Conflicts about Biocultural Diversity in Thailand:

Karen in the Thung Yai Naresuan World Heritage Site Facing Modern Challenges[1]

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Quick Facts

Country: Thailand

Geographic Focus: The Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary covering 320,000 ha is located on the western international border with Burma and is the core area of the Western Forest Complex, Thailand's largest remaining forest area.

Indigenous Peoples: People of the Karen ethnic minority group have been living in the area declared a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1974 for at least 200 years. Since the 1970s, various villages of ethnic minority groups, including Karen, have been resettled. In the late 1990s, some 3,000 almost exclusively ethnic Pwo Karen lived in the Wildlife Sanctuary. The remaining villages are threatened by resettlement and restrictions on their traditional sustainable land use system.

Author Information

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Deforestation, Conservation and Community Forests

Biodiversity conservation in Thailand has focused on the establishment of protected areas that are controlled by the government. This modern approach to nature conservation gained strength in the 1950s during a period of pronounced nationalism, and resulted from the predominant international trend of presupposing an inherent incompatibility between nature conservation and resource use by local communities. Legal provisions for protected areas (PAs) were created in the 1960s, and the Royal Forest Department (RFD) was made responsible for their creation and management.

During the first half of the 20th century, the main concern of the RFD was to allocate concessions for teak extraction. After World War II, tropical forests were increasingly seen as important resources for both industrialized and developing countries, and swidden cultivation was stigmatized as inefficient and detrimental to tropical forest resources. By the mid-1960s, almost 40% of Thailand's land area was assigned to concession areas, and swidden cultivation was prohibited. At the same time, the demarcation of protected areas had begun, although it proceeded slowly at first. The global spread of modernization and the expanding world market was also influencing national agricultural policies. Thailand's rapid economic growth during the 1960s and 1970s was based on the state-propagated extension of agricultural areas for the cultivation of cash crops for the world market. Along with a fast growing population, this policy resulted in rapid deforestation.

From 1950 to the early 1980s, the forest cover in Thailand decreased from almost two-thirds to less than one-third of the country, and deforestation was increasingly perceived as a problem. The RFD had then to explain this rapid deforestation to a conservation-sensitive

1 The data and references on which this paper is based can be found in Buergin (2002).

urban public with growing political power. It also had to deal with some 10 million rural people — about one-fifth of the total population — who were living "illegally" in areas declared forest reserves. Of these "forest areas," more than one-third were used for agriculture, constituting at least one-third of Thailand's entire agricultural area. In this situation of contested competence and growing resistance, the RFD concentrated on implementing a Protected Area System (PAS) that was to encompass 28% of the total land area of Thailand (Fig. 1).

The issue of people in forest reserves, however, became an important societal controversy over social justice, resource control, land rights, and democratization (see Buergin and Kessler 2000). On the one side, the Forest Department together with primarily conservation-oriented NGOs and academics, concentrated on conservation issues. For them "people and forests cannot co-exist" and forest protection required the removal of human settlements. On the other side, peasant-movement groups, socially concerned academics, and people-oriented NGOs focused on the interests and problems of rural communities. They presupposed a vital interest of local communities in protecting their forests as a source of livelihood, as well as for ecological and cultural functions.

To a large extent, this controversy developed in the context of drafting a Community Forest Bill (CFB), which was fiercely disputed throughout the 1990s (see Brenner *et al.* 1999). A so-called "people's draft" was submitted to Parliament and passed in October 2001, but met heavy resistance in the Senate. It was adopted in March 2002, but only with significant revisions, triggering renewed national and international debates. In December 2007, the National

