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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.ARV.15.1.6
Available at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv/vol15/iss1/7

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ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Tim Forsyth

ABSTRACT

Much popular debate about social movements suggests that they are necessarily positive forces for democratization, and that alliances within social movements can be effective means of representing the interests of marginalized people. This paper critically assesses these statements in relation to social movements associated with opposition to the filming of the *The Beach*, and the debate concerning community forestry in Thailand. The paper argues that social movements may not be as representative as commonly thought, and that more attention needs to be paid to how social movements construct environmental norms as another means of politics.

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks critically at environmental social movements in Thailand. Much popular discussion has suggested that social movements may be positive forces for democratization and for resisting environmental degradation. This paper, instead, argues that such optimism needs to be matched with greater awareness of how social movements may also replicate, rather than resist, power bases. In particular, the paper points to the role of different social classes in environmental movements, and to the influence of movements on constructing environmental discourse. The paper does not suggest that social movements have no positive influences. But it is clear that many contemporary approaches to social movements as agents of environmental reform need to be countered by attention to how far movements may successfully represent poor and marginalized people.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section
summarizes current debates from the social sciences about environmental social movements—firstly outlining optimistic insights, and then describing more critical views that suggest that social movements may not be as politically representative as commonly thought. The second section then illustrates these arguments in relation to Thailand, and specifically the cases of social movements concerning opposition to the filming of the Hollywood movie, *The Beach*, and concerning the movement for so-called community forestry. The final section then analyzes these events, and draws lessons for how we can approach environmental social movements more critically in the politics of Southeast Asia.

**ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICAL REFORM**

In recent years, many social scientists and environmental activists have urged the active involvement of social movements within environmental policy. Much of this involvement is based upon the relationship between social movements and the establishment of a vibrant civil society. As Cohen and Arato (1992: 492) noted, “social movements constitute the dynamic element in processes that might realize the positive potentials of modern civil societies”. In this sense, social movements may be defined as examples of collective political activism by several sectors of society within diverse social arenas in order to enact change. They are often associated with, but not necessarily simply composed by, social movement organizations such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or grassroots organizations (GROs).

Writers focusing on environmental reform have echoed such views. Arturo Escobar (1996: 65), wrote:

We need new narratives of life and culture.... they will arise from the mediations that local cultures are able to effect on the discourse and practices of nature, capital, and modernity. This is a collective task that perhaps only social movements are in a position to advance.

And similarly, Peet and Watts (1996: 37,34), describing an approach to environmental politics using social movements known as “Liberation Ecologies”, commented:

movements are collectivities organized around common concerns and oppressions. But as well as being practical struggles over livelihood and survival, they contest the “truths,” imaginations, and discourses through which people think, speak about, and experience systems of livelihood.... Rather than “speaking for” subaltern
peoples, the idea is to help uncover discourses of resistance, put them into wider circulation, create networks of ideas. Rather than saying what peasant consciousness should be, were it to be “correct,” the idea is to allow discourses to speak for themselves.

Environmental social movements and organizations have also been linked to the rise of environmentalism as a force in international politics, and the role of international advocacy coalitions in enhancing environmental reforms in the developing world. At the 1992 Earth Summit, for example, negotiators urged that NGOs, community-based organizations, and citizen groups should be consulted whenever possible in order to strengthen environmental protection as a political objective and to enhance its implementation at the local level. Bryant and Bailey (1997: 190), for example, argued that environmental grassroots activists and NGOs represent a “natural alliance” against states and transnational corporations. Keck and Sikkink (1999: 215) claimed that international advocacy coalitions between environmental NGOs and campaigners in different countries allow “ecological values to be placed above narrow definitions of national interest”. And Princen et al. (1994: 226) similarly argued, “NGOs are increasingly prominent forces in framing environmental issues. They help establish a common language and, sometimes, common world views.”

These optimistic accounts of social movements in environmental politics, however, may be questioned for two key reasons. First, it is not always clear how far social movements may represent diverse groups in society, or become dominated by the most powerful groups, even if they are opposed to the state or business interests. Second, it is also unclear how far the political activism associated with social movements may co-produce a form of environmental concern—or discourse—that is also representative of dominant interests.

