Asia Pacific Viewpoint, Vol. 45, No. 3, December 2004
ISSN 1360-7456, pp311–324

Seeing farmers for the trees: Community forestry and the arborealisation of agriculture in northern Thailand[1]

Andrew Walker

Abstract: *The campaign for community forestry in upland areas of northern Thailand reflects an 'arborealised' perspective on upland agriculture. Arborealisation – which I define as the process whereby upland livelihoods are recast as forest livelihoods – is evident in the main elements of NGO and academic advocacy for the resource rights of upland peoples. As a result of this arborealised perspective, securing rights to forest resources has come to be seen as the key to enhancing the livelihood security of upland farmers. However, the emphasis of the proposed community forest legislation on communally managed forest resources means that it will do little to enhance the tenure security of farmers in relation to agricultural land.*

Keywords: *community forestry, northern Thailand, arborealisation, tenure, upland agriculture*

> *For the villagers, where they live and find food is the same place – the forest.* (Pirmsak quoted in Pennapa, 2002)

This paper is motivated by my concern about the extent to which discussions of resource management in upland areas of Southeast Asia are framed by the discourse of forests, obscuring the fact that most rural peoples' resource interactions are predominantly with agricultural lands and, increasingly, urban areas. It has become disconcertingly natural to speak and write in terms of 'forest dwellers', 'forest lives', and 'forest struggles' (Doornbos *et al*., 2000) based largely on the premise that the *proximity* of forests to upland communities amounts to livelihood *salience*. And, in the now ubiquitous discussions of agro-forestry, it is the forest half of the equation that carries normative weight, and the ecologically innovative promise of donor support. This recasting of

Author: Andrew Walker, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, ACT 0200, Australia. Email: andrew.walker@anu.edu.au

upland livelihoods as forest livelihoods – a process I refer to as arborealisation – has tended to divert attention away from key livelihood issues posed by the current phase of upland commodity production and has spawned an array of proposals for 'bottom up' resource regulation that appear inconsistent with the realities of household-based productive activity.

In this paper my specific objective is to critically examine the process of arborealisation in northern Thailand, focusing on the longstanding campaign for community forest legislation. While I acknowledge the significant political achievements of this campaign I suggest there is room for a more critical examination of the implications of the proposed legislation – and the forms of community-based resource management it advocates – for the management of *agricultural* land. I have no intention of denying that there are important points of linkage between forests and agricultural systems – both in the form of direct livelihood activities and also more indirect 'environmental services' – however I do argue that these points of linkage are often ill-defined, and exaggerated, and do not necessarily justify the widespread elevation of forest management to a 'first order' livelihood issue. Indeed the arboreal perspective that prevails in the proposed community forest legislation means that there is no explicit recognition of the legitimate role of agriculture in upland forested areas, despite the central philosophical claim that people and forests can coexist. To the extent that there is implicit recognition of agricultural activity it is brought within a framework of communal land management that raises important and problematic issues in relation to current tenure practices and aspirations.

ABOREALISATION OF AGRICULTURE IN NORTHERN THAILAND

A key dynamic in the process of arborealisation in northern Thailand has been the highly politicised interaction between official and alternative perspectives on upland resource management. State policy in Thailand has long denied the legitimate presence of farmers in upland forested areas (see Barney, this volume). For much of the twentieth century the state was actively involved in issuing logging concessions to both foreign and domestic firms, ignoring the role of local communities in the management of these resources. With the late-twentieth century shift in emphasis to conservation, state action has imposed various categories of forest protection on local agriculturalists in line with the objective of classifying one quarter of the country's area as conservation forest. This grossly unrealistic administrative action has generated a massive mismatch between official land classification and actual land use, rendering vast areas of agricultural activity illegal. The impact of this administrative denial of local resource-use realities is particularly intense in the north where, in 1990, one third of villages were found to be located inside forest reserves (Sopin *et al*., 1990: 11). Farmers living in these areas have uncertain rights over their land and many lack formal tenure documents. Livelihood insecurity is compounded by persistent state plans – and occasional action – to

relocate upland villagers to less environmentally sensitive midland and lowland locations.

