Hardly a day goes by without a significant environment-related issue making news in Thailand’s media. The issues concerned tend to have little to do with global warming or holes in the ozone layer. In Thailand today, environmental concern has to do with problems closer to home, more directly and immediately connected with livelihoods and quality of life. That is not to say that they are parochial; on the contrary, environmentalism in Thailand reflects many of the key wider issues affecting and concerning Thais in rural and urban areas alike - namely the impact of rapid economic and cultural change, the inequalities associated with rapid economic
growth, and nagging questions as to whether Thailand's change is bringing irrevocable losses along with the gains of development.

A significant feature of environmentalism in Thailand - and indeed elsewhere - is its variegated character, sometimes to the point where everything and anything becomes an environmental issue. The Thai term for environment, singwaedlom is hugely encompassing, literally translatable as "surrounding things". At one level, this can make analysis of environmentalism a study of such a disparate set of issues as to become apparently meaningless. At another, though, the very discourse of environment helps to bind seemingly fragmented phenomena, hence the "forest for the trees" in the title of this book. Within the discourse of environment, a quite differentiated set of interests and sub-discourses is revealed, reflecting patterns of differentiation of Thailand's increasingly complex socio-political makeup, and it is this differentiation of Thai environmentalism that defines the book.

The chapters in this book emerged from a conference and follow-up workshop at the Asia Research Centre on Social, Political and Economic Change at Murdoch University. The Centre provided financial support for several of the participants, and it also provided a congenial environment in which to commence the editing process. The National Thai Studies Centre also contributed generously to the workshop, while the Department of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, provided the environment in which much of the editorial work was completed. Other than the diverse set of authors themselves and the numerous participants in Thai environmental issues who have given generously of their time and ideas to assist the editor in forming the key ideas that shape this collection, particular thanks is due also to Craig Reynolds and Peter Jackson at the National Thai Studies Centre for first proposing the workshop, and to Trasvin Jittidejarak for her support as publisher. As on many previous occasions, my family has been exceptionally accommodating to my perpetually peripatetic existence.

Philip Hirsch

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

While it is important to consider environmental politics in their international context, it is also useful to distinguish global environmental politics per se (Porter and Brown 1991) from the international comparative context in which more local environmental politics are shaped and played out. This book is primarily concerned with the latter, although Thailand’s politics of environment have taken on an increasingly significant international dimension in recent years.

The book is organised thematically, differentiating contexts of environmentalism in two main ways. The first is to examine national and local contexts in which environmental politics are played out. The discourse of national versus local interest is a recurrent theme that reflects the tensions inherent in different scales of environmentalism. The second part of the book’s organising framework is based on the rural versus urban contexts in which environmental problems arise and responses emerge. In some respects, this is out of step with the increasingly fuzzy demarcation between urban and rural economy and society in Thailand. Yet the case studies reveal quite different bases and characteristics of urban and rural environmentalism. In part, this represents a continuing managerial approach to the former and activist basis for the latter. Participation in environmental struggles is more broadly based in rural than in urban areas, although this is likely to change rapidly in coming years.

Environment has become closely entwined in the discourse of community, culture, society and nation in Thailand. Environmental discourse both reflects and influences social, economic and political process. Phil Hirsch’s Chapter 2 provides an overview of these interrelationships, and it investigates the differentiated social basis for environmentalism with reference to material and ideological underpinnings. In Chapter 3, Jim Taylor focuses on a central pillar of the Thai nation, Buddhism, to show how environmental struggles have been boosted by the legitimating influence of religious association, notably through the role of individual monks. The case of Phra Prajak also shows the limits to such in the face of wider state and capital interests. Taylor also reveals how environment and poverty alleviation have been used by the state (in this case the military) as a pretext to try to evict large numbers of farmers from their unregistered lands. The discourse of nation is treated at quite a different level by Philippa England in Chapter 4, with an analysis of the interacting influences between national and international environmental agendas in the case of Thailand. The complexities of accommodating national positions to global agreements lie in part in the multiple interests
within each country, posing significant questions concerning the "national" stance of countries in international environmental negotiations.

While the public face of environmentalism is often most apparent at the national level, much of the country's everyday environmental activism is played out in much more local arenas. Some of these receive attention through the press, such as the case of Phra Prajak reported by Taylor in Chapter 2; the vast majority remain local (eg Hirsch 1995). In the section on local politics of environment, three types of local initiative are examined: state-initiated, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and self-organisation of farmers. In Chapter 5, Apichai Puntasen discusses the role of Tambon councils to show the potential and limitations of local organs created by state machinery in the specific context of community forest management. A significant finding is the importance of local socio-economic context, notably power structures and relative differentiation of communities, in determining the effectiveness of bodies that are simultaneously state organs and people's organisations. Rapin Quinn presents in Chapter 6 a local case study that shows how NGOs have moved from rural development to environmental concerns. In so doing she reveals the micro-differentiation of environmental approaches, both by demonstrating the significance of local history and ecological context, and also by illustrating the different ideologies and approaches brought by four organisations from within the NGO movement. The range of NGO impacts and responses exemplifies the diversity of NGO environmentalism in Thailand, in terms of NGO analysis of problems and solutions, scales of action and analysis, and structural relationship with villagers, the state and commercial interests. Pratuang reports in Chapter 7 on recent networking initiatives in northern Thailand. The case study shows how local action in one watershed, initially based on the specific and localised issue of community forestry, has developed into a wider movement on grassroots watershed management and resistance to state encroachment in the guise of national parks.

