

Thailand

Forest guardians, forest destroyers: The Politics of environmental knowledge in northern Thailand

By TIM FORSYTH and ANDREW WALKER

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What is wrong with the way in which environment and environmental politics have often been conceptualised? What are the repercussions of this? Are there alternative conceptions, visions, doctrines, ideologies, and discourses that would move the debate beyond the impasse of conservation imperative and the sharp divide between forest guardians versus forest destroyers?

Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker set forth a provocative thesis that argues against both positivist science and political ecology in the explanation of environmental processes. For them, the first is apolitical and ignorant of problematic claims towards neutrality and objectivity while the latter is too politicised and inclined to oversimplify the conditions of environmental change which often lead to unnecessary polarisation between state and capitalism on the one hand and local community on the other. To move beyond these shortcomings, the authors suggest 'environmental narratives' as an alternative approach to better understand the nuances connected to resource politics and the complexities of environmental change. This approach, the authors argue, helps unravel the logic that both underlies and governs environmental knowledge believed to be mutually shared, used, and propagated by state agencies, scientists, conservationists, and NGOs alike.

The book uses northern Thailand as the site to test the thesis of environmental narratives. It is widely known that this particular arena has been, for more than three decades, an unsettling terrain shaped by constant resource conflicts between state and ethnic communities, competing environmental discourses and movements, and distinctive views towards upland people, their practice of agriculture and the implications for the environment. The authors assert that despite these seemingly diverse and contradictory perceptions towards forest and livelihoods nexus, they all share the common vision towards environmental change, 'the upland crisis, born of a series of questionable beliefs about environmental processes in the uplands' (p. 227). This prevalent assumption, although generated from different or even oppositional actors, produces complex discourse coalitions that lead to the similar result — the essentialist image of 'uplander' portrayed as either environmental protector or forest destroyer, and the simplified cause and effect of environmental degradation that provide faulty explanations of environmental change. According to the authors, this predetermined framework is unproductive as it prevents and obstructs the possibility of opening up different inquiries and critical ways of formulating knowledge relating to upland environment — the stumbling block the authors call 'problem closure'.

The book's goal is rather ambitious. It strives to create a new platform for environmental debate that not only challenges both 'nature-oriented conservationists'

and ‘people-oriented’ activists, the two oppositions the authors claim derive their ideas from similar environmental basis, but also to redefine the politics of environmental knowledge that would ‘make social influence more transparent and more democratically governed, and that consequently lead to environmental explanations that address underlying environmental and social problems more effectively’ (p. 238). At the biophysical front, the book echoes a similar call from radical scientists such as Ian Calder and his path-breaking work, *The Blue revolution* (1999) which sought to rethink the conventional linkage between forest and water supply. Drawing on scientific evidence in northern Thailand and international research in other parts of the world, the authors debunk the myths of forest and its role in water resources management. The image of forest as sponge with its cover as the source of rainfall is rebutted with the fact that forest also pumps or consumes water. The point is not to deny the significance of forest but rather to pinpoint the uncertainty of environmental phenomena that is not taken into account in scientific discourses. Furthermore, emphasis on water supply as the sole source of conflict has in effect silenced another crucial factor of water shortage — the increase in water demand, especially in the lowland communities. It is also found that scientific uncertainties prevail in many other environmental narratives and claims including the impact of agrochemical use and the value of biodiversity. Yet such assertions have often been powerful in restricting resource use by upland communities and in creating negative views towards commercialised agriculture and the ethnic group engaged in this kind of farming.

The thesis put forward by the book is undoubtedly thought provoking. Its critique of environmental knowledge is a must read for scholars, policy makers, and NGOs who are involved in environmental issues. However, the book is not without problems. Framing environmental politics only through lenses of ‘narratives’ has certain limitations. As environmental narratives are by no means produced in a vacuum but developed out of the specificity of cultural politics and historical context, it is this particularity that the book pays little attention to. The authors’ critique of NGOs and scholar activists as being non-critical of the dichotomy between forest and agriculture, antithetical to upland commercialisation, and perpetuating the Edenic narrative of pristine forest is overstated. While works cited to support this critique are outdated, recent research and publications by NGOs and social scientists relating to issues of dynamics of right and access to agricultural land and changing forms of farming in the uplands are unfortunately missed out from this book. Fixed description and division of the so-called ‘people-oriented’ versus conservationist positions also obscures complex and diverse strands of thinking that might not necessarily fit the two sets of ideological camps defined by the authors.

Despite these distractions, *Forest guardians, forest destroyers* is a critical book that is clearly and engagingly written. It definitely constitutes a step forward in the current environmental literature that offers a stimulating perspective and incisive method for going beyond the apparent conflict between livelihood and conservation in Thailand’s upland.

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