The response to state denial of the role of upland communities in local resource management has been appropriately vigorous. The key element in this campaign has been to assert that upland residents have a legitimate place within forested ecosystems because they have longstanding traditions of sustainable forest management. It is argued that the practical and symbolic aspects of these management systems need to be recognised as legitimate components of upland ecosystems. As an alternative to the Western-influenced state approach – which separates people from forests – a holistic counter-discourse is proposed in which various forms of forest, wildlife, water resources, agricultural fields and settlements coexist. The overall thrust of this strategy has been to emphasise the *intimacy* of human livelihoods and forests in upland areas. Rather than merely arguing for the possibility of forest and agricultural *coexistence*, campaigners for the rights of upland communities argue that upland forest and upland agriculture are *intrinsically linked* in inseparable relations of interdependency and that the relationship is underpinned by locally specific belief systems, cultural practices and forms of social organisation.

The effect of this has been that upland agriculture has come to be descriptively *and* normatively framed in terms of its role as a component of the broader forested ecosystem. This process, which I call arborealisation, has a number of key elements that are considered in the following sections.

Non-commercial orientation

First, in the alternative discourse put forward by NGOs and activist academics the archetypal forest community is one in which production is overwhelmingly subsistence oriented. This primary focus on meeting local needs is seen as underlying a 'balanced' relationship between upland communities and the forest ecosystem: demand for agricultural land is modest given the limited subsistence requirements of local households; fertiliser, chemical and pesticide use is minimal given that local rice strains are well adapted to the microenvironments of the uplands; and, instead of commercially oriented monocropping, mixed plantings in agricultural fields mimic and complement the biodiversity of the forest itself. At a socio-cultural level, the absence of market-oriented values, such as maximisation and competition, contributes to the maintenance of traditional values of respect for the natural environment. Of course the widespread reality of upland commercialisation is acknowledged, however this is framed as the product of intrusive and undesirable external pressure – by both state and market – on the authentic forest-dwelling community.

Shifting cultivation

Second, in recent discussions of human-forest interaction, upland shifting cultivation features prominently despite the considerable evidence that such agricultural systems have been all but abandoned in most upland areas of northern

Thailand. The emphasis on shifting cultivation usually takes the form of a response to the unjustified charges levelled by forest administrators and regulators that 'slash and burn' agriculture has been a primary cause of deforestation and environmental degradation. The argument that has been cogently put by activist academics and NGOs is that certain forms of shifting cultivation typify the balance between upland agriculture and forest ecosystems. Short-term cultivation combined with long-term fallow is said to create a 'multi-layered' forest in which fallow patches of varying age provide for a level of vegetative and faunal diversity that may even exceed that of primary forest. Sites appropriate for clearing and cultivation are carefully chosen – with choices informed by an array of ecological precepts – and forest regeneration on fallow land is facilitated by minimal soil disturbance, maintenance of tree stumps and preservation of ridge-top and streamline tree cover. For some upland groups, the Karen in particular, this form of forest-friendly cultivation has been promoted as lying at the heart of socio-cultural identity and economic pursuit (Walker, 2001). Again, the effect of this emphasis on shifting cultivation is to frame upland agriculture in arboreal terms, with primary attention given to the nature of the relationship between farmers and the forest rather than on the economic, agronomic and demographic processes prompting widespread adoption of permanent cultivation.

Forest product collection

The third key element in the process of arborealisation is the emphasis on forest product collection and consumption. The impression given in much of the literature is that forest products play a crucial role in local subsistence economies and various researchers have gone to considerable lengths to document extensive local wisdom about the management and use of medicinal herbs, mushrooms, roots, flowers and bark. Collection of forest products is said to be framed and regulated by an array of cultural precepts that ensure the sustainability of the forest ecosystem and considerable normative weight is placed on subsistence use rather than commercial exploitation of timber and non-timber resources. This discussion tends to be couched in the predominantly cultural terms of a holistic relationship between people and forests and there is usually a lack of specific information on the extent and significance of these activities in local economies. Where such information is available it rarely supports the typically arborealised conclusion that 'for many, especially the poor, the forest remains their only source of livelihood' (Sato, 2000: 170).

