment and income creation for decades. Even at the present time, although less than ten percent of GDP is generated by agriculture, the sector provides the income for more than half the labour force. The sector is under continual stress from natural disasters such as flash-flooding, drought and landslides. Alarming, such events are becoming more frequent. It is apparent that these events can be attributed to the decline in forest cover in recent decades. This decline has been driven by a number of factors, including commercial logging, road construction, building of irrigation schemes, agricultural production and settlement. The recurrent problem of natural disasters has brought social and economic consequences. Each year, public resources are required to provide emergency relief measures, which are supplemented by contributions in both cash and in kind by the general public. Additional to the cost of this relief, however, is the cost of the destruction of economic activities of farmers. Repairing the damage caused by these disruptions takes time and more sustained effort. While significant resources have been channeled to address these problems the effectiveness of the resulting initiatives has been limited by the fact that the concerned parties have not used an integrated and unified approach. Reviewing the success of this programme we have learned that a more integrated approach towards resource management is needed; a new framework is needed for managing Thailand's twenty-five river basins. The effective management of watershed forests is essential for managing water resources and is crucial for assuring the prevention of opium cultivation. It is also crucially important that we build more and stronger partnerships; there must be clarity over the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders and they must also be involved in policy formulation.

In 1961 around 50% of the kingdom was covered in forest, however, during the last fifty years the extent and fertility of our forests started to decrease due to slash-and-

burn agriculture, and logging. Before, we would grant a license for logging under the condition that those granted licenses had to replant in their grant areas. However, despite this condition forest areas continued to decrease. In general, forest preservation did not occur and some areas were lost to agriculture, farming and encroachment. We revoked these licenses, intending to preserve our forests and forest areas; we also introduced regulatory authorities in order to preserve the forests through the formation of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. At that time people's participation in forest preservation was limited. As time passed forest cover continued to decline still further. This was due to a lack of people's participation and motivation, the extent of forests lying beyond the reach of authorities and a lack of adequate resources vested in the preservation system. Furthermore, without a legal basis for forest settlement, forest dwellers lacked the motivation to preserve the forest. People did not benefit from our fertile forests because the forest belonged to the government. Under this system the only way people could benefit from the forest was by resorting to illegal logging or by turning forests into farmland. Preservation and plantation reforestation programmes managed by the authorities alone were not sufficient. In essence this occurred because there was no legal or policy framework permitting the coexistence of people and forests.

Towards a better forestry policy

The most important element of forestry policy is that people must be encouraged to live in coexistence with the forest. Under this policy people can derive benefits from the forest and preserve them at the same time. By creating the feeling of ownership of the forest in people they become the authorities' instrument of preservation. In a context where people have no incentive to damage the forest there is no reason to move them out of the forest. In order to allow the coexistence of people and the forest we need to support the development of livelihoods that do not involve or cause damage to the forest environment.

This government has sent a piece of legislation to parliament attempting to enshrine the principle of the coexistence of people and forest in law. It has gone under the consideration of committees of both Houses. The government has proposed the creation of 10,860 forest villages in accordance with the concept of His Majesty the King. This scheme has been approved and budget granted. The National Forest Policy

Committee is attempting to integrate and clarify the concepts need to complete an innovative forestry policy. This policy will include initiatives to preserve forestry throughout the kingdom, rehabilitate degraded forest, allow the economic use of forests, and enable villagers' forests. The overall target is to reach and maintain a forest cover level of 40%, comprising 25% conservation forest and 15% productive forest. The main thrust of the policy is to allow the coexistence of people and forests, including the many inhabitants of watershed areas in this region of Thailand. The principle of the coexistence of people and forest is still controversial. Fortunately, the Royal Project and His Majesty the King's royal addresses have provided detailed guidance on all aspects of forestry policy.

His Majesty and the Royal Project on Forestry

So how did we come to this policy? We in the Thai government have long since come to accept that in matters of environment, especially in the development of natural resources, our King is quite far ahead of us. Consequently we have learnt to take His Majesty's advice very seriously. In a Royal address His Majesty gave us the following advice on forestry:

“This is important: Wherever there is a good forest, not bare, the people will not cut down the trees because they know better. I have been in many places, and I have inquired about the condition of the forest: they said that the forest was still in good condition. Then I asked them if they would cut down the trees; they said they would not, “It would be silly to cut down the trees.” They do understand that deforestation will bring about dryness and soil erosion. The rice fields will be ruined, and they know it... the people are clever, those on the hills as well as the plains. They are knowledgeable; they have worked for generations; they have earned their livelihood; they are intelligent; they know where to cultivate and where to conserve and keep intact.”