Social movements and representation

Environmentalism has always experienced a controversial relationship with social classes. Environmentalism has been commonly described as one of the classic “new” social movements—those movements typically associated with the resistance to the instrumentality of modern life in Europe and North America in the 1960s (see Touraine 1981). As such, new social movements are claimed to be different from “old” social movements based on historic class divisions because they concern topics such as environmentalism, gender, or racial rights which (allegedly) cannot be expressed in terms of class alone. Yet,
significantly, new social movements have often been composed of relatively more powerful middle classes who have sought to achieve reform for the sake of all classes. Giddens (1973), for example, claimed new social movements were "class-aware" but not "class-conscious." Offe wrote:

> New middle class politics, in contrast to most working class politics, as well as old middle class politics, is typically a politics of a class but not on behalf of a class (Offe, 1985: 833, emphasis in original).

This class emphasis within environmentalism has led some critics to suggest that its objectives are necessarily more oriented towards bourgeois, or middle-class, interests than working-class or peasantry perceptions of environmental concern. Historians of environmentalism in the USA, for example, have highlighted how perceptions of wilderness as fragile or beautiful have been linked to the emergence of urban middle classes (see the seminal work of Nash, 1982). Giddens (1994), again, has linked the desire to conserve nature to the anxieties about the perceived "loss of tradition" in late modernity, rather than to real and underlying environmental threats. Yet, the influence of such middle-class activism, "on behalf" of other classes may also imply that an environmental scientific concern, per se, is inherently class-based. The Marxist analyst, Enzensberger (1974: 10) famously commented:

> The social neutrality to which the ecological debate lays claim, having recourse as it does so to strategies derived from the evidence of the natural sciences, is a fiction.... In so far as it can be considered a source of ideology, ecology is a matter that concerns the middle class.

Such dominance of wilderness concerns in social movements has also been noted in regards to alliances between NGOs and grassroots organizations. Covey (1995), for example, in the Philippines found that coalitions between local, grassroots activists and urban NGOs often led to the loss of local concerns. Yet Lohmann (1995) also noted in relation to Thailand that such alliances always offered advantages and disadvantages: grassroots activists may often have to sacrifice total control over a campaign’s objectives in order to gain the benefit of an NGO’s greater political power and visibility.

### Environmental concerns and dominant discourse

Such statements have also been echoed in debates concerning environmental discourses and the politics of environmental science. In particular, some theorists of science have argued that the focus on
preserving wilderness within much mainstream environmentalism is linked with the adoption of so-called "balance of nature" or equilibrium-based notions of ecology (see Botkin, 1990; Zimmerer, 2000). Equilibrium-based approaches to ecology, in simple terms, refer to the belief that ecosystems illustrate principles of entropy, balance, and progression to pre-defined points of stasis (such as under Clement's theory of succession). Increasingly, however, these approaches have been questioned by so-called "non-equilibrium" ecology, which, in contrast, highlights insights from physical chaos theory and social debates about the construction of physical reality. Under non-equilibrium ecology, ecologists acknowledge the role of disturbance within ecosystems as a creative and influential force in ecology and landscape. There is also more awareness of how different social systems and values identify the time and space scales into which ecological change is seen to be "stable", such as in valuing wilderness as "pristine" or fragile (Adams, 1997). Importantly, according to some political scientists, such notions of stability and fragility may sometimes be used to legitimize policies—such as resettling villages, or forbidding some agricultural practices—that might otherwise attract criticism for their impacts on forest settlers or shifting cultivators (Leach and Mearns, 1996; Zimmerer, 2000).

There are several implications of these debates for the analysis of social movements in environmental politics. First, the environmental concern used by social movements to legitimize political activism against degrading state or industrial activities is itself socially situated and shaped by the activism of movements. Second, there is a strong relationship between the nature and composition of environmental activism by different classes and the scientific assumptions used to justify environmental concern. Environmentalism based on wilderness preservation may reflect equilibrium, or balance-of-nature approaches to environmental explanation, even if such approaches are increasingly questioned.

Reflecting such concerns, Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) have described "varieties of environmentalism" based on class differences, and have called for an "environmentalism of the poor" which focuses less on landscape conservation, and more on sustainable local livelihoods and environmental protection for poor people. Similarly, Satterthwaite (1997) has claimed that hegemonic environmentalism in many developing countries has been influenced too greatly by the so-called "green" agenda (of conserving landscapes, trees, animals) rather than the "brown" agenda of protection against industrial or urban
pollution as relevant to people.

