Introduction

Over the last 50 years, Thailand has undergone rapid political, social, economic and environmental change. During this period, much of the natural forest area in Thailand has quickly been logged or converted into agricultural areas to spur national development. While there has been much criticism of its failure to stop forest loss, the Royal Forest Department (RFD), which is responsible for managing all forest resources in Thailand, has been constrained in developing appropriate forest management practices by higher political influences and an increasingly polar public opinion regarding how the country’s remaining forest area should be managed (Pragtong and Thomas 1990; Sato 1998). This paper traces the evolution of forest management in Thailand and discusses the decentralization and forest management plans of the RFD.

Evolution of Forest Management in Thailand

Before the establishment of the RFD in 1896, forestland was managed by autonomous local fiefdoms, many of whom profited from logging contracts with European companies. The central government reorganized the forestland administration by establishing the Royal Forest Department which was charged with managing all forest area in Thailand. Since then, forest management strategies have evolved along with the socioeconomic and political conditions in the country. The evolution of forest management in Thailand can be divided into four phases (Pragtong and Thomas 1990).

Phase 1, 1896 - 1953: developing forest management systems and a forest industry

During this period, forestland was managed primarily for commercial timber extraction to meet both domestic and foreign consumption. The Forest Industry Organization (FIO) was established in 1947 as a public forest enterprise for timber and wood, and the Thai Plywood Company was established in 1952 to promote in-country wood processing. During this phase, forest and agricultural land were abundant and population densities were still low. Until 1953, about 60 percent of the total land area was still forested.

Phase 2, 1964 - 1967: state allocation of land for economic development

This Period saw a push to use forestland to Support national economic development. In 1954, agricultural land was allocated to small farmers under the Land Act 1954 which provided the legal basis for land classification and Private Ownership. In 1961, the first national social and economic development plan (1961-1966) was launched. Fifty percent of forestland was to remain forested, but by the second national plan the target was reduced to 40 Percent. Forestland was quickly cleared by logging concessions which were granted on a large scale to provincial timber companies, by other governmental organizations which cleared land for dams and road construction, and by landless farmers who settled in these opened, frontier areas. Transformation of the landscape accelerated during this period, and by 1967, forest cover was reduced to 48 percent of the kingdom while the farm land increased to 26 percent.

Phase 3, 1968 -1980: the vanishing forest frontier

In 1968, the government decided to extend long-term harvesting concessions. The Program resulted in more than 500 concessions being granted, covering half the country. There were many disputes between forest officers and migrants who settled in the logged over areas. This led to an amnesty in 1974 for those residing in reserved forestland. Two major factors led to this. First, the continuing worry over communist insurgents who had moved into forest areas throughout the country encouraged further clearance of forestland to flush the insurgents out. The second was mass migration of hilltribes escaping the conflicts of neighboring countries into the mountainous forest areas of North Thailand. Reflecting the political events of the time, the RFD began playing a more active role in working with communities. In 1975, the National Forestland Management Division
(NFLMD) was created within the RFD to administer the Forest Village Program. This and other rural development programs are generally recognized as having stabilized forest encroachment by setting limits for how much land households could claim (Poffenberger 1999).

By 1980, reserved forest area covered 36 percent of the kingdom, with national parks and wildlife sanctuaries covering six percent. Most of these areas were also under timber concessions, although minor withdrawals were made for national security considerations in highly sensitive areas. Deforestation accelerated, leaving only 32 percent of the kingdom under forest cover.

**Phase 4, 1981 - 1990: transition to collaborative forest management**

By the early 1980s, the government began recognizing the magnitude of forest loss. During this period there was increasing recognition that local participation in forest management could assist in forest conservation as well as in stabilizing agricultural encroachment into forestland. Thus, the RFD initiated the National Forestland Allotment (STK) Project, which provided land usufruct certificates to households occupying degraded reserved forest areas before 1982. STK land-use rights were similar to those issued under the Forest Village Project, but the program did not include infrastructure development and government services. Also in 1981, the RFD initiated village woodlots. These woodlots were aimed at increasing forest production for local needs by communities outside forest reserves. In 1985, The National Forest Policy targeted 40 percent of the country to be under forestland and stressed the need to involve local communities, the private sector, academia, and other agencies concerned with forest management. Other pilot projects were initiated to boost forest cover and reforestation efforts. The RFD once again responded to the problems by reorganizing itself and placing more emphasis on forestry extension and supporting local community efforts.

In 1988, serious flooding and landslides in the South generated public concern and an outcry for more conservation oriented policies. A rising urban middle class, with increasing environmental awareness, pressed for action to halt forest degradation. This led to the 1989 national logging ban. The logging ban pointed towards a shift in national forest management policies toward local participation and forest conservation (Poffenberger 1999).