His Majesty has proposed his own concept for forest management. The concept is called the ‘three types of wood for four types of uses’ theory. His Majesty has explained the theory as follows

“Growing the three-type forest yields four benefits, after the obvious uses of giving fruit, timber and firewood, there is a fourth benefit: this is the important benefit of conservation of the soil and watersheds.”

His Majesty’s approach can be summarized by saying that rational and educated people will preserve the forest because their livelihoods depend on it, or even more simply, *rational self-interest leads to community forestry*.

The exact practice of forestry in the Royal Project varies from area to area, but this is the general outline.

- First is a simple approach to land use: watershed areas are reforested with fast-growing species; high slope non-watershed areas may be used for agro-forestry, the cultivation of fruit trees or for more replacement forests; flatter land may be cultivated as farmers wish. By following this system, except for areas depleted by forest fire, the Royal Project has restored tree cover to most of the high-slope land in the Royal Project areas.
- Second, forestry is managed by village committees: they set their own regulations for the use of the forest; they ensure that no one fells from the watershed, they ensure that those who fell from outside the watershed plant saplings to replace the trees they fell. They impose fines for violations, they organize fire control activities like building firebreaks, and they also organize educational activities for youths.
- Third, the Royal Project has introduced a programme called the Villager Forest programme. This is a system in which participating farmers are allowed to fell trees for domestic consumption outside of the watershed areas on the condition that they replant. The Royal Project support the farmers by advising them on where to fell and replant, and ensures that the overall level of consumption is sustainable. Under this system farmers have replanted around 100,000 trees per year since the inception of the project, around 600 trees per participating farmer per year.

The current government policy

The government policy and proposed legislation has been influenced by this model of forestry. This is the policy in outline.

- First, we recognize the rights of long-term forest inhabitants to remain in the forests; this is conditional on their practicing suitable conservation methods and their being able to prove they lived there prior to the forest being declared public land.
- Second, we wish to promote cultivation of crops that are environmentally, economically and socially appropriate for highland forest environments. In many cases this will involve a move towards less input-intensive farming with the resulting benefits of reducing fertilizer and pesticide contamination.
- Third, in cases where forest is clearly incapable of sustaining the welfare of its inhabitants, we will assist forest inhabitants to relocate, using land development methods to ensure communities can use suitable agricultural practices on sloping land.
- Fourth, we will initiate a programme for granting occupancy rights that will include watershed areas. Occupancy rights will only be granted if grantees use the land sustainably and do not encroach further into the forest. Such rights will not be transferable to any party other than the holder's next of kin.
- Fifth, we wish to promote stronger linkages and interdependency between the culture and lifestyle of forest inhabitants and the ecology of forest areas. We will encourage integrated agricultural practices such as the use of crop residue, leaves, and Vetiver grass to make compost; this will be part of a broader programme of promoting conservation, reuse and recycling in forest communities.
- Sixth, we will support highland villagers in the creation of 'wet forests' through education and instruction in the principles of the construction

of check-dams. These are small weirs or dams usually constructible by farmers using locally available materials that slow down the passage of a body of water. By building these and planting trees along the nearby riverbanks, it has been demonstrated by His Majesty the King that moisture returns to arid land without further assistance from human beings.

- Seventh, we will conduct extensive and exhaustive information and awareness campaigns on the importance and practicality of community-based natural resource management and environment conservation.
- Eighth, we will resolve all conflicts and disputes peacefully by means of consultation with all stakeholders.

However, we do still have several unanswered questions: How can we strengthen our communication strategy? Community forestry is still subject of controversy. There are technical issues about how to measure the performance of community forests and how to prevent people from attempting to exploit them. There are difficulties in creating community organizations capable of managing forests. Unfortunately, I am not able to attend the rest of this symposium, but rest assured, that we, the Thai government, value the views of the international development community. Please remember that although I will not be present, many people involved in forestry in this country will be, and in sharing your knowledge, the seeds of this knowledge-sharing may well germinate and go on to make beautiful flowers.