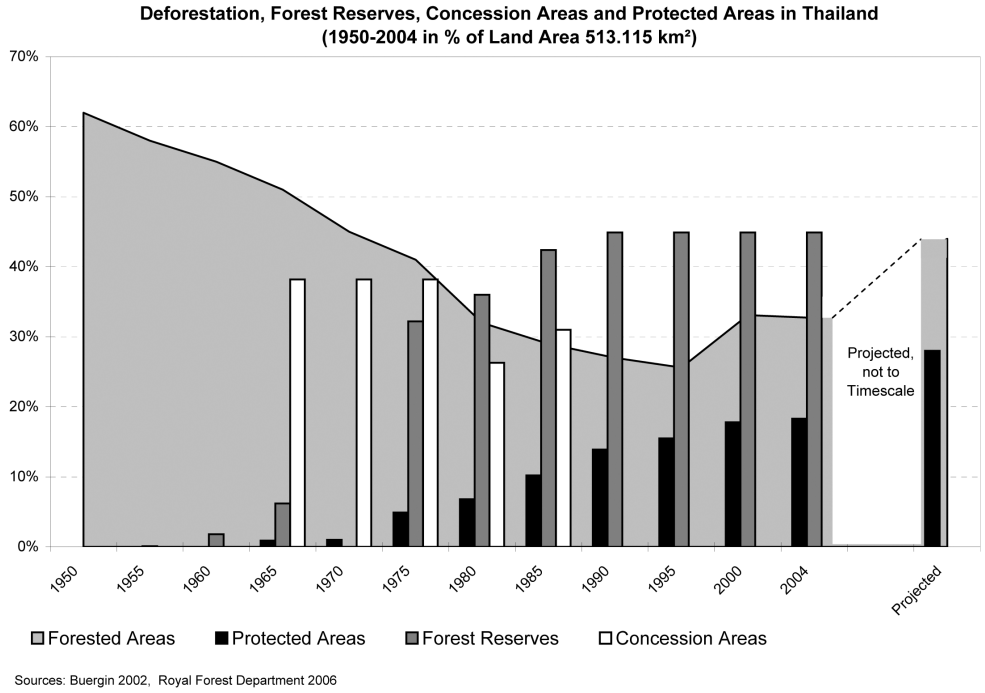

Figure 1. After World War II, the forest cover in Thailand decreased rapidly due to logging and the extension of agricultural areas. Until the 1980s, most forest areas where designated as concession areas. It was not until the 1970s that forest reserves and protected areas were increasingly demarcated. The discrepancy between areas declared forest reserves and real forested areas reflects growing societal conflicts about forests since the 1980s. The implementation of a Protected Area System (PAS) free of human settlement that encompasses 28% of the land area of Thailand complies with national and international calls for nature conservation. It threatens livelihoods and cultural identities of many people living in or close to protected areas, which predominantly are people of ethnic minority groups stereotyped as 'hill tribes'.

Legislative Assembly (set up after a military coup in 2006) approved the Bill just before dissolving, leaving its finalization to a new government. Specifically, the problem of communities and community forests in protected areas remained unsolved and controversial.

Protected Areas and "Hill Tribes"

The particularly problematic issue of ethnic discrimination is rarely addressed in the debate on forest legislation; most of the people living in areas designated for the PAs are members of "hill tribes", who have a precarious status in Thai society. The term came into use in the 1950s as a generic name for various non-Tai[2] ethnic groups living predominantly in the uplands of northern and western Thailand. It soon acquired a negative stereotype, being associated with destruction of the forest, the cultivation of opium, and dangerous non-Thai troublemakers. 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 their urgency, but forest conservation had risen to a high level of public interest. The settlement areas of hill tribes were those areas where most of the remaining forests were to be found, and the hill tribes were conceived as the main "problem group" regarding deforestation. Forest conservation came to dominate hill tribe policies, and resettlement was the preferred solution. On ethnic minority groups and hill tribe policies in Thailand see Buergin (2000).

On the local level as well, conflicts between ethnic Tai and hill tribe groups rose during the 1980s. Resource conflicts over land, forests, and water occurred as ethnic Tai farmers spread into the uplands, and as the populations of hill tribes grew and some of them took up cash cropping. Increasingly in the late 1990s, ethnic minority groups in the uplands were arbitrarily arrested, forcibly resettled, and terrorized.