Environmental social movements are therefore commonly portrayed as being necessarily beneficial for environmental policy and civil society. Yet, evidence suggests that they are also highly diverse, tend to be dominated by middle classes, and influence the construction of what is meant to be "environmental" in ways that are not often acknowledged. Consequently, there needs to be greater awareness of the inherent politics of different interests within social movements, as well as attention to how social movements influence politics between state, industry and society, or at the international level.

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND

Thailand presents a fitting example to consider the impacts of environmental social movements. Environmentalism has played a significant part in the struggle for more democratic forms of government. In 1988, a long-term campaign finally succeeded in persuading the government to postpone the construction of the proposed Nam Choan dam in a rainforest in western Thailand. Later in the year, a related campaign to ban all forms of logging within Thailand also finally succeeded in a logging ban effective in 1989. Events such as these proved that environmental social movements were increasingly inclusive of diverse sectors of society, for questions of everyday livelihood and accountability of government. Before these events, environmentalism had been promoted mainly by urban, educated citizens such as the Association for Wildlife Conservation of Thailand, or in specific locations such as the mountain of Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai where residents proposed a cable car. As Phil Hirsch (1997: 179) noted optimistically:

The environmental movement in Thailand has become a significant force in recent years.... The movement has drawn in a wide range of social, economic and political actors in Thai society, yet it has also maintained its role as a significant challenge to dominant patterns of development and vested interests embodied in the status quo. In this respect, environmentalism represents an opposition force, but one that has, ironically, been increasingly inclusive (emphasis in original).

Yet, such political activism associated with environmental social movements does carry its own bases of power, and the forms of environmentalism emerging reflect wider social changes and attitudes.
One important theme has been the perceived loss of heritage and tradition following rapid industrialization. Thailand has lost some 50 percent of its forests within the last forty years, with subsequent loss of wilderness, and biodiversity. Some observers have suggested these changes together have caused activists to equate the preservation of wilderness with a sense of holding onto a sense of heritage and order (Stott 1991).

Other concerns associated with environmentalism have been the criticism of the state for allowing destructive activities to continue, or for being implicated corruptly. For years before Thailand's first effective democratic government in 1988, opposition to environmental projects was often the only major form of public protest that the state would allow. Within the state, the Royal Forestry Department has been accused by activists of being an outdated and ineffective organization that was originally set up more than 100 years ago to oversee logging, yet now has the unfamiliar role of protecting forests. A further theme is the metaphorical use of conservation to express a sense of nationalism or autonomy over natural resources against their use or export by foreign companies. As is well known, Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country not to be formally colonized and this theme of independence has remained prominent in much popular political discussion.

Yet the sense of autonomy and localized control may also be directed at people within Thailand that seek to degrade environment. Such views may also influence the evolution of environmental discourse. The following quotation (from a respected environmental magazine published in English in Bangkok), presents the image of environmental degradation resulting from deforestation that is commonly adopted throughout Thailand:

When I was a boy, our village was surrounded by dense forest. There were tigers and lots of big trees, some two meters in diameter. When I was about 30, I saw the forest beginning to disappear, but then there was still water in the streams. Fifteen years later, the stream had disappeared too. Now we only have artesian wells which are so inadequate that people fight over them.2

This statement, while undoubtedly indicating a variety of problems experienced by rural people in many areas of Thailand, also reflects many wider—or middle-class or equilibrium-based—framings of environmental concern. Framings include the loss of wildlife; a sense of lost equilibrium or harmony in the countryside; and encroaching conflict
and strife as a result. Different quotations do not share these framings. The following quotation comes from a highland farmer (of the Iu Mien, or Yao ethnicity) in Thailand, who historically practiced shifting cultivation including the occasional burning of forest, and who traditionally lived high up in the hills rather on the plains beneath them. This statement apparently contradicts the preceding description.

It has been a saying in our people for many, many years that in order to get a regular, year-round long-term supply of water you need to cut down the largest trees around the village. I have seen it myself. It is only since we arrived in Thailand that we have heard people claim that this is not the case, and it is the Thai extension workers who tell us this (Forsyth, 1996).

