

3 Trapped in environmental discourses and politics of exclusion

Karen in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in the context of forest and hill tribe policies in Thailand

Reiner Buergin

Trouble in 'paradise'

On 13 April 1999 the Director General of Thailand's Royal Forest Department (RFD) landed with his helicopter in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary (see Figure 3.1) at the place where the Karen living in the sanctuary had just started to celebrate an important annual religious festival. The Director General requested to stop the ceremonies. Soon after, soldiers burned down religious shrines of the Karen. From 18 April to 12 May, soldiers and forest rangers went to the Karen villages, demanded that they stop growing rice, demolished huts and personal belongings, and burnt down a rice barn. When these events became public, the commander of the military troops involved declared the operation a 'pilot project' of a new alliance between the military and the RFD, exemplary for their joint efforts to prevent forest destruction (*Bangkok Post*, 13 May 1999, 15 May 1999, 16 May 1999; *Nation*, 30 May 1999, 13 June 1999). Throughout the following months, efforts to convince the Karen people to resettle 'Voluntarily' and to prevent them from using their fields continued. Allegedly, military officials confiscated identity cards and house registration papers while they raided villages, arresting people unwarranted for days, and removing families without Thai identity cards. Even though the Senate Human Rights Panel criticized the incidents, the RFD and the military continued with their joint resettlement programme in November 2000, announcing further relocations of families as well as the preparation of the resettlement area for all the villages in the sanctuary (*Bangkok Post*, 1 December 2000, 7 December 2000, 11 December 2000).

For the Karen who live in the area that was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1974, Thung Yai is also a 'sanctuary' - a 'holy place' - homeland and base of livelihood for more than 200 years. *Thung Yai*, the 'big field'

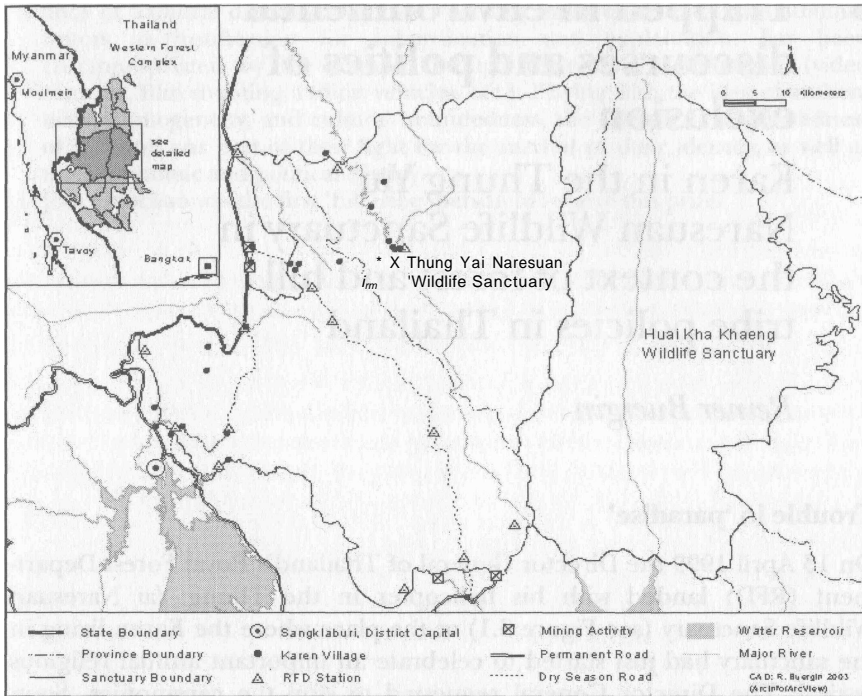


Figure 3.1 World Heritage Site and Western Forest Complex: Thung Yai Naresuan and Huai Kha Khaeng.

or big savannah in the centre of the sanctuary from which its Thai name is derived, is called in Karen *pia aethala aethae*, which can be translated as 'place of the knowing sage'. The term *aethae*¹ refers to the mythological hermits who, according to Karen lore, once lived in the savannah. As 'saints' and 'culture heroes' of the Karen in Thung Yai, they are honoured in a specific cult. Karen seeking spiritual development still retreat for meditation to this important place, where a big annual festival is also celebrated. It was this annual ceremony in honour of the *aethae* that the RFD Director interrupted.

Contrary to the image of the forest-destroying hill tribes deployed by the RFD and the military, the Karen in Thung Yai conceive themselves as people living in and with the forest, as part of a complex 'local community' of plants, animals, humans, and spiritual beings. Within this community the Karen do not feel superior, but rather highly dependent on the various other beings and forces. Living in this community requires adaptation as well as highly specific knowledge about the interdependences and rules of the community. Fostering relations with the various spiritual caretakers of the community is an important part of Karen life in the sanctu-

ary. Their support has to be sought continuously in order to use the forest. In these rules and norms as well as in their daily practice of livelihood, which is passed on and transformed from generation to generation, a rich and highly specific knowledge about their 'environment' is contained and kept alive. This knowledge as well as the 'real' and 'imagined' local history of the Karen in Thung Yai is crucial for their social identity.

From a 'modern' perspective many of these rules and traditions may be termed 'ecological knowledge'. This term emerged in the dispute about how to handle a 'global environmental crisis' and - together with terms like 'indigenous knowledge' and 'indigenous rights' - became an important concept for localist positions in international and national environmental discourses. Here, the empowerment of indigenous people and local communities together with the protection of cultural diversity are conceptualized as alternative approaches to the solution of the environmental crisis, an alternative to technocratic conservationism and global modernization strategies. In the context of these environmental discourses, the Karen in Thailand increasingly are conceived of as 'benign environmentalists'.

Apart from these different conceptualizations, the 'problem' of Karen people living in Thung Yai is determined by conflicting interests and objectives of the various actors involved. The local Karen are primarily concerned with their physical and cultural survival which is threatened by restrictions on their land use system and resettlement. On the regional (subnational), national and international level, conflicts regarding the sanctuary arise, on the one hand, between commercial and conservation interests, on the other hand, between conflicting ideologies and politics regarding 'development', social justice, and solutions to the environmental crisis. Understanding the present conflict relating to the Karen in Thung Yai not only requires consideration of the different interests of the various actors, but also exploration of the history of these interests and the changing framings of the 'problem'.

Local change and livelihood

Approximately 3,500 people live in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary. Most of them are ethnic Pwo Karen and were born in Thailand, predominantly within the sanctuary itself (Buerger 2002b: 189-195). The relation of the Karen in Thung Yai to the Thai state has changed frequently over time.