Environmental services from forest

Finally, apart from 'direct' livelihood services (such as forest product collection) forests are also said to provide important 'indirect' environmental services to upland agriculturalists (NDF, 2000). Most generally, this is reflected in the 'holistic' view, noted above, that sees upland agriculture as an integral part of the broader forested ecosystem. In more specific terms, when asserting the

intimate relationship between agriculture and forests, it is widely argued that forests play a key role in ensuring water supply for agricultural irrigation. Watershed forest protection by northern Thai irrigation groups is said to be one of the key antecedents of the modern community forestry movement and is widely reported to be a key component of contemporary community forestry activities. Ideas about the hydrological importance of forests persist despite the fact that there is very little evidence supporting the claim that forests help secure downstream water supplies and good evidence that water shortages attributed to forest clearing are caused, in fact, by very significant increases in demand for water (Walker, 2003). Moreover, while general beliefs about the watershed functions of forests are often attributed to upland farmers there has been no sustained research on the specifics of indigenous hydrological knowledge in the region. There is a strong sense in much of the material on local hydrological knowledge that it has been selectively packaged to accord with the prevailing arborealised orthodoxy about the links between forest cover and agricultural water supply.

COMMUNITY FORESTRY AND AGRICULTURAL LAND IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Community forestry has become a central element in campaigns for the rights of upland farmers in northern Thailand and various activist organisations have placed legal recognition of community forest rights at the top of their political agenda. This community forest campaign strategically promotes a particular version of upland livelihood in which these arborealised perspectives on upland agriculture justify the claim that reform of *forest* management is essential for acknowledging the rights and improving the livelihoods of upland *farmers*. Proposed community forest legislation is presented as a much-needed response to coercive state policies that have excluded local people from the management of forest resources, undermined local traditions of sustainable resource management and fostered unsustainable resource competition and conflict. Specifically the draft legalisation would allow representatives of local communities to propose the establishment of community forests.[2] In forest conservation areas, such as national parks, applicants would have to demonstrate that they have been caring for the forest for at least five years prior to commencement of the Act and that they have a 'culture of coexistence that favours forest protection'. Once the proposed community forests were approved, local committees would be given wide ranging powers in relation to the management and regulation and policing of the community forest and would be empowered to develop management plans that demarcated 'protection' and 'use' areas within the community forest.

Is agricultural land included?

But what is the status of agricultural land within the proposed community forest framework? This is a crucially important question given that, as noted

above, there are large areas of agricultural land located within forest reserve areas on which tenure rights are ill defined and uncertain. What will the proposed community forest legislation do to enhance the security of farmers working these ambiguous lands? What sort of land use does the community forest bill seek to endorse and facilitate? Surprisingly, given the fundamental and oft-repeated claim that people and forests can and do co-exist – the basic claim that has underlain the community forest movement – *at no point does the proposed legislation state that agriculture is a legitimate activity within community forest boundaries*. Indeed Article 34 of the proposed legislation specifically forbids anyone to 'control land, farm, live in, build, burn, clear, lop, gather or do anything else that would cause destruction to the forest in the community forest area'. In Article 64 this prohibition is backed by a sanction of five years' imprisonment, or 15 years if the offence takes place in a conservation area of the community forest. The legislation does make provision for 'zones for use' but the Thai term used here (*kaan chay sooy*) usually implies, in discussions of forest management, collection of forest products rather than agricultural activity.

This interpretation would suggest that the proposed community forest legislation would offer no enhanced security for farmers whose agricultural lands lie in the ambiguous zones of forest reserves. The formal status of their fields would not change and the mismatch between formal land classification and actual land use would be unresolved. Despite all the claims about community forest legislation providing a basis for sustainable and secure upland livelihood, the central elements of this livelihood – agriculture and rights to agricultural land – have no clear place within the proposed legislative framework. It is ironic that while official versions of the bill that restrict access to forest products are vigorously condemned as amounting to a denial of the livelihoods of upland villagers (Anon, n.d.) the fact that all versions of the bill are silent about agriculture has passed largely without comment. Indeed, the possibility that community forest legislation may make the tenure of some farmers even more insecure must be considered. Already there is some evidence, anecdotal and other, that owners of upland fields in a number of villages are being 'encouraged' to restrict or shift their cultivation in order to maintain the integrity and strategic promotional value of locally declared community forests (Charal *et al*., 2002: 11–13). Numerous writers have also reported situations where 'community forestry' has been used as a tool to pressure farmers from neighbouring villages out of disputed hinterland areas, and this must be acknowledged as a key part of the 'tradition' of community forest management in northern Thailand.