The point of this comparison is not to explore which statement may be more accurate but instead to indicate that both are examples of different evaluations of environmental change from different experiences of hydrology. The first quotation may be seen to be more accurate and more resonant with the experiences of many environmental campaigners. Yet, the second statement also suggests that the knowledge claims about the impacts of deforestation on water supplies locally may result more from the powerful influence of the agricultural extension workers in highland regions than on the experiences of local farmers. Water shortages in Thailand are indeed common and urgent problems, yet there is much debate about how far these are actually caused by deforestation—as commonly claimed by lowland settlers and farmers—or by increasing demand for water through the growth in irrigation, industrial estates, and cities (see Alford, 1992; Forsyth, 1996, 1999). In such cases, the emergence of social movements that urge an end to deforestation in order to prevent water shortages may be considered to represent only some of the perspectives of stakeholders involved in water and forest use. Relying only on the information carried by social movements about land use and environmental impacts may therefore contain hidden political implications.

The following case studies consider in more detail the role of social movements in creating new forms of political power concerning the uses of natural resources in Thailand. The first case study summarizes the high-profile campaign against the filming of the Hollywood movie, *The Beach* in a national park. The second case assesses the campaign for community forestry—or enhanced public governance of forests—in general. The point of these cases is to illustrate the two key points of this paper: that the analysis of social movements in environmental policy
needs to consider more closely the class basis of who participates (and wins) in social movements; and that social movements influence underlying environmental discourse. Both cases may be seen to be part of general environmental activism rather than two specific social movements, but the two cases offer a useful opportunity to demonstrate activism that first highlights the “balance” of nature, and the alternative forms of activism that challenge this principle. The cases are described in basic detail first, and then the paper discusses them in greater detail afterwards.

Resisting “The Beach”

In 1998, the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) incited controversy when it allowed a foreign company to film the Hollywood movie, *The Beach*, in the two national parks of the Phi Phi islands in southern Thailand, and in the Khao Yai national park in the northeast. During the 1970s, a distinctive limestone cave in the neighboring southern province of Phangnga became known as “James Bond Island” after *The Man with the Golden Gun* was filmed there, and has remained a tourist attraction since. It was hoped that *The Beach*, starring such a Hollywood idol as Leonardo Di Caprio, and featuring a story about backpackers, drugs and self-exploration, would generate a new flow of tourism and publicity for Thailand.

Unfortunately, the film crew wanted to change the physical properties of the selected beach in Maya Bay, Phi Phi Leh Island. Bulldozers were used to widen the area covered by sand in order to shoot a soccer game, and sixty coconut palms were imported and planted on the beach in order to make it conform to the image of a tropical paradise that the team wanted. This was in clear contravention of the 1961 National Park Act of Thailand that stated it was illegal to damage or change any aspect of landscape in parks. The decision by the RFD therefore appeared to be a case of the government both bending national laws for international investors, and failing to protect natural resources.

Throughout the dispute, campaigners sought to represent the actions of the RFD in terms of an assault on a unique and fragile ecosystem. Indeed, these statements represent a strong application of “equilibrium”-based approaches to ecology. A leading campaigner, a woman who had been active for years as a freelance journalist and environmentalist, was quoted as saying:

If they were just shooting the film, that would be fine, but they’re going to take out the indigenous plants and keep them in pots in a
nursery. The place is beautiful but it’s not Hollywood’s idea of a tropical island. For them a tropical island needs coconut trees so they’re going to plant 100 coconut trees. This is a major ecological disaster.³

A particularly graphic editorial in The Nation, an English-language national daily newspaper, stated:

Imagine filming an ambitious Hollywood blockbuster on Phi Phi Island, one of the most beautiful islands in the Pacific. All the elaborate and crushing equipment and ravaging crew laying waste to most of what they touch. This is what is about to descend on Phi Phi if 20th Century Fox gets the final go ahead from the Thai Government to shoot The Beach.⁴

Much concern focused on the disturbance to the plants, sand and coral in the bay. Newspaper reports and information on Internet pages mentioned exotically named local plants such as Giant Milkweed, Sea Pandanus, Spider Lily and other beach grasses. Some journalists also suggested that introducing coconut palms to the island may be damaging because they may not be indigenous. A university biologist also expressed concern at the company’s restoration efforts, saying:

From years of experience and numerous experiments around the world, there’s never been a case where the altered environment can be completely restored.⁵

Meanwhile, the campaign also maintained pressure on the RFD and its high-profile director, Plodprasob Suraswadi, for alleged corruption in overturning national legislation, and also for accepting a payment of some $200,000 from the company to assist with cleaning up the site. Fishing communities and villagers on neighboring islands and the mainland also joined the protest, although newspapers reported that many villagers also supported the filming.