According to Karen traditions, their ancestors came to the area fleeing political and religious suppression in Burma after the Burmese had conquered the Mon kingdoms of Lower Burma in the eighteenth century. The first written historic references to their residence in Siam's western border area may be found in chronicles of the late eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, they received formal settlement rights from

the Governor of Kanchanaburi, and their leader was conferred the rank of Siamese nobility *Khun Suwan*. When the status of the border area was raised to that of a *muang* or principality - between 1827 and 1839 - the Karen leader of the *muang* was awarded the title of *Phra Si Suwannakhiri* by King Rama III. Since 1873 at the latest, *Phra Si Suwannakhiri* resided in Sanepong which became the centre of the *muang*, and nowadays is one of the Karen villages lying within the Wildlife Sanctuary. During the second half of the nineteenth century this *muang* was of considerable importance to the Siamese Kings, guarding part of their western border with British-Burma. Karen living there were consulted for the delineation of the border between Siam and Burma under King Rama V (Renard 1980: 20-24; Thongchai 1994: 72f).

In the beginning of the twentieth century, after the modern Thai nation state was established, the Karen in Thung Yai lost their former status and importance. During the first half of the twentieth century, external political influences were minimal and the Karen communities were highly autonomous regarding their internal affairs. This changed, however, in the second half of the twentieth century, when the Thai nation state extended its institutions into the peripheral areas. In Thung Yai the Border Patrol Police (BPP) and its schools were established in the 1960s. Since the 1980s various state offices supporting 'development' followed, as well as stations of the RFD and the military.

The permanent presence of ethnic Tai² in the Karen villages since the 1960s, as well as the activities of government institutions with the purpose of assimilating the Karen into the nation state, at first triggered and determined changes of the social, political, and religious organization of the Karen communities in Thung Yai. These transformations and impacts include the decreasing importance of matrifocal kinship and cult groups, accompanied by the emergence of a more household-centred and patri-focal village cult, the clash of a rather egalitarian and consensus-oriented political organization on the village level with a more authoritarian and hierarchical external political system, and the obstruction of the transmission of Karen identity to the younger generations due to the Thai education system in the villages. (Regarding the complex dynamics of these local changes see Buergin 2002a, 2002b.)

The economic organization of most of the households remained rather unchanged until the late 1980s and early 1990s, when restrictions on their land use system began to threaten the subsistence economy and material existence of the Karen in Thung Yai. Until today, most of the households in Thung Yai practise subsistence farming. They predominantly grow rice in swidden fields and some paddy fields, producing most of the basic provisions for subsistence locally. Within a territory 'supervised' by the village community, every year each household selects a swidden field according to household size and work capacity. The secondary vegetation of a fallow area - predominantly bamboo forest - is cut, and burnt after a period of

drying. After being used to grow hill rice, generally for one year, the field once again is left fallow for several years, while numerous plants growing in the fallow are used continuously. The long fallow periods of 5-15 years (and more) - now prohibited by the RFD - together with specific cultivation techniques support the long-term productivity of the soils. Assuming a mean fallow period of 10 years, the total agricultural area in the sanctuary, including fallow areas, accounts for about 1 per cent of its area. In swidden fields, gardens, and forests, a great variety of other plants is grown and collected. Fishing is important for protein provision. Small supplementing cash incomes are obtained in most households by way of selling chillies, tobacco, and various other fruits grown within the traditional land use system. Wage labour is of little importance in most households. The mean annual income per person in 1996 was below US\$50. (For an account of the social and economic organization of the communities see Buergin 2002b.)

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the relation of the Karen in Thung Yai to the Thai state was predominantly determined by categorizing them as 'hill tribes' and declaring their living place a national forest and protected area. In this context, the case of Thung Yai is only one example of a broader controversy on people and forests in Thailand. The controversy is rooted in conflicting interests involving the resources of the peripheral forest areas in the context of changing forest, development, and conservation policies.

Forest resources, modernization and deforestation

Western concepts of territoriality, nation state, and modernity were crucial in the process of the emergence of the Siamese nation state at the end of the nineteenth century (Thongchai 1994). The forests of Thailand, as valuable natural resources for the colonial powers and the regional elites, did play an important role in these processes of globalization (Renard 1987; De'Ath 1992). The emerging nation state claimed control over these resources early on by establishing the Royal Forest Department (RFD) in 1896. At that time, the RFD was made responsible for about 75 per cent of the total land area (Vandergeest 1996a: 161f) and presently the RFD still claims authority over almost half of Thailand's land area.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the main concern of the RFD was to allocate and control concessions for teak extraction, predominantly executed by British companies. Territorial control of the vast areas under the administration of the RFD was neither of interest nor feasible. There were only a few restrictions on local forest use, and forest clearance for agricultural purposes was even encouraged by the state until the enactment of the Land Code in 1954. It was not before the 1950s and 1960s that a remarkable shift in forest policies took place, now increasingly trying to restrict local forest use and to improve territorial control through the

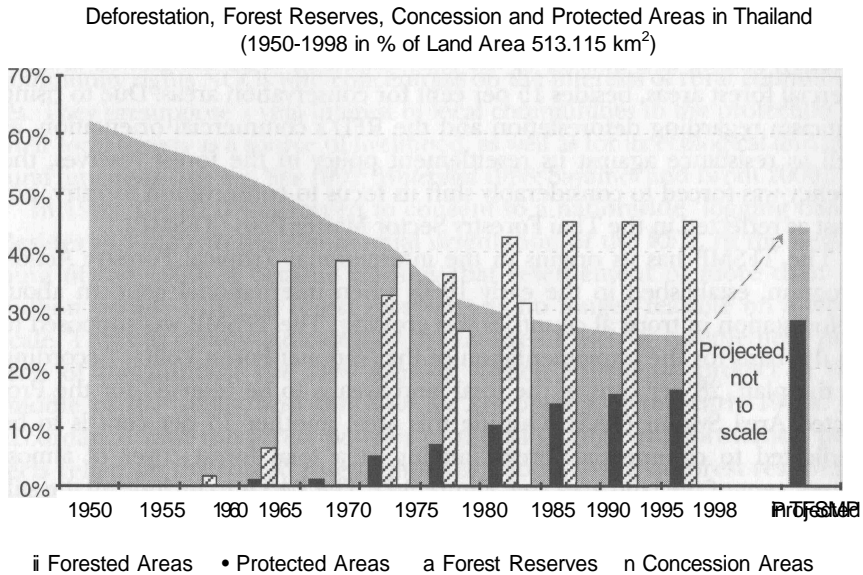
demarcation of forest reserves. (Regarding changing forest policies see e.g. Kamon and Thomas 1990; Sathi Chaiyapechara 1993; Vandergeest 1996a.)