In the international debates on environment, development, and human rights, however, new conceptions of "traditional" or "indigenous" people[3] gained strength; increasingly conceiving them as promising partners in biodiversity conservation rather than as foes. In Thailand, likewise, an alternative image of "benign environmentalists" emerged in the 1990s for at least some of the ethnic minority groups in the uplands; prominent among them the Karen. In contrast to the stereotype of the forest-destroying hill tribes, which still prevails in Thailand, the Karen are increasingly referred to as "people living in harmony with nature." This alternative stereotype — in Thailand as well as on the international level — meets with reproaches from various sides as being partly fictional, over-generalizing, or violating people's rights to development. For the Karen, however, who never had access to the discussions in which these stereotypes were framed, this image of the benign environmentalists is one with which they can identify, at least to some degree. And for many of them who live in forests and protected areas it has become their most important asset in the national and international debates that will decide their future.[4]

History and Identity of Karen in Thung Yai

The case of the Karen groups living in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, on which the following account focuses, received considerable national and international attention, but cannot be easily generalized. In the late 1990s, some 3,000 people were living in Thung Yai. They were almost exclusively ethnic Pwo Karen, most of them born in

2 The term "Tai" is conventionally used to refer to linguistic or ethnic categories, while "Thai" indicates aspects of formal nationality and citizenship.
3 On problems regarding the concept of 'indigenous people' in Asia see specifically Kingsbury (1998).
4 Regarding ambiguities of these stereotypings see Buergin (2003).

Thailand and within the sanctuary. Their ancestors had come to the area in the 18th century fleeing political and religious suppression in Burma. In the early 19th century, their leader was conferred a Siamese title of nobility as head of a principality with considerable importance for the Siamese Kings, as it guarded part of their western border with British-Burma. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century, after the establishment of the modern Thai nation state, that the Karen in Thung Yai lost their status. When they reappeared on the political scene towards the end of the 20th century, it was as forest encroachers and illegal immigrants.

Figure 2. Karen village in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary. In the late 1990s, some 3,000 people were living in Thung Yai. They were almost exclusively ethnic Pwo Karen.

Figure 3. Ceremony for the guardian of the forest *rukkhajue*. As long as matrifocal cult groups were crucial for Karen social organization, ritual heads called *thei ku* fostered the relationship between each individual village and the "spirit of trees" *rukkhajue*. After the weakening of the matrifocal cult groups due to external influences, the Karen have started to pay respect to *rukkhajue* on a regional level as part of a big festival where all villages participate. This festival takes place in the big savannah (*thung yai*) to honour the *aethae*, mythological hermits who are important for the identity of the Karen. In Karen language this savannah is called *pia aethala aethae*, which may be translated as "place of the knowing sage."

The Thai name *Thung Yai* ("big field") refers to a savannah in the centre of the sanctuary. In Karen language this place is called *pia aethala aethae*, which may be translated as "place of the knowing sage," referring to mythological hermits who are important for the identity of the Karen. The Karen see themselves as people living in and off the forest, part of a complex community of plants, animals, humans, and spiritual beings. Within this community, the Karen do not feel superior, but highly dependent on the other beings and forces. Living there requires adaptation as well as specific knowledge about the interdependencies and rules of this community. Fostering relations with the various spiritual caretakers of this "forest community" is an important part of Karen life in the sanctuary. In these rules and norms, as well as in their daily practice of livelihood, the Karen conserve a very rich and specific knowledge about their environment, which—like their real and imagined history in Thung Yai—is at the heart of their identity.

Interethnic Encounters and Socio-political Transformations

Until the second half of the 20th century, when state institutions expanded into peripheral areas to control resources and people, external influences in Thung Yai were minimal. A crucial feature of Karen social organization in Thung Yai is their ancestor cult, *ong chre*. Until the 1960s, most of the households in Thung Yai practiced *ong chre,* which may be translated as "eating with the ancestors." It is organized in matrifocal cult groups based on matrilineal descent. Children are born into their mother's group, and men become members of their wife's group when they marry, without leaving their mother's group. Generally, the eldest female of the group

is the ritual head of the cult groups. Households practicing *ong chre* are forbidden to raise chickens or pigs, or to consume alcohol, opium or marihuana. Furthermore, *ong chre* requires the purity of the village, which has to be restored in an annual village ceremony that has all villagers present while all outsiders have to leave the village.