Although middle-class activists dominated the campaign, the national labour organization and the Assembly of the Poor, sent representatives to show support. Indeed, several organizations supported the presentation of a lawsuit against the RFD in Thailand, and some twenty civic and environmental groups also filed a petition to the US Department of Justice alleging that Fox had acted corruptly by offering the RFD a bribe.

The campaign effectively ended when the filming was complete and when the film was eventually released to poor reviews. Although the campaigners had failed to stop the filming, or succeed in getting the lawsuit heard, they did succeed in drawing attention to the apparently
undemocratic and highhanded actions of the RFD. The ecological claims of the campaigners, however, were questioned by a variety of observers. Two marine biologists from the USA wrote to Thai newspapers stating that, after their inspection of Maya Bay, “no coral appeared to have been damaged in any way” and that the plantation of coconut trees had been done in an “exemplary” way. They also drew attention to the fact that the filming company had actually removed some two tones of garbage from the beach area that had been left over some years by tourists. One of the biologists had worked for Reef Check, a non-profit project endorsed by the United Nations. They wrote to question

why The Beach was the target of all this environmental ire?... Who put on this show? Who scripted it? If they were concerned enough to put together a coalition of environment groups, why aren’t they complaining about the trawlers, the bombing of coral reefs in the Similans [neighboring islands], the nets that cover the shallow corals there, the rape of the rocks off Koh Phi Phi Don where all of the baby black-tipped sharks have been taken to be served up in local restaurants? Why are they not protesting the dumping by boats of sewage that is destroying the water quality and diving off both islands?  

This statement may be somewhat naive by failing to appreciate that such protests would usually lead to personal danger for anyone taking part. But the statement does show that the controversy surrounding The Beach is just one of several possible environmental concerns in the region.

Debating “community forestry”

The second case study concerns the long-standing debate about so-called community forestry. The term, “community forestry” refers to the governance and management of forest resources by local people such as villagers, rather than centrally through government agencies such as the RFD. Indeed, the words, “community forests” are sometimes used instead of “forestry” in order to indicate a separation from orthodox concepts of forest management and logging, and to acknowledge the diverse definitions of forestry that may occur outside plantation forests (see Somsak and Permsak, 2000).

Concepts of community forestry have been discussed and used for many years in Thailand. But the debate became more controversial after the logging ban of 1989. The ban was originally introduced in order to protect both the livelihoods of local dwellers who used forests and forest
products, as well as to protect forests for wilderness and biodiversity (PER, 1992). Under the logging ban, all forms of deforestation, including some forms of community forestry, were considered illegal, and so in 1990 activists originally proposed a Community Forestry Bill in order to clarify the rights of entry to forests. Conservationists, however, have been concerned that increasing forest access for limited agriculture may also imply allowing more damaging economic activities such as mining and logging concessions. The following debate, including various proposed drafts of the Bill, have involved many social movements, including a body of NGOs and activists seeking to protect forests against all further kinds of encroachment; and other activists who have seen access to forests to be a crucial element of democratization and local autonomy in Thailand (see Johnson and Forsyth, 2002).

The first official draft of community forest legislation was produced by the RFD in 1990, shortly after the passing of the ban on logging in 1989. Yet this first draft was criticized by NGOs, academics, and grassroots organizations for effectively maintaining forest management as a state monopoly. In response, a coalition of activists and NGOs such as the Project for Ecological Recovery developed a new “people’s” draft bill that asserted the rights of local villages to enter and use forests. This bill was referred to in the Thai Forestry Sector Master Plan of 1993, but in general, official action on developing “community” forests (or officially recognizing those already in existence) was held back during the early 1990s largely because of the re-emergence of a military government (1991–1992). During this period (and shortly afterwards), the government sought to reforest large areas of northern and northeastern Thailand, often including forcible resettlement of villages such as at Pa Kham in Buri Ram province. Such reforestation was often justified on grounds that it was good for environment or watershed protection (such as the *Isaan Kheow* or “Green Isaan” campaign). But critics suggested reforestation was also a quick way for the government to regain control over land that officially was state owned, or for entrepreneurs to make profits from plantations of teak or eucalyptus.