After World War II, international interests in tropical forests grew, and conceptions of tropical forests as important resources for the process of modernization were to guide the forest policies of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and many developing countries during the 1960s and beyond (Steinlin and Pretzsch 1984). The commercialization of tropical forests for the sake of national and 'global' development was widely accompanied by the condemnation of shifting cultivation. The changes in forest policies in Thailand were mainly in reaction to these international forest policies. From the 1960s to the late 1980s commercial forestry was of major concern of the RFD. The new objectives and conceptions of forestry also influenced perceptions and politics of the state authorities towards the ethnic minority groups who lived in the peripheral, forested mountain areas and practised various forms of swidden cultivation.

Modern concepts of nature conservation had gained a foothold in Thailand around the middle of the twentieth century, together with modernization ideology. They were linked to efforts to shape a national identity. For Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who had taken power after a military coup in October 1958, the conservation of 'nature' became a matter of national interest, and the swiddening practices of non-Tai ethnic minority groups were an assault on the nation. Under his military rule, the legal basis for the establishment of protected areas was laid (Vandergeest 1996b: 260). However, the demarcation of protected areas at first proceeded slowly. While forest reserves altogether encompassed more than a third of the country in the late 1970s, and concession areas for commercial forest use made up for almost 40 per cent, protected areas accounted only for about 5 per cent.

The global spread of modernization ideology and the expanding world market after World War II influenced not only national forest policies, but also overall national development policy. During the 1960s and 1970s, Thailand's economy grew rapidly due to the diversification and extension of cash cropping for the world market propagated by the state (Hirsch 1987a; Phongpaichit and Baker 1996: 1-88). Commercial interests in the resources of the forested areas, concerns about national security, a national development policy based on the extension of agricultural areas, together with population growth, resulted in the 'colonization' of the peripheral areas and rapid deforestation. In this process, many farmers settled in areas that had formerly been forest areas and gradually were demarcated as forest reserves. While in the early 1950s almost two-thirds of the country was still covered with forest, the forest cover was officially estimated at less than one-third of the total land area in the early 1980s and the areas declared forest reserves were considerably larger than the areas actually covered with forest (see Figure 3.2).

In the middle of the 1980s, deforestation was perceived as a problem by



Sources: Kamon/Thomas 1990; Royal Forest Department 1985, 1993, 1995, 1999; Vandergeest 1996a; Pasuk/Baker 1997

Figure 3.2 Deforestation and forest areas in Thailand.

a broader public for the first time. The new public interest in forests and deforestation was due to increasing societal conflicts and contested resources in rural areas, but was also related to the growing international and national awareness of a 'global environmental crisis' and the accompanying upswing of international conservationism. The RFD now had to explain the rapid and ongoing deforestation of the country - which was pointing to the RFD's own failure - towards a conservation-sensitive urban public which was achieving increasing political power. At the same time, the RFD had to deal with some 10 million rural people, or about one-fifth of the total population, who were living 'illegally' in areas that had been declared forest reserves or even protected areas. In the early 1990s, almost one-half of these 'forest areas' were used for agricultural purposes, constituting about one-third of Thailand's whole agricultural area.

The Forest Department reacted with a new forest policy based on a zoning approach that had emerged as a prominent concept in international conservationism (Vandergeest 1996a: 168ff). The idea of zoning the country's land area according to suitability and function based on scientific criteria had already formed the basis for Thailand's National Forest Policy of 1985. It became central to the concept of the Protected Area System (PAS) as the main instrument of nature conservation, set out in the Thai Forestry Sector Master Plan of 1993 (RFD 1993).

From commercial to conservation forestry

In the middle of the 1980s, the RFD was still concentrating on commercial forestry, aiming at a quarter of the total land area to be designated as commercial forest areas, besides 15 per cent for conservation areas. Due to rising criticism regarding deforestation and the RFD's commercial orientation, as well as resistance against its resettlement policy in the forest reserves, the agency was forced to considerably shift its focus to conservation forestry, not least as reflected in the Thai Forestry Sector Master Plan (TFSMP).

The TFSMP has its origins in the international Tropical Forestry Action Program, established in the early 1980s when international concern about deforestation in tropical countries was growing. The TFSMP was supposed to be the basis for the implementation of the National Forest Policy. According to the plan, 28 per cent of the total land area is to be reserved for the Protected Area System (PAS). Outside this area, another 15 per cent is to be dedicated to commercial forests, aiming at a total forest cover of almost 44 per cent of the land area (see Figure 3.2). The PAS is to include all the still existing 'natural' forests, as well as all protected areas and watershed areas.

Generally, the TFSMP gives absolute priority to conservation objectives in the PAS and preferably would have these areas free from human settlements. However, with its background in international conservation discourse and pointing to foreseeable problems, resettlement is made conditional on the consent of the concerned population. This may be one of the reasons why the TFSMP was never passed by the Thai Cabinet. However, its fundamental objectives of designating 27.5 per cent of the land area to the PAS and another 16 per cent as commercial forest area was already passed in 1992 (Bhadharajaya 1996: 11).

The fact that, already in the middle of the 1980s, about one-third of the forest reserve area was used for agriculture - while apart from the forest reserves there was hardly any unclaimed land suitable for agricultural purposes - reveals the naivety or calculating manner of propagating the TFSMP as a solution to deforestation and 'encroachment' on forest reserves. It is not surprising that the conflicts between local communities and the RFD mounted up throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. In these conflicts over forests and reafforestation projects, a strong civil society movement emerged during the 1980s which, specifically in its more 'people oriented' parts, conceived the RFD as one of its main opponents. In the 1990s, the debate on community forests and the issue of people living in forest reserves became an important field of societal controversy. The outcome of this controversy is still open (see Brenner *et al* 1999; Buergin and Kessler 1999, 2000; Pearmsak 2000; RECOFTC 2002).

