

Forest in Culture—Culture in Forest: Perspectives from Northern Thailand, edited by Ebbe Poulsen, Flemming Skov, Sureeratna Lakanavichian, Sornprach Thanisawanyangkura, Henrik Borgtoft & Ole Hoiris. Research Centre on Forest and People in Thailand, Tjele, Denmark. 2001. Pp. 246, 12 tables and 37 figures. ISBN: 974-537-004-5.

Forest in Culture—Culture in Forest is a collection of papers that was produced from or in association with the Forest and People in Thailand research program—a joint research program between research institutions in Denmark and Thailand. The preface to this book does not provide a very explicit background on this program, i.e. information on the collaborating institutions, study areas, schedule of activities etc. The aim of the program is defined rather vaguely as contributing to the development of a theoretical framework for explaining the interaction between natural resource dynamics and social dynamics and providing a knowledge basis for better forest management in northern Thailand. The aim of the book is stated as to develop a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to the explanation of the natural and social forces involved in forest management not by producing new data, but by reinterpreting already existing information. The book is divided into three parts. Part one is on perceptions of forests and nature, part two provides an overview of the history and land use history of northern Thailand, and part three focuses on forests as a resource.

The perception of forests through the lens of natural sciences, i.e. vegetation science is presented in a very short chapter on vegetation types of northern Thailand by Rachan Pooma and Anders Barfod, which is to a large extent based on the book by Thawatchai Santisuk on the vegetation of northern Thailand (SANTISUK, 1988).

The topic “Ethnic minorities in Thailand” seems misplaced in a context on perceptions of forests, and should rather have been left out than treated in a 3-page chapter subtitled “Figures and biography” (sic!), which contains random scraps of information on the ethnic groups of northern Thailand and a bibliography, which does not do justice to its title “Literature cited” as the literature listed here has not been cited in the article. There is, moreover, no discernible selection principle for the bibliography apart from a (intentional/accidental?) focus on the Hmong and Karen ethnic groups.

This chapter is followed by a chapter on “Nature through western eyes” by Hans Fink, which is entirely without a bibliography or references to other authors who have written on this subject. Even though the article, which is organized around six perspectives on nature, provides a valid and useful introduction into the complexities and ambiguities of the concept of nature in western thought, it would have definitely benefited from incorporating at least a classic such as Glacken’s *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (GLACKEN 1967). In accordance with the title of the book under review here, the author states his preference for a holistic perspective on nature, which overcomes the dichotomy of nature and the human realm. His statement that, from such a perspective, everything that is possible is also natural is thought-provoking, and his criticism of concepts which equate the “natural” with a state of being that is “in balance” is a healthy antidote against glib statements about “harmony in nature”, which litter the literature on nature. His statement that “...nature does not state any general norm that allows us to condemn certain forms of production or commands us to use others” (p. 31) is reminiscent of another author (LOVELOCK 1995), who has written on this subject and whose views should have been discussed in this paper. James Lovelock developed in his book *Gaia: a New Look at Life on Earth*, a comparably holistic concept of nature, and wrote in a similar vein that “There

can be no prescription, no set of rules for living within Gaia". This statement, however, is followed by an important addendum: "For each of our different actions there are only consequences".

The holistic perception of humans, nature and society from a Buddhist perspective is elaborated on in a very thoroughly researched and well-written paper by Soren Ivarsson on the role of Buddhism and Buddhist views on nature in Thai environmentalism. The paper explores the environmental ethic of Buddhism as a basis for forest conservation as well as the application of Buddhism and Buddhist symbols as tools in conflicts over forests in Thailand, e.g. the practice of ordaining trees in order to protect them against felling. The examples cited for the involvement of Buddhism and Buddhist monks in environmental conflicts reveals the complexities of Buddhist environmentalism, where Buddhist monks can be allied with or set against the various stakeholders involved in forest conflicts e.g. local forest users and government officials in various configurations. The discussion of the environmental ethic of Buddhism could have benefited from an inclusion of KAMALA TIYAVANICH'S (1997) studies on the *thudong* or wandering monks of Thailand, who spend long periods in the forest because forest is perceived as the most suitable environment for monks to train their mind.

The perspective of the ethnic minorities of northern Thailand, the so-called "hill tribes", who rely on the forest as a place for settlement and swiddening, is rendered in a very detailed paper by the anthropologist Mikael Gravers. Gravers focus is on the Karen—the largest ethnic minority in Northern Thailand—and their concept of environment in the context of changing and conflicting claims on natural resources and the environment. The paper investigates the case of the Pwo Karen in or near the Thung Yai Naresuan and Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries, and the Skaw Karen of Doi Inthanon National Park. In both cases, indigenous concepts of landscape came into conflict with other concepts of and claims on the land, which left the Karen with a feeling of, as Gravers puts it, "symbolic defeat" or cultural dispossession.