A broader approach to land management?

Some would argue that an interpretation that suggests that agricultural lands are excluded from the community forest framework is overly literal and narrow. Many observers, for example, explicitly reject the technical and 'Western' view that community forests are restricted to conservation areas and village

use-forests and, by contrast, include agricultural land *and* settlement areas under the community forest umbrella. According to this view, agricultural lands are seen as being a particularly important component of the community forest domain given their contribution to local systems of ecological diversity. While the specific provisions of the legislation may seem narrow, it is argued that recognition of local community forestry rights will provide a basis for negotiation of the entire package of land use in forest reserve areas. Anan and Mingsarn (1995), for example, argue that the state should recognise traditional systems of land management and allocation in exchange for a commitment to forest protection. And some areas of government appear sympathetic to this view with a Royal Forest Department publication (1998: 7), for example, suggesting that community forests could be a basis for 'both forest and agriculture to exist appropriately and in a well blended manner . . . in the one area'.

All this appears rather promising, but to the extent that agricultural lands are included within this broader approach to community forestry they are incorporated within a framework that privileges communal forms of property. Community forestry is seen as countering a long trend in resource regulation that has privileged private property on the one hand and state property on the other. Neither of these 'Western' forms of property is seen as being appropriate given the particular circumstances of resource management in the forested uplands of Thailand. It is often argued that the upland political economy was characterised by communal land management prior to the disruptive intrusion of the state and the market. While the erosion of communal arrangements in recent decades is acknowledged it is argued that they continue to form part of the repertoire of local knowledge and that legislative recognition will enhance the ability of local *communities* to pursue sustainable resource management.

But how realistic is this emphasis on communal tenure in relation to agricultural land? While, historically, there may well have been forms of common property that governed some areas of agricultural land, there are also long-standing practices in upland areas that grant de-facto private ownership to the person who clears forest land for agricultural use. For example, in relation to the Hmong of Mae To, Geddes (1976: 149) noted that the first person clearing agricultural land 'gained complete rights of use and disposal' and that cleared land 'may pass to new occupiers by loan, by mortgage, by gift, or by purchase'. Kwanchewan (1996: 55) also suggests that the rights of first clearers are acknowledged in relation to upland plots in some Karen communities. Individual land rights are even more clearly evident in the popular settlement areas along upland streams where the construction, maintenance and cultivation of paddy fields have long been predominantly household enterprises. Individual ownership of paddy fields is well documented in northern Thai (Tanabe, 1994: 17), Karen (Anan, 2000; Hamilton, 1976: 61) and Hmong communities (Lee, 1981: 104). Of course, paddy farming often relies on communal forms of labour recruitment and water management but these forms of resource mobilisation – for *household* production – should not be confused with communal ownership of land. This local recognition of *de facto* individual

tenure is reflected in the fact that informal land markets are already active in upland areas despite the lack of legislative recognition.

Where there does appear to be a more communal approach is in relation to agricultural lands left fallow or abandoned. Writing of the Hmong, Geddes (1976: 149) suggests that 'rights to land evaporate with its disuse' and that others are relatively free to re-clear and cultivate the land. In many Karen farming systems communal ownership and management of fallow lands have been well documented, with farmers often allocated only temporary use rights to clear and cultivate. Under such systems – where land 'cycles' between individually managed cultivation and communally managed fallow – granting permanent private title would clearly be inappropriate and a more 'communal' approach, which recognises temporary use rights, is likely to be more effective. But this must be set against trends over the past few decades in relation to the intensification of cultivation. Among Hmong farmers it is now clear that most cultivation is undertaken on a permanent basis with 'fallow' limited to only short periods of non-cultivation. Widespread investment in land improvement, water supply systems, green-houses, soil conservation and fruit trees has meant that previous practices of abandonment and re-cultivation by a new farmer are now virtually non-existent. In Karen villages, though the level of intensification has been somewhat less marked, there has also been a strong trend to permanent cultivation. Kwanchewan (1996: Abstract), for example, reports that upland fields in the Karen village of Mae Lu are 'continuously cultivated for an average of 5.4 years, while fallowed fields were left uncultivated for an average of only 2.8 years'. She notes that 'upland fields, upland fallow and paddy are the property of the household, or to be specific it is the mother and the father . . . who are the owners' (Kwanchewan, 1996: 55).