Eventually, in 1996, the government requested the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), a policy-making body composed of both government and public figures, to organize and draft a new version of the Community Forestry Bill, with participation of representatives from government, NGOs, academics, and grassroots communities. This NESDB version was approved subsequently by the Cabinet, but still caused controversies among NGOs over the issue of
allowing community forests within protected forest areas such as National Parks or specifically identified watershed protection areas. Some environmental groups argued that the then Prime Minister, Chawalit Yongchaiyudh, had proposed to allow community forests in official sanctioned protected areas as a covert way to allow limited business interests in forests. This led to a public hearing concluding that community forests in the protected areas were allowed on condition that communities proved that they settled before 1993 and that they used forests sustainably. Yet following this, and further changes in government, some more conservationist environmental groups and government officials within the RFD, notably the new Director General of the RFD, Plodprasob Suraswadi, argued in emotional terms that people and forests cannot co-exist, leading to yet more redrafting of the Bill, and more opposition from social development NGOs and activists (see also Pinkaew, 1997).

In 1999, a revised version of the NESDB draft was submitted to parliament along with 50,000 supportive signatures from across Thailand. In July 2000, this draft, along with the more conservationist environmental version, and four further drafts from other parliamentary parties, passed the first reading in parliament. The aim was to reduce discussion to these existing proposals. Currently, debate focuses on choosing which of these opposing versions to accept. One key debate, for example, refers to the definition of “community”. The “people’s” version proposes, in accordance with the 1997 Constitution, that a local community is defined as a “social group” living in the same locality and having the same cultural heritage, and that such a community can apply for that status after a minimum of five years experience in safeguarding forest land. By contrast, the alternative government version proposes that a “community” may comprise at least fifty individuals living in proximity to forest, regardless of how long they have been there or how forest is managed. Critics fear this latter scheme may allow commercial projects and plantations rather than the empowerment of villagers. Similarly, the two main proposals also differ on the power of the RFD to propose or veto land-management plans (see also Achara, 2000; Anan, 2000).

Yet, the debate about community forestry has also seen differences in the types of social movement and activism techniques. On the one hand, ironically, many conservationist NGOs have found themselves allied with the RFD because they both seek to exclude access to many forest areas by all actors, including local dwellers and farmers. The statement
of Plodprasob, that people and forests cannot co-exist, in essence represents a statement about ecological equilibrium that implies that irreparable damage may occur from people gaining access to forests.

One the other hand, however, this statement is widely challenged by various social development activists or farming groups who claim that local people may provide a better form of forest management than the RFD, or that disturbed forests are not necessarily degraded forests. For example, one representative of the Karen—an upland group who have been described as adopting various forms of community forests—commented:

Community forestry’s main concern is the livelihoods of local people and local communities.... Scientific foresters [such as the RFD] assume that humans only make problems in a protected area, but our work is to let outsiders understand how local people conserve the forest.... Community forestry is about decentralized management by communities, but conventional scientific forestry is about centralized management.7

And one other internationally respected expert in community forestry suggested the RFD—and proponents of so-called scientific, or plantation-based forestry—unhelpfully exclude less powerful people who often have equally valid, but different, knowledge of forest management:

Forestry education follows the curriculum and style of Western forestry education... it ignores the local knowledge.8

Such statements reflect various elements of social movement activism discussed above. Much activism about forestry in Thailand has often sought to represent, or “speak on behalf of” (see Offe, above), less powerful social groups such as those who may lose agricultural land to plantation forestry, or whose livelihoods depend on access to forests. Frequently these actions have acknowledged that allowing access to forests may also mean confronting conservationists. One campaigning journalist, for example, commented:

We must... stick together, work together, and we just couldn’t kick the poor out of the scene just to save the trees.9

But some proponents of community forestry have also adopted elements of green (or conservationist) discourse in order to legitimize their concerns. For example, one recent colorful book about the Akha ethnic minority (in English) in northern Thailand adopted the rather romantic title, Akha: Guardians of the Forest (Goodman 1998) because
the Akha have a reputation for protecting forest zones close to villages for spiritual purposes. Research on biodiversity and Akha shifting cultivation in general, however, has suggested that agricultural land tended by Akha is less biodiverse than land tended by other groups such as the Karen and Lawa (Schmidt-Vogt, 1996). Other critics have also pointed to the romanticization of the Karen as necessarily protective of forests, in order to demonstrate, contra-Plodprasob, that people and forest can co-exist (Walker, 2001). Such arguments, of course, do not suggest that the Karen or Akha should or should not be criticized for forest management, but illustrate how the debate about forest management in Thailand is increasingly commoditizing ethnic groups for the sake of the debate, but in ways that do not necessarily match the groups' own views about themselves.