The chapter "History and people of north Thailand" by Lotte Isager is actually on the relations between forest and human space. Isager explores the changes in these relations over three periods: The premodern period, colonial and post-colonial, is characterized by a Theravada Buddhist conception of space that establishes a dichotomy of civilization and culture (*meuang*) at the center and forest at the periphery. Forest in this concept is regarded as the opposite of culture and is seen in predominantly negative terms. This relation between people and forests was redefined two times: first, in the colonial period, when the realization of the economic value of forests provided the rationale for centralizing forest management through the integration of the forested periphery with Siam, and through the creation of a central forest administration, i.e. the RFD; second, when concerns over deforestation, and the emergence of environmentalism in Thailand engendered a focus on forest conservation. This is a very well argued chapter that shows an almost diametrical reorientation in the perception of the forest: forest first as a place far away from the merit-making center of the *meuang*, and then as a place where merit can actually be made through forest conservation.

The chapter "Forest policy and history" by Sureeratna Lakanavichian is a study of the logging ban of 1989, i.e. of the rationale underlying the ban and its role in the overall context of strengthening forest conservation as a forest policy goal in Thailand.

"The forest as a resource for non-timber produce" is a survey of the existing literature

on non-timber forest products with a focus on Thailand, which is based on a research framework devised by CIFOR. The overall statement is that even though non-timber forest products play a significant role in the national economy of Thailand, there has been very little research on this subject, with almost no work conducted on the topic of local people's involvement, which is an indicator of the predominance of the state in this sector of the economy.

The two papers by Peter Hansen on "The forest as a resource for agriculture in northern Thailand" and "Environmental variability and agro-ecological stratification" provide a shift of focus from socioeconomic, cultural and political aspects to the importance of biophysical factors. Both papers are based on extensive field work in the Nam Mae Khong watershed of northern Thailand and a solid study of the available literature. The first paper is on the importance of forest as a resource especially for shifting cultivation, which has been the most widespread form of land use in northern Thailand in the past. Hansen takes up an issue that has been widely debated in the literature on swidden cultivation, i.e. what causes farmers to practice one of the two types of swidden cultivation that can be found in the highlands of northern Thailand, i.e. the presumably more sustainable rotational type as practiced by the Karen, and the non-rotational type that is practiced by, among others, the Hmong. The association of the two systems with particular ethnic groups because of the preference of these groups for one of these types is regarded by Hansen on cultural grounds as an oversimplification, especially in the present situation characterized by overpopulation, and environmental problems. He argues that other factors, such as environmental conditions and farming systems objectives, have been more important. His focus is on environmental conditions that are linked to elevation, climate, geological stratification, topography, and humus accumulation. The same theme is elaborated on in the second paper, which proposes an agro-ecological stratification of the Nam Mae Kon watershed on the basis of fundamental aspects of bedrock, landform and elevation.

"Tourism and the Doi Inthanon National Park" is a thorough investigation of tourism issues in one of northern Thailand's most heavily frequented national parks that is based on documentary survey and personal communication with a wide range of key persons.

In "Tropical forests as a resource for science and NGO's" the authors treat, or rather mistreat, a very interesting topic: the role of scientists and NGOs as actors or stakeholders in the large arena of development in the sense of them staking out claims on tropical forests in protected areas as a commodity with a high image value that provides them with justification and a sense of purpose, and —last not least— a livelihood. The central argument that scientists, representatives of NGOs, and members of local communities form an "unholy alliance" for the purpose of providing "Science (!)" with an undisturbed laboratory, NGOs with knowledge to help them consolidate their influence, and local communities with various benefits, which they obtain for their compliance with the other members of this trinity, suffers from contradictions, misrepresentations, and especially from simplifications which in some cases border upon the banal ("Clearing of vast areas for agricultural purposes...etc. is only undertaken because it is profitable", p. 218), sometimes upon the painful ("The local community...is basically an odd group of people, living in a defined area," p. 219).

The last two chapters in this book deal with the application of fuzzy logic in mapping and modeling. The authors, in both cases emphasize and argue convincingly for the capacity of fuzzy logic, which is a tool for describing units or categories without sharply defined

boundaries, for the representation of uncertain knowledge and the integration of “hard” facts from natural sciences and “soft” information or values from social sciences.

The book is—to borrow from the quotation above—an “odd group” of papers, which differ from each other in terms of thematic focus and in terms of quality. Some of them are excellent contributions to the theme of forests and people in northern Thailand; others are of low standard: unprofessional, carelessly edited, and badly written. Most of the chapter titles are very broad and general, and should have been more specific to the actual chapter content. Missing from the book are also short author biographies with at least a minimum of information about their background and role in the research program. Also missing is a synthesis chapter that should have addressed the aim of the book that has been stated in the preface—to contribute to a theoretical framework for the interaction between natural resource and social dynamics. Without such a chapter, the book is essentially a compilation of papers of variable quality, but with so many of them of a very good or even excellent quality, that the book can be recommended.

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Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt
Asian Institute of Technology
School of Environment,
Resources and Development
P.O. Box 4 Klong Luang
Pathum Thani 12120