This very brief review of tenure practices suggests that considerable caution should be exercised in adopting communal title as a template for management of *agricultural* lands in upland areas. It may be appropriate in some cases, particularly where long fallow systems mean that agricultural lands are characterised by temporary use rights that 'evaporate' when cultivation is replaced by forest. But this rather arboreal version of agriculture is now relatively uncommon and becoming increasingly so in a context of upland intensification and commercialisation. While 'holistic' approaches to land management are desirable, this should not amount to an uncritical extension of property arrangements that may be appropriate in the case of fallow lands or forest to the very different context of permanently cultivated agricultural land. While an arboreal perspective of agriculture may make this extension seem logical and even desirable, there are a number of key issues that highlight how problematic a 'forest-based' approach to agricultural tenure may be.

First, communal forms of title will prevent farmers from using their land as security for loans. The limitations placed on farmers' capacity to mobilise capital for use on 'perfectly good agricultural lands' in forest reserve areas have been identified as one of the primary negative impacts of current forest policy (Ammar *et al.*, 1991: 12, 28). In upland areas where more formal

individual title is available, use of land as credit collateral has been a key factor in facilitating increased land productivity, largely through investment in cash crops such as soybeans, garlic, vegetables and flowers but also through investment in improved soil and water management measures. Of course, there are many who see the proliferation of agricultural debt as regrettable and as undermining local self-sufficiency but it would seem desirable for farmers themselves to make this assessment rather than having a substantial group of them denied the option by the imposition of communal tenure on privately held lands. It is important to note that farmers with formal individual title are able to obtain credit from official lending sources (the Bank of Agriculture and Cooperatives in particular) where interest rates are relatively low and foreclosure action is relatively infrequent. Those who lack appropriate title tend to be forced into more informal credit markets where the costs and risks are substantially higher.

Second, it seems unlikely that farmers would welcome the regulatory empowerment of village committees in relation to agricultural land use. Note that the proposed legislation requires communities seeking to establish community forests to demonstrate a 'culture of life that is consistent with care of the forest'. How might the action of community forest committees in monitoring and enforcing such a 'culture' impact on household autonomy and adaptability in a context of agricultural intensification and widespread commodity production? Who will be the local arbiter of consistency between agricultural practices and forest health? The broader community forest literature makes it clear that such a forest-friendly culture of life is based on low chemical input, low technology, and an emphasis on subsistence production while production of cash crops is regularly targeted as one of the primary causes of forest destruction. What might the impact be of implementing this community forest consensus on local attempts to intensify and diversify agricultural production?

Third, it seems equally doubtful that many farmers would accept the proposals for allocation and reallocation of agricultural land that are implicit in many discussions of communal land management. In particular, the currently popular approach of participatory land use planning – that the proposed community forest bill is seen as facilitating – appears to be based on the premise that 'communities' should manage the allocation of land between various forest *and* agricultural uses. Garrity (1998), for example, writes of a case where committees were established to develop 'community-enforced land use rules' and to categorise the landscape into a 'mosaic of areas of various types of land use'. The identified agricultural areas are 'managed by individual households . . . *subject to necessary conditions imposed by the community*' (my emphasis). The case study is illustrated with a 'before-and-after' map illustrating the planned consolidation of once dispersed upland fields (and their exclusion from the newly demarcated community forest), the extension of paddy areas and the establishment of orchards. What remains unanswered in these sorts of case studies is how such systems of community based land re-allocation impact on the rights of individual landholders. How are farmers encouraged to

relocate their upland fields? Whose paddy fringe gardens are absorbed by planned paddy expansion? Whose lands are put out of production in the short term to achieve long-term returns from fruit orchards? In brief, how are highly complex and decentralised processes of landscape *evolution* compressed into the framework of committee-based landscape *planning*?