**People's Involvement in Forest Management**

Forestry policies in the 1990s have echoed the concern raised by the general public. In 1979, Thailand had only 16 national parks covering an area of 9,357 sq. kms. By 1996, this had increased to 81 national parks covering an area of 41,738 sq. kms (Pipithvanichtham 1997). In addition, a number of programs were initiated to encourage people's participation in forest management. In 1991, the RFD began a process to develop a Community Forestry Bill to involve local communities in managing communal forest areas. The bill has passed through many processes of public involvement and it is hoped that it will become law in the near future. There are many who oppose the Community Forestry Bill and fear that the bill will cause further forest encroachment and degradation. Thus, while many in the RFD see the bill as the only viable way to solve land disputes, forest encroachment and increasing rural discontent, the RFD is tied down by political considerations and has to wait for formal approval by the Thai Parliament. Other initiatives of the RFD include:

- **Private forest plantation:** The Reforestation Act of 1992 was initiated to promote tree farming on the private lands. Private plantation cooperatives were organized in 1996.

- **Forestland use zonation:** Forestland was reclassified into three use zones: conservation forests, economic forests and agricultural lands.

- **Public involvement in degraded watershed rehabilitation:** In 1994, a reforestation campaign in commemoration of the Royal Golden jubilee was initiated to promote tree planting in degraded watershed areas, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, roadsides, riversides and urban areas. The five-year program involved people from all sectors.

- **Ecotourism for forest conservation:** Over the last five years, ecotourism has become a popular and economically viable form of tourism. In 1997, the RFD began ecotourism projects in a number of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. The RFD has tried to include local communities living in or near these areas in ecotourism activities so they will benefit from, and help to ensure, forest conservation.

In addition, the Eighth National Social and Economic Development Plan (1997-2001) emphasizes human resource development as its main thrust. Many of the strategies in the plan focus on people's participation in
national resource management.

**The new Thai Constitution and decentralization to local governments**

The 1992 Tambon Administration Act (TAO) provides a greater role for local government units in forest management. Under this act, TAOs (sub-district governments units) have responsibility for managing all natural resources within their boundaries. This decentralization plan was further supported by the new Thai Constitution which came into law in 1997. The constitution states that local people and organizations should be involved in managing their natural resources. Both of these laws further enshrine people's participation in forest management and pave the way for clarifying land-use issues and people's role in forest management (Poffenberger 1999).

**Adaptation to Decentralization**

While formal adoption of the Community Forestry Bill is still pending, the RFD has been testing out a number of pilot projects which will prepare the department for when the bill is eventually approved. This includes:

- **Community Forest and Bufferzone Pilot Projects:** These projects are implemented in forest reserves surrounding national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. They aim to increase understanding on local tools and processes for developing collaborative management arrangements between local organizations and the RFD to manage natural forests in bufferzone areas. The projects began in 1997 and are currently being carried out in six regions of the country.

- **Small-scale Forest Plantations:** This project encourages job creation in rural areas for workers who have returned home since the economic crisis that started in July 1997. The project aims to support the TAO in its role as primary local manager and encourage small-scale enterprises and employment. Areas of 10 - 20 ha are allocated to the TAO for reforestation. The RFD works with the TAO to ensure sustainability.

- **Forest and Forest Fire Protection:** Initiated in 1997, this five-year project promotes people's involvement in forest fire protection. The RFD aims to support TAOs in developing forest fire protection plans to lessen the impact of forest fires on local economies and ensure that fires do not devastate national parks and other sensitive forest areas.

- **Forest Management and the TAO:** This pilot project covers all 75 provinces in the country and aims to develop procedures for local forest officers to work effectively with the TAO administration to manage forestland in their territories. TAOs can now develop five-year plans for their sub-districts which include forest management activities. The local forest officers play a crucial role in providing extension support to plan and implement forest management activities.

**RFD and the Economic Crisis**

To ease problems caused by the economic crisis, the government launched the public sector adjustment policy to review the role of government agencies. It was decided that all work that can be carried out by the private sector should be privatized. Correspondingly, all work which can be undertaken by local people should be transferred to local organizations. Under this policy, the RFD will terminate government reforestation projects, private plantation promotion, seedling distribution, and wood and non-wood checkpoints. These activities as well as all the work concerning forest engineering (such as road construction, forest boundary survey and all mechanical engineering) shall be transferred to the private sector. Plantation and forest protection activities will be transferred to local organizations. The process of the adjustment was initiated in 1998 and is ongoing.

**Conclusion**

Thailand has gone through dramatic changes over the last 50 years and the RFD has tried to keep apace. Increasing public concern over the environment, pressure to downsize government in the face of the economic crisis, and the recognition that local people should play an active role in forest management have all encouraged decentralization of forest management responsibilities in Thailand. All sectors of Thai society (government, private, urban and rural) recognize the need to balance rapid socioeconomic development and environmental conservation, however, there are diverse opinions as to how to best meet these goals. The difficulty of reaching a consensus on how best to achieve improved forest conservation and rural development,
and in turn implementing policies which support these goals, are the major challenges ahead for forest management in Thailand (Sato 1998).

References