These requirements became difficult to meet after ethnic Tai people started to live in the Karen villages as government officials in the 1960s. As they generally raise pigs and chicken, and consume alcohol, they offend the purity of the village while simultaneously preventing its purification through their presence. As a result, many households adopted a new, less demanding form of the ancestor cult, called *ba pho* ("to do flowers"). This change was accompanied by transformations of the village organization. As long as *ong chre* was the predominant form of ancestor cult, matrifocal cult groups were the most important social units structuring the community beyond the household level. The ritual head of one of the matrifocal cult groups, called *thei ku* ("head of the tree"), fostered the relationship between the village and the *rukkhajue*, the "spirit of trees" who resided inside a village tree called *thei waplieng*. The relation to the powerful spirit of the trees was crucial for the well-being of the village within the forest. The *thei ku* was also responsible for keeping moral norms and for performing the annual village purification ceremony. The permanent presence of ethnic Tai in the Karen communities made it difficult if not impossible to perform these functions. The change from the matrifocal *ong chre* to the more household centered *ba pho* form of the ancestor cult further diminished the position of the *thei ku*.

Figure 4. Novices in a Karen Buddhist Wat. Besides their specific ancestor cult, a particular form of Buddhism different from Thai-Buddhism has long constituted an important part of Karen culture in Thung Yai. Traditionally, the Buddhist monasteries provided the only formal education for the Karen. Since the 1960s, Thai schools have been established in the sanctuary which all children have to attend. Regarding the tradition of their own culture, the Karen see these schools as highly problematic; the Tai teachers deliberately debase Karen culture and all-day schooling restricts children's possibilities to partake in this culture.

In the context of these changes, in most villages the cult of the village tree *thei waplieng* and its spirit *rukkhajue* was substituted by a village cult called *priao*. Compared to the cult of the village tree, which references the forest spirit, the village cult *priao* addresses a kind of village tutelary spirit called *phu pha du* or "very old grandfather," which resembles spirits honored in Tai villages and shows closer connections to the "human," "male," and Buddhist sphere.

These social and religious changes in Karen communities indicate a growing similarity between the Karen and the Thai society, as well as a weakening of the Karen's traditional identity and their practice of maintaining a close relationship to their forests. While these changes have been unintentionally brought about by external actors, other political, educational, and economic transformations of the Karen communities are much more purposefully supported and enforced by people and institutions in Thailand aimed at assimilating and modernizing the Karen. With the incorporation of the

Karen communities into the Thai nation state and the expansion of its institutions to the peripheries of the country, frictions between the internal, largely autonomous, egalitarian, and consensus-oriented organization of the Karen villages on the one hand, and the dominant, highly hierarchical and external bureaucratic system on the other, have increased considerably, and pose serious threats to the Karen way of life and identity.

The Karen are even more concerned about the Thai schools in their villages, where their own culture is deliberately debased by the Tai teachers, and all-day schooling considerably restricts the children's possibilities to experience their parent's everyday life as well as efforts of Karen elders to establish supplementary Karen schools. Most threatening to their existence and particular way of life as Karen people in Thung Yai, however, are the persistent plans to resettle them or to enforce the modernization of their subsistence-oriented land use system.

Nature Conservation, Resettlement, and Enforced Modernization

Until the 1980s, the extension of state institutions into the peripheral areas triggered transformations and adaptations of the social, political, and ideological organization of the Karen communities in Thung Yai. Profound changes to their economic organization occurred in the late 1980s and are closely related to the declaration of Thung Yai as a protected area. The wildlife sanctuary was established in 1974, and in 1987-1988 Thung Yai attracted international attention concerning conflicts over the construction of the Nam Choan Dam, which would have flooded most of the sanctuary. After the dam project was stopped due to the protest of a broad public alliance, in 1991 the international community acknowledged the outstanding ecological value of Thung Yai by declaring it a Natural World Heritage Site. Together with the adjoining Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary, it constitutes the core area of the Western Forest Complex — Thailand's largest remaining forest area with considerable importance for biodiversity conservation in mainland Southeast Asia and worldwide (Fig. 5). Since the establishment of the sanctuary, villages have been removed, and the remaining Karen villages became a political issue when it was declared a World Heritage Site. The RFD and the Military used violence, and placed restrictions on their land use system, to induce them to resettle "voluntarily."