While acknowledging these problematic aspects of communal approaches to agricultural land management, some would argue that the alternative of granting individual forms of title is simply unacceptable given the risks of outside investors gaining access to land (see Barney, this volume). Community forest advocates condemn previous systems of forest land allocation that granted individual title, arguing that they have destroyed community-level institutions and undermined traditional values, opening the way for commercialisation, corrupt dealings and investor intrusion. In some cases, upland villagers are said to be uninterested in individual title based on the view that 'if they have no tenure documents the capitalists will not be interested' (Anan and Mingsarn, 1995: 302) and one advocate of the proposed legislation specifically states that 'villagers do not want land rights' (Somsak, 2000: 5). Recently, when Prime Minister Thaksin proposed that the limited title granted in land reform areas be upgraded to full title – with the possibility of revoking the forest reserve status of some areas of agricultural land – there was vigorous opposition from some of the key players in the community forest campaign. Their opposition was based on the view that full tenure would allow farmers to use their land as collateral, burden themselves with 'heavy debts' and squander the borrowed money. The end result would be that 'their land would be snapped up by businessmen' (Post Reporters, 2002).

These are important considerations, but they raise further issues that warrant ongoing discussion. What is being argued is that a sub-group of the nations' farmers, chosen somewhat arbitrarily on the basis that their lands happen to fall within state-imposed forest reserve, should not receive the tenure rights that predominate in other areas of the country. Despite the considerable emphasis placed on the resource management capabilities of these upland farmers it is suggested that they should be protected from the risks of resource transaction by the non-provision of individual land rights. It seems that not only are these farmers expected to be responsible for environmental conservation (pursuing lifestyles consistent with protection of the forest) but they are also to be responsible for a form of socio-economic conservation whereby they are denied the opportunity to participate equally in the broader market economy. It is certainly possible that some farmers may agree with this approach and may wish to pursue recognition of their 'communal' land rights under the broad framework of community forestry. Some may see internal community recognition of their individual rights as being more important than formal state recognition. But these should be seen as options. The community forestry act *may* provide for these options (but remember that nowhere in the legislation is agricultural activity actually permitted) but the hostility to various forms of individual title appears to rule out recognition of rights that would be consistent with longstanding trends in land management in the region.

CONCLUSION

The community forest movement in northern Thailand represents a challenge to the denial of resource rights of farmers located in forested upland areas. At present the denial of farmers' rights is potently expressed in the fact that officially declared forest conservation areas contain numerous communities and vast areas of 'illegal' agricultural land. In asserting the rights of these farmers, and in countering ill-conceived plans for relocation of upland villages, the community forest movement has argued that coexistence of people and forest is possible due to the intimate relationship between rural livelihoods and forest ecosystems. Widely promoted images of communities leading simple, non-commercial lifestyles, practising forms of forest-friendly cultivation, implementing indigenous forms of watershed management and carefully managing a diverse range of forest products help create a position from which it can be asserted that local management of resources is the key to ensuring livelihood security and resource sustainability. The proposed community forest legislation encapsulates this desire to transfer resource management rights to local forest-dwelling communities.

My basic argument in this paper is that the assertion of the intimacy between upland livelihoods and forests has resulted in what I have called an arborealised perspective of upland agriculture. One of the key effects of this arborealised perspective is that the particular characteristics of contemporary upland agriculture have become hidden in the normative and descriptive thicket of forest-friendly discourse. As upland farmers have blended into the trees, giving local communities a greater role in *forest* management has come to be seen as the best response to state denial of livelihood rights. The result is proposed legislation that seeks to give local committees the right to manage community forests in areas currently claimed by the state as forest reserve. However, and this is surely a crucial limitation, a literal reading of the legislation suggests that agriculture is not permitted in areas managed by these community forest committees. A considerably more generous reading of the legislation and associated literature suggests that agriculture *may* be permitted under a broader process of land use reform facilitated by the legislation but this process is one that places primary emphasis on communal forms of land ownership and management. Overall, the community forest legislation appears somewhat disconnected from the upland realities of widespread commodity production and predominantly individual management of agricultural land.

I should emphasise that in making this critique I do not wish to dismiss the achievements of the community forest movement. In an environment where some upland communities are under real threat of relocation it is surely appropriate to use whatever discursive strategies may be required to relieve their position. As Li (2002) has noted, the 'environmental hook' has proven to be internationally effective in promoting and defending the rights of minority peoples under pressure from state regulation and extractive capitalism. In northern Thailand, there is little doubt that vigorous promotion of the imagery of a forest-friendly upland community has contributed to a softening of the