Conservationists have also used similar tactics. In 1991 an Australian television documentary about forest disputes in northern Thailand used the title: “The Monk, the Princess and the Forest” (van Beld 1991) in order to focus on one particularly notorious conflict at Chom Thong where lowland villagers, with the support of a local monk and royal benefactor, were working to exclude highland farmers from the forest. The documentary romanticized the dispute by inaccurately describing the local forest as “rainforest”, and by claiming the dispute was a good example of grassroots resistance against environmental degradation. Later analyses have criticized this group as racist and inflammatory for their actions, and particularly for erecting a new barbed-wire fence with posts painted in Thai national colours around land used by upland farmers (Pinkaew 1997; Lohmann 1999). Indeed, the use of Thai colours in this context again indicates nationalism being used to define locality, or the boundary around which certain actors will allow debate to take place. The adoption of nationalism was again shown at a conference in Chiang Mai in 2001 when members of this conservationist group sought to delegitimize scientific statements from foreign academics on the grounds they were “foreigners” who wanted to impose their own views or “steal Thai nature from Thai people”.10 Some activists have also resisted the ratification of the international Convention on Biological Diversity because it may also allow foreign companies to “steal” Thai biodiversity. In this confrontational sense, the national territory itself is being used as a form of locality, and a device to include or exclude participants in debate.

Perhaps most directly, however, there have also been occasions when
some forms of political activism by social groups have been forcibly stopped by the state. In May 1999, for example, some 5,000 upland and lowland farmers demonstrated outside the provincial hall of Chiang Mai with a variety of demands including better access to Thai citizenship and an end to unwanted reforestation. Such protests represented a different form of environmental concern to that commonly stated by conservation groups, or those proposing an equilibrium approach to ecology. The protest was forcibly broken up by RFD and police. When Thai academics called for a more informed approach to forest rights and citizenship, the governor of Chiang Mai denounced them as “traitors”. In 2001, a coalition of pro-democracy groups also called on Plodprasob to resign because of his use of force to resist calls for community forestry, and his tendency to declare agricultural or settled land as “sanctuary forest” in order to legitimize resettlement. This paper has summarized only a few examples of conflicts about community forestry. Debates and activism continue.

ASSESSING THE HIDDEN POLITICS OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The case studies presented above suggest a few important lessons about social movements and environmental activism in Thailand. As noted in the introduction, much popular political debate has suggested that social movements are effective means of opposing environmental degradation, and of regulating the state. In addition, some writers have suggested that coalitions between NGOs and grassroots organizations may enhance the political strength of environmentalism. Indeed, much mainstream environmentalism under “new” social movements has been shown to be a coalition of different classes, or at least the middle classes seeking to act on behalf of other classes for the benefit of society at large.

The case studies, however, has suggested such views require more critical scrutiny. Two important points are worth noting. First, it must not be assumed that the social movements are indeed speaking on behalf of other groups. The campaign against *The Beach* spoke authoritatively and loudly about the immense ecological damage produced by the filming process. But, as shown in the case of community forestry, the arguments in favor of ecological fragility and equilibrium were more publicly opposed, and were also shown to be linked to various exclusionary land-use policies that are contested by a wide variety of scientists and poor people alike.
Second, it is also clear that the social movements themselves help construct notions of ecological concern that are presented as factual, yet which are highly uncertain and contested. Different participants in environmental social movements may produce different emphasis on the type of ecological concern. For example, if debates about community forestry are dominated by upland farmers and the campaigning journalist quoted above, then environmental policy may seek to address rural livelihoods and access to land rather than exclusion of people from land. Such framings of environmentalism do not suggest that orthodox scientific approaches to watershed degradation or deforestation need be dismissed, but that political solutions should be found within what is agreed about the impacts of deforestation and agriculture.