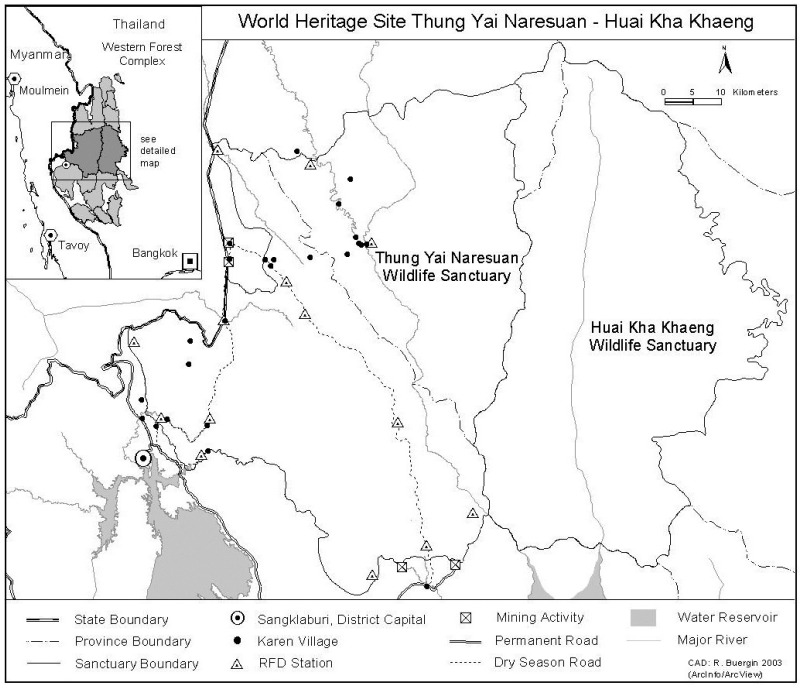

Figure 5. The Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary together with the adjoining Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary was declared a Natural World Heritage Site in 1991. The two Wildlife Sanctuaries constitute the core area of the Western Forest Complex, Thailand's largest remaining forest area with considerable importance for biodiversity conservation in mainland Southeast Asia as well as globally.

Most households in Thung Yai live on subsistence farming, predominantly growing rice on swidden fields and some paddy fields, although since probably at least the middle of the 19th century, Karen in Thung Yai have earned small incomes by selling traditional cash crops such as chilis,

tobacco, forest products and domestic animals. These income sources have been important for the subsistence economy of most of the households until today. Since the late 1980s, monetary incomes increased mainly due to wage labor outside of the sanctuary, even though this increase was very moderate in absolute terms. The mean annual cash income per person in 1996 was less than US$50, and for more than one-third of the people it was below US$20. There was no evidence for a general shift from a subsistence to a market orientation.

The future of the Karen's subsistence economy in Thung Yai was threatened by the RFD's restrictions, which prohibit the use of fallow areas older than three years. In the long term, this will necessarily lead to the breakdown of the traditional swidden system, as the soils under constant use lose their productivity. In the villages where RFD and military control was most effective, people were already reporting decreasing yields in the second half of the 1990s. Furthermore, the RFD started to plant tree seedlings on swidden fields in some villages, leaving the Karen to choose between being charged as forest destroyers or facing severe subsistence problems. The only possibility to adapt to these restrictions—apart from trying to avoid them—seemed to be economic modernization; to either try to increase the productivity of the fields using fertilizers and pesticides, which most of them cannot afford, to turn to cash cropping inside the sanctuary, or to wage labor outside of it. Intensification of agriculture and cash cropping is already propagated by some government institutions and NGOs working in the sanctuary, although most of the Karen in Thung Yai try to carry on with subsistence farming. Furthermore, intensification of land use, cash cropping, and increased market orientation endangers their reputation as "forest people living in harmony with nature," their most important asset in the debate about the future of their villages.