official emphasis on relocation and a greater willingness to explore options embracing 'local knowledge,' agro-forestry, decentralised management and state-community networks. There is also little doubt that the symbolism and practice of community forestry have been taken up by some upland residents to counter negative, and racist, stereotypes. The community forest campaign has made an important contribution to establishing a legitimate place for upland communities in contested northern Thai landscapes.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that there are risks in this campaign, especially when relatively diffuse symbols of forest coexistence come to be fixed in legislative form. There is, I argue, a strong sense in which the assertion of the rights of upland farmers has become overly constrained by the (counter-) discursive form that the assertion has taken. The legitimacy of upland occupation proposed by the community forest campaign appears to have limited relevance to farmers involved in complex and dynamic processes of commodity production and agricultural intensification. The nature of this limitation has been highlighted in recent commentary prompted by the Senate's rejection of key provisions of the proposed bill. Some Senators expressed fear that the proposed bill would allow upland farmers to 'convert the fertile forest to cabbage and other cash crops' and 'claim their cabbage plantations as community forest' (Pennapa, 2002). Seemingly startled by this public 'outing' of the reality of upland commercialism the advocates of human-forest coexistence retreated to the safe discursive ground of conservation. The Northern Farmers' Network responded that the bill 'aims to make us responsible for protecting nature in our communities. *It doesn't allow a person or group of people to live in, or to make a living in the forest*' (Supara, 2002, my emphasis). And a key academic advocate of community forestry argued that the bill 'gave local communities the right to manage the forests, *not to occupy forest land*' (Niti quoted in Kultida, 2002, my emphasis).

The irony here is that advocates for community forestry end up promoting the position that the campaign set out to oppose: that agricultural presence and forest conservation are incompatible. The legislation is now defended on the basis that it will *not allow agricultural occupation of forest land*. This somewhat surprising outcome is, I suggest, the result of a campaign that is based on an arborealised view of agriculture that is simply inconsistent with contemporary upland realities. Once these realities are entered into the debate – and cabbages are a potent symbol of agricultural change and non-forest oriented commercialisation – the arborealised basis of the claim to legitimate residency is simply cut away and the proponents of upland rights have little alternative but to join the state in excluding agriculture from the domain of forest conservation. As Conklin and Graham (1995: 705–706) have argued in relation to the eco-politics of the Amazon 'generic representations, no matter how sympathetic, inevitably turn into liabilities when the disjunctures between external images and indigenous realities become manifest'.

This community forest cul-de-sac highlights the potential benefits of some more radical advocacy of the rights of upland farmers. Alternative arguments mounted to secure the rights of farmers whose agricultural lands have been

classified as forest reserve may, for example, point to the growing body of evidence that there is no simple relationship between commercialism and forest destruction and that relatively market oriented villages may be in the best position to manage and protect neighbouring forested areas. These arguments could also point to evidence that upland agricultural intensification can take pressure off forest resources by enhancing the productivity of existing cultivation. Similarly, rather than portraying upland farmers as guardians of environmental services, hydrological evidence could be deployed to refute the widely voiced claims that past forest clearing has compromised water supply. And, at a broader level, rather than being stereotyped as a consumptive assault on forest ecosystems, upland cash cropping could be portrayed as one important component of the development of Thailand's agricultural sector, linking upland villages with regional, national and even international markets. Of course, there is no reason why community forestry cannot be part of this broader package of advocacy, but to the extent to which it is based on, and vigorously promotes, a narrowly defined arboreal version of agriculture it will continue to exclude these more radical possibilities.

NOTES

1 A version of this paper was presented at the Politics of the Commons Conference (July 11–14, 2003) organised by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University. I would like to thank Nicholas Tapp, Andrew McWilliam, Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and colleagues in Chiang Mai for useful critique, comments and suggestions.

2 For some time the community forest debate has been complicated by the preparation of a number of alternative drafts of proposed community forest legislation, with clear differences between the draft prepared by the Royal Forest Department and that prepared by an alliance of academics and NGOs (commonly referred to as the 'people's version'). In early 2002 the House of Representatives passed a version of the bill that was broadly consistent with the people's version, however the Senate rejected key provisions and, at present, the bill appears to be in legislative limbo. In the following sections I focus on the people's version, as this is, no doubt, the most representative of the broader community forest movement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ammar Siamwalla, Suthad Setboonsarng, and Direk Patamasiriwat (1991) *Thai agriculture: resources, institutions and policies*, Bangkok: Thailand Development Research Institute Foundation.