On the one side of this controversy are the Forest Department, conservation-oriented academics, and 'dark green' NGOs who concentrate on nature conservation. They conceive of the relation between people and forests predominantly as exclusive and problematic, and specifically reject human

settlements and community forests in protected areas.³ In opposition to these groups with a focus on nature conservation, there are various groups of the peasant movement, socially concerned academics, and 'light green' or community rights NGOs who concentrate on the interests of rural communities. They presuppose a vital interest of local communities in the protection of their local forests as a source of livelihood, as well as for its ecological and cultural functions (see e.g. Yos 1992; *Watershed* 1998; Sayamol and Brodt 2000).

In 1989, the RFD was forced to consent to a nationwide 'logging ban'.⁴ Besides this blow to the commercial orientation of the RFD, in the beginning of the 1990s it became obvious that resettlement of more than 10 million people living in forest reserves was no longer feasible on a large scale. This was clearly indicated by the failure of two big resettlement projects of the military: the *Isan Kiew* or 'Green Northeast' project in the middle of the 1980s, and the *Khor Jor Kor* project of the early 1990s. In accordance with the forest policies of the RFD, both reafforestation projects relied on the forced resettlement of people living in forest reserves - projected 1.2 and 6 million people respectively. They both failed due to heavy resistance. (See Perapong 1992: 82-185, 208-217; PER 1992: 68-77; Phongpaichit and Baker 1996: 83f.)

In this situation of contested competence and authority, the Protected Area System became increasingly attractive for the RFD. Protected areas were extended considerably from about 10 per cent in 1985 to more than 17 per cent of the land area in 1999, with the objective to enlarge up to 28 per cent. The appeal of the PAS to the RFD is mainly due to its roots in prominent international and national conservationism. But there is yet another aspect to the PAS which improves the chances of the RFD to succeed in establishing a conservation area free of human interference encompassing more than a quarter of the country's land area. While the majority of the people living in forest reserves are ethnic Tai, most of the people within the PAS⁵ are members of one of the various ethnic minority groups categorized as *chao khao* or 'hill tribes' who have a most precarious status in Thai society.

Forest people' and the Protected Area System

The term *chao khao* came into use in the 1950s to deal politically with various non-Tai groups living predominantly in the uplands of northern and western Thailand, which became of national and international interest at that time. Previously these groups frequently had been referred to as *chao pa* or 'forest people'. Some of these ethnic minority groups, like the Lawa, H'tin and most probably the Karen, have been living in areas now part of the Thai nation state before ethnic Tai groups immigrated at the beginning of the second millennium. Others, like the Hmong, Yao, and Lahu settled in the uplands of present-day Thailand since the middle of the nineteenth century, or immigrated since the early twentieth century like the Lisu and Akha. (For overviews on these ethnic minority groups see, for

example, McKinnon and Vienne 1989; McKinnon and Wanat 1983.) In the late 1990s, 'hill tribes' comprised about 840,000 people - or 1.3 per cent of the total population⁶ - and ethnic Karen account for about half of them.

Anthropologists and geographers have differentiated these groups into those living predominantly in the uplands at altitudes from about 400 to 1,000m above sea-level like the Karen, Lawa, H'tin, and Khamu, and those living at even higher altitudes like the Hmong, Yao, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha. While the former, comprising about 60 per cent of the 'hill tribes', generally cultivated rice in sedentary forms of rotational swidden systems in combination with paddy fields where possible, the groups living at higher altitudes in Thailand 'traditionally' practised forms of shifting cultivation with long cultivation and very long fallow periods, often including opium cultivation (see Kunstadter *et al.* 1978).

This model, based on ethnic layers related to specific forms of economic organization, became increasingly obsolete from the 1970s due to state control, national and international development policies, as well as population growth in the mountain areas and lowlands. The economic systems and settlement patterns of the 'highland groups' have changed considerably. Swidden systems requiring very long fallow periods are not practicable any more, opium production in Thailand has become fairly insignificant, and highland groups increasingly have moved to lower altitudes as well. Here the rotational swidden systems of the 'upland groups' came under pressure, even more so as ethnic Tai were also moving into the uplands. Meanwhile, ethnic Tai constitute the majority of the population of the uplands, formerly almost exclusively inhabited by ethnic minority groups (see Uhlig 1980; Kunstadter and Kunstadter 1992; McCaskill and Kampe 1997).

The reasons why 'hill tribes' now constitute the majority of people living in areas designated for the PAS are rather obvious. Historically the 'highland groups' predominantly migrated over the mountain ridges and adapted their economies to these living places. Some of them were forced to retreat into mountain areas by dominant valley populations, which to some extent is the case for 'upland groups' as well. These mountain areas in large parts are the 'watersheds' to be included into the PAS. Most of the remaining 'natural forests' are to be found in mountain areas as well, as the deforestation process in Thailand started in the plains and valleys, and is most advanced there.⁷ After conservation forestry received priority, these remaining 'natural forests' were increasingly designated national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, in many instances enclosing settlement and land use areas of 'hill tribes' (see Figure 3.3).

Hill tribe stereotype and national identity

Since the 1960s, perceptions of these groups and policies towards them were predominantly determined by a stereotype of forest destroying, opium cultivating, dangerous alien troublemakers that was applied to the

