Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers: The Politics of Environmental Knowledge in Northern Thailand

Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008)

This is a book whose messages will resonate as commonsensical with many readers, and yet will simultaneously provoke unease. Among the reasons for the mixed feelings likely to emerge from reading *Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers* is that the authors cross a number of boundaries, and they slay not a few sacred cows along the way. They cross the disciplinary boundaries of geography and anthropology but, more importantly, the academic boundaries of natural and social science. They cross the boundaries of post-structuralist deconstruction and positivist environmental science. And central to the book is a crossing of the boundary between critique of mainstream statist agendas and critique of the NGO and academic critics of such agendas.

Forsyth and Walker set out to expose the "problem closure" inherent in what they term "environmental narratives" in and on northern Thailand. These narratives are storylines based on received wisdom about the nature of and reasons for environmental degradation. More specifically, they show how those inhabiting upland areas and practising upland agriculture, most notably ethnic minority groups, have been portrayed alternatively as environmental saints and sinners. Not only is neither portrayal accurate, suggest the authors, but both portrayals end up leaving them nowhere to move in terms of livelihood options.

Much of the writing on environment and environmental politics in Thailand, and elsewhere, has tended to focus on the contrasting explanations of mainstream and alternative, state and civil society, elite and subaltern voices. In this book, the authors take a different tack, going out of their way to emphasise how deliberate or inadvertent "discourse coalitions" between those with markedly different views have, in fact, at a deeper level forged a common understanding of problems ranging from deforestation and water shortage (and the all-important question of linkages between them) to soil erosion, agricultural chemical pollution and biodiversity loss.

The book builds on previous work by both authors. Tim Forsyth's *Critical Political Ecology* makes a case for examining the science and scientific assumptions on which policy and critique are based, and for examining how the science of environmental problems is framed at societal and political levels. Andrew Walker has, from a number of angles, looked critically at the assumption that the only allowable and sustainable agriculture practised in the uplands should be subsistence-orientated, following an essentialised sustainable practice associated with an assumed preferred practice by particular ethnic groups – notably the Karen. The book builds on this deeply political message to reinforce the case for a more egalitarian and less essentialised way of looking at problems, their causes and their culprits and, therefore, for solutions that do not privilege certain groups and marginalise others on the basis of highly questionable scientific assumptions.

There is much that is exciting and refreshing in this book. Any analysis that takes sacred cows of environmental knowledge by the horns, for example the notion that trees somehow create (rather than consume) water, is to be welcomed. The inadvertent marginalisation of the very same groups that many NGOs are seeking to

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empower is a similarly poignant message. The more inclusive, open and open-minded approach to the creation, employment and questioning of environmental knowledge that is recommended in the closing chapter is similarly to be applauded, although the very same forces that are the subject of much of the book's critique clearly need to be overcome in ways that the analysis leaves largely unaddressed.

The shortcomings of Forsyth and Walker's work are partly of style and partly of substance. The iconoclastic bent of both authors comes through strongly, sometimes to the detriment of the book's intention to convince, feeling at times like too much of a sledgehammer and with significant repetition of messages. The authors' analysis could perhaps, go back further into their own disciplinary antecedents. Harold Conklin's typology of shifting cultivation systems, for example, is never far in the background of the essentialised and dichotomised Good Karen, Bad Hmong that the authors rightly treat with a dose of scepticism. Charles Fisher and others whose detailed agro-ecological descriptions of the 1950s and 1960s underlie some of the generalisations and essentialisations of ethno-ecological practices similarly shoulder some of the explanation (not blame) for today's fossilised understandings of such practices.

It is sometimes a little difficult to determine what the precise critique is of particular authors. For example, in their discussion of Pinkaew Leungramsri's work on the Karen, there is an intimation that she overly romanticises her subjects. Such intimation fails to recognise the very different circumstances of the different Karen groups that Pinkaew has studied in Thung Yai, on the one hand and in northern Thailand on the other.

At a more fundamental level, the authors' demonising of environmental narratives raises questions regarding the target of critique. From their work elsewhere, both the authors could be expected to be among the first to recognise such narratives to be an integral, and normal, element of society-environment relations. At a quasi-functional level, moreover, such narratives are a crucial part of building coalitions for collective action to address real problems. Where the narratives become a problem in themselves is when they take phoney science and victimise innocent groups who are marked out as culprits. Clearly this use of narratives is what the authors have in mind as their own main target, but the exposition in the book tends to dwell on narrative *per se* as the evil to be expunged from environmental science, politics and policy.

Overall, this book deserves to be read by all with an interest in the societal and epistemological bases of environmentalism, and all with an interest in environmental issues in Thailand. It makes important statements in its dissection of environmentalism, and similarly in its commentary on the creation of environmental knowledge. It also gives very specific and extended treatment to issues that continue to lie at the heart of environmental debates in Thailand. The forward-looking question it raises, but only partly addresses, is that of how the science of environment can be made more accessible without being simplified to suit particular agendas.

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