Adaptation and Resistance

The transformations on the local, national, and international level over the last 50 years are highly interdependent, as this paper indicates. Locally, the most important changes are the decreasing importance of matrifocal kinship groups accompanied by the emergence of a more household centered and patrifocal village cult; the clash of a predominantly egalitarian and consensus-oriented internal political organization with a more authoritarian and hierarchical external political system; the challenge of the Thai education system to local Karen identity and tradition; and resettlement and the pressures on their subsistence economy. They were stereotyped as alien hill tribes, and their living place, the forests in Thung Yai, were first defined as economic resources for national development, and later—when the costs of development became more obvious—as national and global biodiversity assets that have to be protected against local people. Efforts to incorporate the Karen into the nation focused mainly on surveillance, cultural assimilation, resettlement, and enforced economic modernization. While "otherness" was assigned to the Karen, they themselves express a strong desire to retain a different way of life closely related to their living space. Far-reaching adaptations to the external challenges allowed them to retain a distinct identity as Karen in Thung Yai until today.

Even though all of the Karen in Thung Yai believe that resettlement is neither justified nor desirable, they take different positions towards external influences. There is a small group, including most of the Phu Yai Ban (the village head in the context of the Thai administrative system), that is open to moderate economic modernization. But even these "moderate modernists" do not want to abandon their local Karen identity. The vast majority is rather more reluctant to modernization, preferring to "live like our grandparents did", as a common saying goes.

Among the Karen, there are marked differences in their reaction to external challenges and allies. A rather big group, including many influential elders as well as young people, can be labeled "extroverted traditionalists." They are trying to shape the changes by strengthening Karen culture and identity, as well as seeking support from outside of Thung Yai. They emphatically participate in activities promoting environmental awareness, sustainable resource management, and

indigenous knowledge. Another group of more "introverted traditionalists" also focuses on tradition, but invokes to a higher degree "exclusive" frames of Karen culture. They base their hopes on a strict compliance to the rules of a local millenarian buddhist sect and its promises of redemption. Regarding their relation to non-Karen outsiders, they rather tend to avoid transcultural exchange and support.

Despite their differences in position and strategy, all groups wish to remain in their villages and protect their culture and homeland, even if offered improved living standards outside of the sanctuary. So far, the Karen in Thung Yai have had no chance to participate directly in the national and international discourses regarding their homeland. To defend their rights and interests, they depend on advocates. They find allies predominantly in the peasant and civil society movement, even though it is a sometimes precarious alliance. Many of the Karen feel that they cannot accurately communicate their own views, and that their own urgent needs and interests may not necessarily be shared and supported by their external allies.

Figure 6. Indigenous knowledge project in the savannah *thung yai*. When Thung Yai was declared a Natural World Heritage Site, the Karen people were perceived only as a disruptive factor which had to be eliminated. Studies carried out there since then clearly indicate that they are an integral part of Thung Yai. In their culture they keep a unique body of knowledge about their natural environment to which they maintain a specific and deep spiritual relationship. To defend their rights on local resources and their own way of living they depend on external support and advocacy.

To explain their current situation, an important spiritual and political leader in Thung Yai, who belongs to the group of "extroverted traditionalists," told a story which may be recounted in a very condensed form as follows: Peoples of different origins were living on a big ship, among them Tai, Farang (Westerners), and Karen. Most of them had killed their ancestors, but not so the Karen. They had hidden their ancestors in a basket, being afraid the other people would kill them too. One day an enormous storm threatened to sink the ship. In this desperate situation, the Karen offered to ask their ancestors for advice, if the other people promised not to kill them. The advice of the Karen ancestors was to prepare a fish-hook with a cow as bait to catch a very big fish which would pull the ship out of the storm into safety.