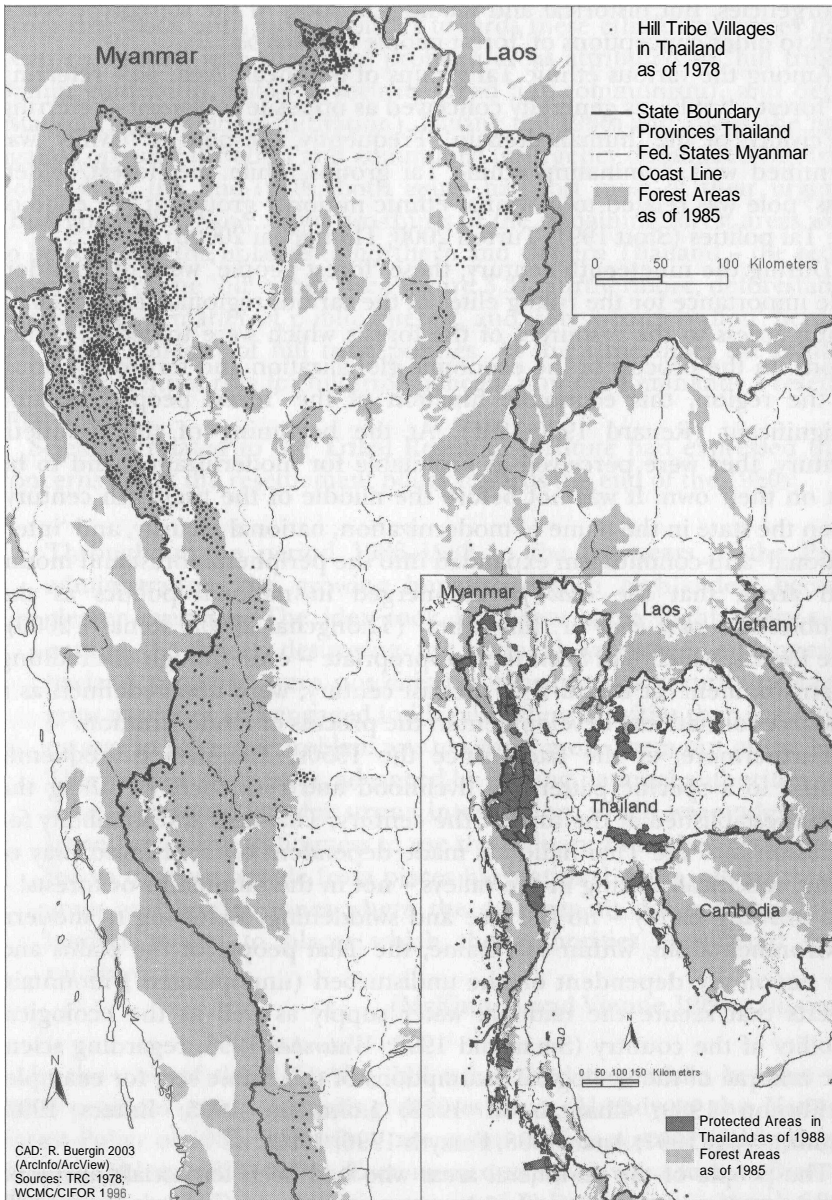


Figure 3.3 Hill tribes, forests, and protected areas in Thailand (Hill tribe villages as of 1978, forest and protected areas as of 1985/88).

social category *chao khao* (see also Pinkaew Laungaramsri's Chapter 2 in this volume). This stereotype was mainly derived from the Hmong ethnic minority group, as their shifting cultivation systems frequently included

opium cultivation, and some of them were involved in the communist insurgencies. But historical and ideological roots of the stereotype reach back to older conceptions of 'forest people' or *chao pa*.

Among the various ethnic Tai groups of Southeast Asia, *pa* - referring to 'forest', 'wild' - is generally conceived as opposite to *muang*- referring to 'civility' or the 'human domain'. Frequently, the pole of 'civility' was identified with dominating ethnic Tai groups, while the 'forest/wilderness' pole was related to marginal ethnic minority groups at the edge of the Tai polities (Stott 1991; Turton 2000; Thongchai 2000b).

During the nineteenth century, these 'forest people' were of considerable importance for the ruling elites of the various regional centres, facilitating access to the resources of the forests which were traded as luxury goods. In the process of the economic globalization and territorialization of the region, this economic function of the 'forest people' became insignificant (Renard 1980: 24f). At the beginning of the twentieth century, they were perceived as unsuitable for modernization and to be left on their own. It was not before the middle of the twentieth century, when the state in the name of modernization, national security, and 'international' anti-communism expanded into the peripheral forest and mountain areas, that the *chao pa* re-emerged in national politics as the troublesome *chao khao* or 'hill tribes' (Thongchai 2000a; Renard 2000). The forests, which had been their appropriate - even though discrediting - 'environment' at the turn of the last century, were now redefined as a resource for national development in the process of modernization.

Furthermore, at the latest since the 1950s, Thai-ness is frequently related to a specific pattern of livelihood and residence. Recalling the frames established at the turn of the century, Thai-ness and suitability for inclusion into the Thai nation is made dependent on a 'civilized' way of living, specifically: living in the valleys - not in the mountains or forests! - and growing paddy - no hill rice and swiddening! Referring to modern environmentalism, within this frame, the Thai people of the plains and the nation are dependent on the undisturbed (unpopulated!) mountain forests that secure the national water supply as well as the ecological stability of the country (Smansnid 1998; *Watershed* 1998; regarding scientific critique of the ecological assumptions of this frame see, for example, McKinnon 1989; Chantaboon 1989; Lohmann 1995; Enters 1995; Schmidt-Vogt 1997; Anan 1998; Forsyth 1996, 1999).

The people of the peripheral areas who had been territorially included into the nation state at the end of the nineteenth century, were now culturally excluded as 'others within' (Thongchai 2000a). In the shaping of the social category *chao khao*, cultural concepts of national identity, modernization, and conservationism were merged, defining the 'hill tribes' as non-Thai, underdeveloped, and environmentally destructive. Up to today this has been a widespread and influential image in Thailand (Krisadawan 1999), revived and exploited in the community forest debate and resource conflicts of the 1990s.

Hill tribe policies, resource conflicts and ethnicism

From the 1950s until today, policies towards these ethnic minorities have been concerned with the three problem areas attributed to 'hill tribes': opium cultivation, national security (read anti-communism), and deforestation (read swidden cultivation). During the 1960s and 1970s, the fight against opium cultivation and communist insurgency dominated hill tribe policies. By the mid-1980s, both issues had lost most of their urgency (Buergin 2000). Now, about two-thirds of the remaining forest areas were to be found in the uplands of northern and western Thailand - the settlement areas of the 'hill tribes' (see Figure 3.3). Furthermore, deforestation had become a matter of public interest, and 'forest conservation' became the major concern of hill tribe policies. At the same time, the military assumed a central role for hill tribe policies, now predominantly a resettlement policy.

Scientists related to the Tribal Research Institute had expressed their concerns about the resettlement policy towards the end of the 1980s:

Throughout the period 1986-1988 in the last years of the Prem administration, the growing impatience with highlanders became clearer everyday. The idea took hold that since highlanders were cutting the forest, destroying the national watershed, endangering lowland property, were not citizens, constituted a security problem, grew narcotics and engaged in illegal trading activities then the quickest way to solve the problem was to simply move them out of the hills. This barrage of charges, advanced by leading national authorities provided a *raison d'être* for strong intervention, which was underscored by an increasing willingness to use the military and other paramilitary forces to move people from places like national parks, other forested areas and border zones where the government did not want highlanders to be, to places which the authorities considered more suitable.