As a result of these findings, it is clear that the analysis of environmental social movements needs to be far more attentive to the construction of norms of environmentalism, or scientific concern, rather than simply looking at different political actors who support or oppose such norms. In the case of resistance to The Beach, the activists spoke with great confidence about the alleged ecological impacts of filming. But many statements are contentious according to perspectives of non-equilibrium ecology. For example, the statement of one academic above, that “there’s never been a case where the altered environment can be completely restored” is ironic because such landscapes are changing constantly anyway, and that some impacts from humans may be difficult to differentiate from those occurring naturally (see Adams, 1997; Zimmerer, 2000). Similarly, the overall framing of the criticism in terms of what was occurring to a beach already polluted by tourists removed attention from other local possible concerns such as overfishing or dumping of sewage. The dominant environmental discourse associated with this disputes was shaped by activists, and their choices concerning which strategies would gain the maximum political goals. (As the scientist from Reef Watch noted: “who put on this show? Who scripted it?”) It is also worth noting that activists resisting The Beach also included family members and close friends of NGO workers working for watershed conservation in the north of Thailand, who are actively seeking to exclude upland agriculture because of its alleged impacts on fragile ecology. Hence, there may be coordination of such “scripts” between both case studies.

Yet, while the critics of The Beach sought to resist filming by highlighting alleged ecological fragility, ethnic groups or marginalized people may be misrepresented. The case of community forestry
demonstrated that some activists and writers have sought to portray some ethnic groups in somewhat romantic terms as protectors of nature. There is much evidence already that ethnic minorities such as so-called “hill tribes” may not be as damaging to environment as commonly thought (e.g. Alford, 1992; Forsyth, 1996). But the implication of some descriptions of hill tribes as “Guardians of the Forest” indicate that activists are adopting pre-existing green environmental discourses in order to represent upland minorities, rather than seek to redefine such discourse on fairer grounds for them. Indeed, the social activism performed by minorities themselves—such as at Chiang Mai in 1999—framed environmental concern within terms of sustainable agriculture and an end to plantation forestry on agricultural land. But the police and RFD quickly terminated such activism, and the government quickly castigated academics seeking to highlight the causes of citizenship and land rights. It may therefore be very difficult to achieve, what Peet and Watts (1996, quoted above) called, allowing subaltern discourses to “speak for themselves.” Indeed, it seems such discourses are quickly subsumed or shaped by more powerful interests.

CONCLUSION

This paper has adopted a critical tone towards some popular debates about the influence of social movements in environmental politics in Thailand. The paper has argued that many optimistic approaches to social movements are overstated, and that there needs to be more attention to how far social movements actually represent marginalized people, and how far the needs and concerns of marginalized people are shaped by more powerful interests.

Most importantly, this paper has argued that greater attention needs to be paid to the construction of the environmental norms that are often used as scientific justifications for social activism. As shown in the case of opposition to the film, The Beach and debates concerning community forestry, concepts of ecological fragility and equilibrium have been used to add political urgency to campaigns to criticize the state, or to encourage land-use policies that exclude certain types of land use that affect wilderness areas. Yet, such claims have also been shown to be highly contested, and arguably influenced more by concerns to regulate a corrupt state; maintain national autonomy against ethnic minorities or foreign companies; and maintain senses of lost tradition and wilderness within a rapidly changing Thailand. As Zimmerer (2000: 357) noted:
Many abuses that have stemmed from conservation policies are rooted in the belief, held by policymakers, politicians, scientists, and administrators, of a balance or equilibrium-tending stability of nature.

Political reformers need to adopt a more critical perspective towards environmental social movements. Environmentalism has been associated with the “new” social movements, and as such arguably has overlooked the ways in which middle classes may dominate such movements. Grassroots organizations and poorer people may lack the political or communicative power to influence existing discourses to propose a reframing of policies to address their needs. Activists may willingly choose to adopt pre-existing—if inaccurate—discourses in order to add legitimacy and potency to their campaigns, even if ultimately such discourses do not ultimately match their concerns.

The lessons of this paper are that each social movement or conflict needs to be assessed for how far different sides may—or may not—represent different social groups. Social movements should be seen as any other form of political activism—with winners and losers, engaging with, as well as opposing, state policies. Only by understanding the innate politics of social movements, and their adopted environmental discourses, will the democratic potential of movements be fully achieved.

Notes

1 This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK, project: R000222767, ‘The local and the global: environmental knowledge and social movements in Thailand’.
5 Surachet Chetmas, Dean of Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University, quoted in Bangkok Post, 19 December 1998.
6 Bangkok Post, 18 February 1999.
8 Dr. Somsak Sukwong, Director, Regional Community Forestry Training, Center, Bangkok, quoted in Watershed 6:2 (2001): 12.
9 Santisuda Ekichai, Bangkok Post, personal interview with author, 19 March 1999.


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