Environmentalism in Thailand is largely a response to the depredations made on resources, livelihoods and quality of life by the country's rapid economic development in recent decades, and this is particularly striking in the rapid pace of urban development and environmental degradation. Often the tensions in Thailand's rapid growth path are represented in terms of the urban-rural divide, the assumption being that cities and their inhabitants have benefited at the expense of the countryside and peasantry. The environmental nightmare of Bangkok belies this simplification, and it is further challenged by the quite different environmental impact of urban development on various social groups and places within the city. In line with the thrust of this book in examining environmentalism in Thailand as a socially differentiated response to environmental problems, Helen Ross in Chapter 8 takes a "stakeholder" approach to show the range of players in the capital city's environmental politics and management. She reveals how Thailand's rapidly developing political situation has opened spaces for participation of new stakeholders. Charles Greenberg takes a similar approach for the Extended Bangkok Metropolitan Region in Chapter 9, presenting a social analysis of environmental costs and their social and geographical distribution in the context of peri-urban development. He frames responses in terms of "eclectic environmentalism". The diverse nature of environmental voices has both strengths and weaknesses - strengths in being encompassing and flexible, weaknesses in being fragmented and containing internal contradictions. The socially regressive side of elite environmentalism is illustrated in the case of proposals for an urban park at Bang Kachao. Both Ross and Greenberg conclude on optimistic notes, seeing the potential for increasingly participatory environmentalism and thus a broadening of the social base of urban environmental decision making. In Chapter 10, Tim Forsyth looks critically at the rhetoric and reality of government policy on industrial pollution. He shows how the country's industrialisation has brought with it quite new environmental challenges, with which technocratic management signally fails to deal because of the political dominance of pro-industry branches of government. The chapter is an interesting illustration of the differential environmental agendas within the bureaucracy, and it is a strong case for promoting the role of professionals and citizen groups in tempering the worst abuses. An interesting aspect of this study is that it moves beyond a simple state/civil society division, showing the potential and need for alliances between pressure groups and sympathetic individuals or agencies within the bureaucracy.

If urban and industrial growth represent the leading edge of development and concentration of environmental degradation, rural development and its environmental implications nevertheless remain the fundament of environmental activism in Thailand. In reality, many rural environmental problems can be linked to urban and industrial expansion, whether as a result of direct impact, as related in the case of peri-urban development in Chapter 9 and provincial industrial estates in Chapter 10, or in less direct demands on the rural resource base in the form of logging, energy development and other extractive economic activities. In Chapter 11, Anan Ganjanapan shows the links between politics of environment and politics of ethnicity in the context of highland development programs. Struggles for control over resources raise human and community rights issues most sharply in the case of upland minorities, many of whom still do not hold Thai citizenship. Ethnicity can sometimes divert attention from more fundamental material conflicts over resources between various social actors. Anan's discussion reinforces the point that environment lends legitimacy both to government agencies, for example in resettlement programs, and to communities in their struggle for resources. It also brings home the point made in other chapters about divisions internal to the bureaucracy. Roger Attwater's Chapter 12 shares with Anan's study a focus on watersheds, which have become a common unit for analysis,
management and activism - as also indicated in Chapter 7 by Pratuang. Attwater’s study of catchment management deals with a small watershed in Phetchabun, on the North-Northeast border. The stakeholder approach resonates with Ross’s Chapter 8 on Bangkok, in this case demonstrating the differentiated set of actors concerned with resource and environmental management in a watershed setting. The chapter shows how a stakeholder analysis can be used positively to facilitate dialogue between diverse interests in pursuit of improved watershed management. In Chapter 13, Santita Ganjanapan investigates the contrast between scientific and indigenous classification systems. While this follows in Conklin’s (1957) ethnological tradition, it is also central to the discussion at hand in showing the different meanings of environment and environmental degradation to different social actors. The contrast between indigenous and scientific classification offers a case of competing, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations of environment and legitimacy of claims to manage it. Chapter 14, by Nitasmai Tantemsapya, also shows the value of indigenous modes of resource use, but in this case with reference to the sustainable agriculture movement in Thailand. She discusses how sustainable agriculture has emerged as a direct response, if not yet a real challenge, to destructive mainstream practices. She also indicates the wide range of social actors involved in the movement, including some within the bureaucracy.

The wider picture thus shows a diverse environmental movement with multiple agendas, which are manifest from local to international scales. Like other social movements, Thai environmentalism reflects the social, economic and political milieu in which it is located. Concomitantly, it is instrumental in setting directions and limits to the country’s development path. As part of the emerging political economy, environment increasingly serves as a legitimising discourse for a range of socio-political actors. Environmentalism in its various manifestations is thus a response to, but also an influence on, the country’s ecological fortunes and emerging social forces at different levels.

Yet the very incorporation of environmentalism into a range of mainstream as well as peripheral discourses also indicates some of its limits within the bigger picture of Thailand’s development juggernaut. The very diversity of actors and material interests articulating environmental concern itself produces contradictions that limit the unity of environmentalism as a movement. As a legitimising discourse, moreover, environmentalism has a limited "shelf life" that may be approaching its use-by date in certain circumstances, for example as more powerful voices utilise environmental discourses to their own ends. Most powerfully, the dominant material forces behind Thailand’s ecologically unsustainable development path are so strong that environmentalism ultimately may do little other than to allow a tinkering at the edges. And finally, the internationalisation of Thailand’s economy within its regional context and through globalisation limits the role of a nationally bound social movement. To this end, internationalisation of environmentalism in a form that preserves the role of local voices is perhaps the movement’s greatest challenge.

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