(McKinnon and Vienne 1989: xxiii-xxiv)

In the view of the RFD, the 'hill tribes' had meanwhile become the main problem group regarding deforestation. Already in the National Forest Policy of 1985, 'hill tribes' are mentioned as a major 'forest degradation problem' (RFD 2001). Even more outspoken was a former Director General of the RFD in a talk to a group of PhD students in March 1996, referring to the resettlement policy and the protection of the watersheds against encroachment by 'hill tribes' as the most important task of the RFD (Phairot 1996).

On the local level, with the spreading of ethnic Tai farmers into the uplands as well as the extension of cash cropping by some of the 'hill tribe' groups, induced and supported by the international and national

opium substitution programmes, conflicts between ethnic Tai and hill tribe groups increased during the 1980s, specifically over land, forest, and water resources (Waranoot 1995; *Watershed* 1997, 1998). In the early 1990s, these resource conflicts - often termed environmental conflicts - emerged as a national issue in the context of the debate over the Community Forest Bill and the so-called Chom Thong Conflict. NGOs established in local conflicts to support the interests of 'lowland' Thai farmers against hill tribe groups in Chom Thong District, together with the RFD and Bangkok based 'dark green' conservation NGOs, now tried to push through their objective to remove the 'hill tribes' from the watershed areas on a national level (Buergin and Kessler 1999; Pinkaew 1999).

The ethnicist traits of these resource conflicts increasingly came to the forefront, aiming at the exclusion of the 'hill tribes' in the context of a more or less outspoken, culturally defined Thai nationalism. This discourse refers to the image of the 'hill tribes' as destroyers of the nation's watershed forests, as well as to the cultural framing of Thai-ness as incompatible with residence in watershed forests and swiddening. For example, in August 2000, a leader of the conservation NGOs in the Chom Thong Conflict claimed that 'This land is ours. We were here before. Hill people are not our people (*chao khao mai chai chao rao*). If they were Thai, they would live down here in the lowlands.' This view is confirmed when the Director General of the RFD, on a forum at Thammasat University concerned with the Chom Thong Conflict, laments that the territory of Thailand is gradually being given away to non-Thai, and the Deputy Agricultural Minister argues that the problem was that '90 per cent of the hill peoples are not Thai' (*Nation*, 18 September 2000). In this perspective, the 'hill tribes', due to their place of residence and their way of livelihood, exclude themselves from the Thai nation. Even worse, they are threatening the welfare of the country by destroying its forests.

Since 1998, acts of arbitrary arrests, forced resettlement, terror, and violence against hill tribe groups seem to increase once more (e.g. *Watershed* 1998, 2001). In May 1998, the Director General of the RFD signed an agreement with the Supreme Commander of the Army, specifying the cooperation of the RFD and the Army to protect Thailand's remaining forests. In this agreement, the Army is given far reaching authority as well as financial support for operations in forest areas where 'illegal immigration' and illegal large-scale logging prevail, while the RFD is responsible for forest areas encroached by small-scale farmers (*Nation*, 9 May 1998; *Bangkok Post*, 2 July 1998). According to this division of responsibilities, the RFD will mainly have to deal with the Thai farmers predominantly living in the highly degraded forest reserves, while the military is supposed to deal with the 'non-Thai' ethnic minority groups, often living in protected and watershed areas. The Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary - a core area of the Western Forest Complex conceived of as the most important forest area within the PAS - was among the first target areas of

this alliance. The fruits of the agreement were to be observed in the 'pilot project' referred to in the introduction to this article.

Promotion of an 'exclusive' sanctuary

The idea of protecting forests and wildlife in western Thailand emerged in the mid-1960s among conservation-oriented officials of the RFD. Due to strong logging and mining interests, it was not before 1974 that the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary could be established. Not only timber and ore, but also the water of the western forests became of interest in producing electricity for the growing urban centres. The Nam Choan Dam was projected to flood a forest area of about 223 km² within the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary. The public dispute about this project lasted for more than 6 years, dominating the public debate in early 1988 before it was shelved in April of that year. The success of the movement against the dam was not only a remarkable victory for conservationism in Thailand, but also a milestone in the process of Thailand's democratization (Buerger and Kessler 1999, 2000).

The Karen living in the area to be flooded never had a voice of their own in the debate. Their interests partly were advocated by NGOs and journalists, but hardly appeared as an important argument, very much in contrast to the forests and wildlife. Pointing to the high value for nature conservation and biodiversity, the dam opponents on the national and international level had raised the possibility of declaring the area a World Heritage Site. This option would have been lost with a reservoir in the middle of the sanctuary. After the project was already shelved, student groups, NGOs, and academics again pushed forward the idea, fearing the dam project could be revived.

On behalf of the RFD, the proposal to UNESCO was written by two outspoken opponents in the Nam Choan Controversy,⁸ and in December 1991 Thung Yai Naresuan, together with the adjacent Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary, was declared Thailand's first Natural World Heritage Site. The 'outstanding universal value' of the site, in the first place, was justified with the extraordinarily high biodiversity and 'the undisturbed nature of its habitats' (Seub and Stewart-Cox 1990: 49). Despite this 'undisturbed nature', the Karen in Thung Yai were defined as a threat to the sanctuary, and their resettlement was announced for the near future.

Immediately after the declaration, international organizations in cooperation with national partners began to plan and project in and around the sanctuaries. The most important in terms of economic weight was a joint project of the World Bank and the Ministry of Agriculture, designed to improve biodiversity conservation and protected areas management in Thailand, this concentrating on the World Heritage Site. The pre-investment study for the project (MIDAS 1993) was disapproved by NGOs in Thailand who criticized its narrow conservation perspective, its top-down

approach, as well as the high costs of the project (on the controversy see Ewers 1994; Malee 1994; PER 1995). The negotiations between the World Bank, state agencies, and NGOs focused on the controversial issue of resettlement. The study had cautiously argued against resettlement, though, in a rather ambivalent way and giving absolute priority to conservation issues. Keeping the option for resettlement open, a whole chapter was dedicated to its implementation.

The Karen villages in Huai Kha Khaeng had already been removed in the 1970s when the Sri Namarin Dam flooded their settlement areas (Jorgensen and Ewers Andersen 1982). During the 1980s and early 1990s, villages of the Hmong ethnic minority group were removed from Huai Kha Khaeng and Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuaries (Eudey 1989). The resettlement of the remaining Karen in Thung Yai was announced in the management plan for the sanctuary, drafted in the late 1980s, as well as in the proposal for the World Heritage Site. But, when the RFD tried to remove them in the early 1990s, it had to reverse the resettlement scheme due to strong public criticism.