To understand the advice of the Karen ancestors requires an explanation of the symbols employed in the parable, which can be done here only in crudest terms. According to the Karen elder, the fish which saved the ship refers to a way of life respecting traditional habits, values, and ancestors, while the cow figures as a symbol for "religion," and the fish-hook indicates "faith". By relating the threats to local Karen culture and identity (symbolized in the killing of the ancestors) to a global crisis (signified by the possible sinking of the ship) traditional Karen culture, in this parable, becomes crucial for the salvation of the local as well as the global crisis.

On another level, the parable implies a criticism of "modernity." In this perspective, uncontrolled greed, which the Karen personify in the figure of a mighty, vicious and devouring witch called *My Sa Le Pli*, is conceived of as a basic feature of modernity. Unleashed due to the loss of traditional values by "people who killed their ancestors," greed is conceived as being at the root of the threats to the Karen way of life in Thung Yai as well as the global crisis. With their own "traditional" way of life, the Karen in Thung Yai see themselves not as a cause of the problem, but much more as a part of the solution, even regarding the global crisis, as the parable suggests.

Biodiversity Conservation and Cultural Diversity

From a modern, ethical point of view there can be little doubt that the Karen in Thung Yai have a right to stay there. Their resettlement or the prohibition of their subsistence-oriented swidden system is hardly reasonable, even under strict objectives of nature conservation. Although the Karen were perceived as a disruptive factor when Thung Yai was declared a Natural World Heritage Site, studies done there clearly indicate that they are an integral part of Thung Yai. With their traditional sustainable land use system they have shaped the sanctuary considerably over a long time and increased its biodiversity. In their culture they keep a unique body of knowledge about their natural environment to which they maintain a specific and deep spiritual relationship. This history and relationship even suggests a reconsideration of the status of Thung Yai. The sanctuary may be better conceived of as a Cultural Landscape World Heritage Site, which would acknowledge the profound interdependence between "nature" and "culture" in Thung Yai, and may provide a frame supportive to the survival of a distinctive living culture as well as to the protection of the unique biological diversity of the region.

There are strong forces in Thailand that support either the exclusion or a complete assimilation of the so-called hill tribes, as well as their removal from protected areas. However, over the last 30 years, Thailand has undergone a remarkable process of democratization, has committed itself to the principles of human rights, and has enacted a constitution (in 1997) that explicitly grants rights to local communities for cultural self-determination and the use of local resources. Unfortunately, these commitments are not always easy to implement. Furthermore, their interpretation is often contentious and subject to political bargaining where weaker social groups may be at a disadvantage. Regarding the still-pending Community Forest Bill, the vulnerable position of ethnic minority groups in the uplands should be reconsidered and provisions included that support their traditional land use systems and land claims. The case of the Karen in Thung Yai and the more general problem of integrating the hill tribes into Thai society remain a challenge for democratic forces in Thailand.

In international environmental discourses, forced resettlement is no longer a legitimate option; participation and cooperative resource management are prominent concepts in protected area management. After having adopted Thung Yai as a World Heritage Site, responsible international institutions should have disapproved the pressures and violence towards the Karen, even more so, as "indigenous knowledge" and "cultural diversity" are increasingly seen as significant factors for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation.

Furthermore, as so called "biodiversity hotspots" frequently coincide with areas of extraordinary cultural diversity, the protection of cultural diversity is increasingly propagated as a strategy for global biodiversity conservation. In practice, however, interdependencies between biological and cultural diversity often find their expression in conflicts about biocultural diversity, in which biological as well as cultural diversity are threatened, be it due to continuing tendencies of modern societies to exploit natural resources and overwhelm non-modern groups, or by way of fortress conservation strategies depriving indigenous people of their homeland and resources for subsistence.

Protecting biological as well as cultural diversity on a global scale not only requires a reconsideration of exploitative environmental relations, but also a new respect and support for non-modern groups at the fringes of modernity, with their different ways of life and world views.

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