Anan Ganjanapan (2000) *Local control of land and forest: cultural dimensions of resource management in northern Thailand*, Chiang Mai: Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

Anan Ganjanapan, and Mingsarn Khawsaard (1995) *wiwadthannaakaan khong kaan buk berk thi din tham kin nay khet paa phaak nua ton bon [The development of forest clearing for agriculture in the upper northern region]*. (In Thai.) Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University.

Anon (n.d.) *raang pho ror bor paa chum chon: chabab prachaachon taan jaak rang chabab ratabaan yaangrai [Draft community forest laws: differences between the people's version and the government versions]*. (In Thai.) Unpublished manuscript.

Charal Thong-Ngam, Thamanoon Arretham, Prasong Kaewpha, Songsak Thepsarn, Narit Yimyam, Chavalit Korsamphan, and Kanok Rerkasem (2002) Scaling up a PLEC demon-

stration site for the national pilot programme: a case example of a *hmong njua* village in northern Thailand, *PLEC News and Views* 19: 7–16.
Conklin, B.A., and L.R. Graham (1995) The shifting middle ground: Amazonian Indians and eco-politics, *American Anthropologist* 97(4): 695–710.
Doornbos, M., A. Saith, and B. White (2000) Forest lives and struggles: an introduction, *Development and Change* 31: 1–10.
Garrity, D.P. (1998) *Participatory approaches to catchment management: some experiences to build upon*, Paper presented at Managing Soil Erosion Consortium Assembly, Hanoi.
Geddes, W.R. (1976) *Migrants of the mountains: the cultural ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Hamilton, J.W. (1976) *Pwo Karen: at the edge of mountain and plain*, St Paul: West Publishing Company.
Kultida Samabuddhi (2002) Academic slams senators over ban, *Bangkok Post*, 29 March 2002.
Kwanchewan Buadaeng (1996) *kaan plien pleeng witikaan damrong chiwit khong chum chon kariang [Changing lifestyles of a Karen community]*. (In Thai.) Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University.
Lee, Gar Yia (1981) *The effects of development measures on the socio-economy of the white Hmong*, Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney, Sydney.
Li, T.M. (2002) Engaging simplifications: community-based resource management, local processes and state agendas in upland Southeast Asia, *World Development* 30(2): 265–283.
NDF (Northern Development Foundation) (2000) *naew khit lae tit taang: kaan jad kaan saphayaakoon nay lum nam dooy kaan mi suan ruam khong prachaachon [Lines of thinking and directions: participatory management of watershed resources]*. (in Thai) Chiang Mai: Northern Development Foundation.
Pennapa Hongthong (2002) Forest dwellers to remain in limbo, *The Nation*, 27 March 2002.
Post Reporters (2002) 'PM's title deeds proposal panned: another economic bubble in the making', *Bangkok Post*, 3 December 2002.
Royal Forest Department (1998) *pa chum chon [Community forestry]*. (In Thai.) Bangkok: Suan Pa Chum Chon, Samnak Songseem Kaan Pluuk Pa.
Sato, J. (2000) People in between: conversion and conservation of forest lands in Thailand, *Development and Change* 31: 155–177.
Somsak Sukhuang (2000) pho ror bor paa chum chon: phua khon fao rawang pa lae khwaam yang yuun [The community forest bill: for the people who protect the forest and for sustainability], in Asia Pacific Forestry Training Centre (ed.), *pa chum chon [Community forestry]*. (In Thai.) Bangkok: Kasetsart University.
Sopin Tongpan, Theodore Panayotou, Songpol Jetanavanich, Ketty Faichampa, and Charlie Mehl (1990) *Deforestation and poverty: can commercial and social forestry break the vicious circle?*, Bangkok: TDRI.
Supara Janchitfah (2002) Senators scoff at people power, *Bangkok Post*, 24 March 2002.
Tanabe, S. (1994) *Ecology and practical technology: peasant farming systems in Thailand*, Bangkok: White Lotus.
Walker, A. (2001) The 'Karen consensus', ethnic politics and resource-use legitimacy in northern Thailand, *Asian Ethnicity* 2(2): 145–162.
Walker, A. (2003) Agricultural Transformation and the Politics of Hydrology in Northern Thailand, *Development and Change* 34(5): 941–964.