As resettlement was not feasible, the RFD prohibited the use of fallow areas older than 3 years. In the longer term, these restrictions necessarily will lead to the breakdown of the traditional land use system, as the soils under constant use lose their productivity. In some villages decreasing yields were already reported in the second half of the 1990s. In early 2002, the RFD started to plant tree seedlings on swidden fields (R. Steinmetz, personal communication, February 2002), forcing the Karen to choose between being charged as forest destroyers or facing severe subsistence problems.

The only possibility for the Karen to adapt to these restrictions, apart from trying to avoid them, seems to be 'modernization'. They may either try to increase the productivity of the fields, using fertilizers and pesticides - which most of them cannot afford - or right away turn to cash cropping or wage labour. Intensification of agriculture and cash cropping is already propagated by some of the government institutions and NGOs working in the sanctuary. But most of the Karen in Thung Yai reject these efforts and prefer their subsistence farming. Furthermore, intensification of land use, cash cropping, and market orientation leads to the destruction of their reputation as 'forest people living in harmony with nature' on which they have to base their claims to remain in the sanctuary.

Ambivalent transcultural resistance to politics of exclusion

In the late 1990s, in the context of the ethnicist turn of conservation policies, the RFD once again deployed a more offensive strategy in Thung Yai, leading to the 'pilot project' of the RFD and the military. Open resistance to continuous repression and acts of violence by RFD and military officials is difficult for the Karen, not in the least due to specific cultural

frames of behaviour and historically grounded inter-ethnic relations. In their encounters with state agencies they frequently feel they are without rights and powerless. They have the impression that their rights and concerns are not relevant in the national and international discourses about their home place. Currently, for the Karen in Thung Yai, advocacy by national and international actors is the only possibility of drawing attention to their situation, and the image of the 'benign environmentalists' (see Pinkaew Laungaramsri's Chapter 2 in this volume) is their most important asset in the national debate that will decide their future in the sanctuary.

In this national controversy the Karen in Thung Yai find their allies among 'light green' NGOs and the community rights movement. But for the Karen it is an ambivalent 'alliance'. A strong feeling prevails that they have to use arguments and ideas that are not their own while trying to justify their claims, even towards their Tai allies among NGOs and activists. The Karen conceive these 'communication problems' not predominantly as language problems - even though many of the elder Karen have only limited competence in Thai language - but attribute them to different cultural contexts.

Almost all of the Karen in Thung Yai believe that resettlement is neither justified nor desirable, but they do take different positions towards the external influences and the resettlement threat. There is a rather small group, including most of the Phu Yai Ban (the village head in the context of the state administrative system), which is open for 'moderate modernization' without having to give up Karen identity. The vast majority is rather more reluctant to 'modernize', preferring to 'live like our grandparents did' as a common saying goes.⁹ Among them there are marked differences in their reaction to the external influences. A rather big group, who may be labelled 'extroverted traditionalists', including many influential elders as well as young people, is trying to shape the changes and resist the threats. They do so by trying to strengthen Karen culture and identity in an open-minded manner, as well as seeking support outside of Thung Yai. Another group of more 'introverted traditionalists' focuses on strengthening 'traditional' Karen culture too, but invokes to a higher degree millenarian and more 'exclusive' frames of Karen culture, rather avoiding transcultural exchange and support.

Despite these differences of position and strategy, all these groups wish to remain in their villages as well as to protect their culture and living place. Furthermore, they all refer to the same cultural frame of values and objectives regarding a 'decent' life appropriate for a Karen living in Thung Yai. Sharpened, but not created in the clashes with external actors and influences, this conception of specific Karen values and objectives focuses on the concepts of 'modesty' in opposition to 'greed', 'harmony' in contrast to conflict, as well as 'spiritual development' versus 'material development'. These concepts and objectives, to a high degree, reflect

common Buddhist conceptions, but are also deeply rooted in narratives and images that seem to be more specific to the Karen in Thung Yai. The counterpart to these values and objectives is quite obvious and explicitly named by the Karen as such. It is primarily the 'modern' Thai society which is increasingly intruding into their traditional living places and spaces, threatening their cultural identity and physical existence.

Shifting frames in discursive hegemonies

Looking back, several major reframings of the 'problem' Karen in Thung Yai and their relations to the Thai state emerge (see also Buergin 2003). The first reframing occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century when the modern territorial nation state was established, and the Karen in Thung Yai were spatially included into the 'geo-body' of the Siamese nation state. The second reframing took place in the context of the nation building during the first half of the twentieth century, when Thai national identity was based on cultural features like language, Buddhism, monarchy, and a specific way of living. The Karen, who had been included into the state spatially, now were culturally excluded from it and disappeared from the political agenda. In the middle of the twentieth century, the third reframing was related to international and national modernization ideology and anti-communism. While the 'frontier-areas' were included in the national economy and became the base for economic development, the people living there were conceived of as 'backward troublemakers' in conflict with national interests who had to be monitored and 'modernized'. The fourth reframing, since the 1980s, predominantly took place in concepts of international and national conservationism. In this context the remaining 'wilderness' has to be protected against humans, but as 'wilderness' is claimed by the 'global community' and supposed to be managed sustainably. In this frame, the Karen in Thung Yai are an alien element in a global *natural* heritage, and have to be carefully controlled if removal is not possible.

The alternative image of 'indigenous people in harmony with nature' that emerged in the environmental dispute to question the dominating conservationist framing as well as global modernization approaches has to face reproaches from various sides as being partly fictional, over-generalizing, and/or violating people's rights to development (regarding the case of the Karen in Thailand see, for example, Walker 1999, 2001).¹⁰ These objections are largely reasonable, and helpful if they serve to perceive actual situations without obscuring ideological frameworks. The criticism of the image is more ambivalent when replacing a stereotype by another one, as, for example, that of the 'rural poor craving the benefits of modernization'. It may even be true that the image of the Karen as 'benign environmentalists' has intruded government circles in Thailand, but the case of Thung Yai does not indicate that this image is very influential there.

The external discourses determining the status of Thung Yai have long been those of international and national elites, the framing being the result of negotiations of interests and shifting power relations. In these processes, the international and national discourses became interrelated and mutually intelligible to a high degree. The Karen in Thung Yai have never participated in these external discourses and their local discourse is largely irrelevant on the national and international level.

In the national and international discourses, the Karen in Thung Yai are predominantly conceived of as a disruptive factor in the sanctuary, as a threat to wildlife and forests. If they uneasily try to invoke the image of the 'benign environmentalists' - which is the only position in these discourses that to some extent accounts for their rights and self-perception - they are on the one hand trapped by commitments to external conceptions of 'tradition', on the other hand, they have to face reproaches of reaping benefits of a deceptive stereotype. The only chance to escape these external ascriptions and discursive hegemonies seems to be the representation of the local Karen in the disputes and decisions about their living place.

All discourses about Thung Yai - on the 'local', 'national', and 'global' level - refer to the area as being an important part of the 'living space' of the respective 'community', worthy of and in need for protection. Assuming there is something like a 'national' or 'global community' with a respective living space and respective rights to this space, Thung Yai is a case of a conflict of interests that has to be mediated politically. The concerned national and international 'communities' have committed themselves to principles of democracy and human rights, in the case of Thailand's new constitution conceding far-reaching rights of local communities to their local resources and cultural self-determination (Thailand 1997). Asked whether they would agree to resettle if offered 'higher living standards' outside of the sanctuary, more than 98 per cent of the Karen expressed their wish to stay in their home places (Buergin 2002b).

To conceive of the Karen as benign environmentalists may be well-meaning and, in the case of Thung Yai, is furthermore substantiated by the studies done there so far (Pinkaew 1992; Ambrosino 1993; WFT 1993, 1996; Chan-ek, Kulvadee and Ambrosino 1995; Maxwell 1995; Steinmetz 1996, 1999; Steinmetz and Mather 1996; Kulvadee 1997; Buergin 2001, 2002a, 2002b). But a refraining of the situation in Thung Yai that comes up to the normative obligations of the concerned national and international communities should rather be based on the right of the Karen living there to defend their own case (see also McKinnon's Chapter 4 in this volume), as well as from the appreciation of their different conceptions and values. As far as I can see, neither commitments of the national and international community to democracy and human rights nor possible threats to 'their' heritage warrant the forced removal of the Karen from Thung Yai. By way of recognizing their legitimate settlement and land use rights, supporting

their sustainable land use system, integrating them into the management of the sanctuary, and securing their right to cultural self-determination, the forests and the wildlife in Thung Yai will probably be protected most effectively.

Notes

- 1 In Thung Yai *aethae* are conceived as pre-Buddhist 'hermits' with supernatural powers living a contemplative and ascetic life. The Karen term *aethae* generally is translated with the Thai term *rysi*, supposed to refer to pre-Buddhist hermits or ascetics in the Mon kingdom of Haripunjaya (see Turton 2000: 26).
- 2 The term 'Tai' refers to linguistic/ethnic categories, while 'Thai' indicates aspects of nationality.
- 3 The Director General who broke up the ceremony in Thung Yai had rather succinctly expressed his position on the occasion of an international seminar on community forestry when he declared in September 1998: 'Man cannot co-exist with the forest.' To justify the position of the RFD of not tolerating community forests in protected areas he further explained: 'Humans can't live in the forest because human beings aren't animals. Unlike us, animals can adapt themselves to the wild or any environment naturally' (*Bangkok Post*, 24 September 1998).
- 4 Due to heavy floods and landslides in the south of the country in November 1988, attributed primarily to deforestation and the establishment of rubber plantations, more than 250 people had died, forcing the Government to declare a logging ban. Regarding the events leading to the ban see PER 1992: 14f. For an analysis of the arguments on the causes of the flooding see McKinnon 1997.
- 5 Estimates regarding people living in forest reserves altogether range from 10 to 12 million, those for protected areas are considerably lower. In 1998 M.R. Smansnid Svasti, then Vice President of the Dhammanaat Foundation, referred to 591,893 people living in National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries (*Watershed* 1998: 13). In 2001 the RFD claimed 460,000 households to be living in 'protected forests' (*Bangkok Post*, 26 March 2002).
- 6 At present, only about one-third of the 'hill tribe' people do have the status of Thai nationals (*Bangkok Post*, 25 July 2001). Therefore, most of them even cannot refer to the existing legal provisions regarding their settlement and land use rights. Most of them, at best, do have a so-called 'Blue ID Card' and *thor ror 13* residence permits, entitling them to stay in Thailand legally for 5 years and restricting freedom of movement to the district of registration. Contrary to the integration policy announced by the Government, the bureaucracy responsible for the naturalization of ethnic minority people is rather restrictive regarding these groups. Moreover, the discretionary powers of the officials in the process of granting citizenship, quite often, seem to be used for personal profit. (See, for example, Deuleu and Naess 1997; *Nation*, 23 July 1999; *Bangkok Post*, 31 December 2000; 19 July 2001; 2 September 2001.)
- 7 In the early 1960s, the forests in northern and western Thailand - the settlement areas of the 'hill tribes' - accounted for about 55 per cent of the total forest area. This share increased continuously up to about 68 per cent in the early 1980s, and has remained constant at about 69 per cent until the late 1990s according to RFD statistics (RFD 1985, 1995, 1999).
- 8 Belinda Stewart-Cox, who did research as a biologist in Huai Kha Khaeng, and Seub Nakhasathien, chief of the Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary. Seub

committed suicide on 1 September 1991, out of despair about missing support within the RFD. Belinda Stewart-Cox (1998) commented on his death with grave reproaches towards his superiors at the RFD:

Seub's death was suicide - an act of despair - but it might as well have been murder. When he needed the support of his superiors to do the job they had asked him to do - stop the hunting and logging that was rampant in Huai Kha Khaeng at that time, master-minded by police and military officials - it was withheld. A terrible betrayal.

- 9 This idiomatic expression does not necessarily refer to a fixed set of behaviour or norms attributed to the ancestors - most of the people are well aware of the considerable changes over the last 50 years (see Buergin 2002a; 2002b) - but rather implies a wish to retain a primarily subsistence-oriented way of life, based on values supposed to be crucial for their existence in Thung Yai (see below).
- 10 In these discourses the stereotype of the 'indigenous benign environmentalists' ascribed to these groups is criticized from both sides of the political spectrum. On the one side it is argued that, if ever they have been 'benign environmentalists', development - not to be denied to them - will deprive them of this status. On the other side the concept of 'indigenous-ness' or ethnicity is suspicious for its segregating and discriminating potential. Both positions of critique - as well as the stereotype itself - tend to deny these groups rights to self-determination. While the first position generally identifies 'development' with the specific cultural pattern of 'modernization', the second one often tends to neglect actual differences between social groups and their importance for social/'cultural' identities.