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BOOK REVIEW

***Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers: The Politics of Environmental Knowledge in Northern Thailand.* Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008. 302 pp.**

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The uplands in Northern Thailand are usually associated with the "hill tribe" ethnic minorities such as the Hmong, the Karen, and the Lahu. For many years, the Royal Forest Department (RFD) has stigmatized the hill tribes, blaming their "slash and burn" shifting cultivation for rapid deforestation, and has repeatedly threatened the forest dwellers with forced relocation. In the now infamous Chom Thong conflict in 1998, a conservationist foundation mobilized lowland farmers to destroy the orchards of an upland Hmong community that they blamed for water shortages downstream.

A wide range of scientists have challenged the racist stereotyping of upland ethnic minorities as environmentally destructive. The scientists, who are loosely associated with grassroots activist networks such as the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), argue that traditional cultivation methods, including shifting cultivation, have actually preserved forest landscapes for centuries. The threat of eviction from conservation areas was countered by the AOP's demand for democratic resource management and the right for upland inhabitants to remain in protected areas and to manage their own community forests.

This thought-provoking book takes a fresh look at these extremely controversial political debates over the environment in Northern Thailand. Forsyth and Walker contend that the two "narratives" outlined above converge into one of "environmental crisis" that ends up with new ethnic stereotyping, in which the traditional subsistence agriculture of the Karen, the "forest guardians," is contrasted with the commercial agriculture of the Hmong, the "forest destroyers." The imagery created is one in which the Karen's "local ecological wisdom" (73) preserves the forest, while the Hmong clear forest areas to grow pesticide-soaked cabbages. The bias of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) against commercial agriculture, "their persistent valorization of subsistence-oriented lifestyles and their critique of modernization adds legitimacy to the protectionist perspective" (217) that argues for relocating people from the uplands.

Forsyth and Walker argue that the "environmental crisis narrative" offers "succinct summaries of environmental cause and effect that are seen as factual within popular debates or policy networks," but which are misleading and simplistic because they are "essentially based on highly selective participation in problem definition and knowledge production" (17), i.e., they ignore scientific

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findings that do not fit their own problem definitions and explanations. The result is a series of generalized conclusions that create a picture of impending environmental doom caused by modern agriculture in the uplands. These conclusions do not do justice to the complex and manifold realities in different locations and offer little in terms of constructive environmental policy.

The authors draw on a wide range of environmental science research to challenge many of the assumptions that underpin popular perceptions of the uplands. In chapters 2 and 3, entitled "Mountains, Rivers and Regulated Forests" and "Upland People," they give an excellent overview of the natural and social geography of the region and the dominant stereotyping of wild forest versus agriculture. The "common view that the northern hills are denuded of forest" (39) is contradicted by the fact that they are one of the most forested areas of Thailand. And "despite popular perceptions, hill tribes probably make up less than half the total upland population" (61). These basic truths belie the problem definition of unchecked deforestation by ethnic minorities, but also call into question the focus on traditional practices in harmony with nature that would exclude most of the upland population today.

In the following five chapters (4 through 8), entitled "Forests and Water," "Water Demand," "Erosion," "Agrochemicals" and "Biodiversity," Forsyth and Walker take some of the most common "truths" to task: the watershed forests in the mountains ensure water in the lowlands; water shortages are caused by deforestation; agriculture causes erosion; agrochemicals are washed downstream and poison the lowlanders; agriculture destroys biodiversity. They systematically draw on scientific research to examine the basis of these claims, with often surprising results.

Questioning Claims

In their examination of forests and water, for example, they question claims that forests are responsible for rainfall, that they act as sponges that redistribute runoff to the dry season, and that clearing forests leads to drought. Although the last two decades have seen a dryer period in comparison to the 1970s, this is within the parameters of longer-term fluctuations, and rainfall is primarily influenced by the monsoon climate pattern. Rather than being the basis for water in the lowlands, forests actually reduce stream runoff due to their high interception, evaporation, and transpiration of rainfall. Agriculture increases total runoff and is therefore beneficial for the water supply of lower areas. The conflicts over water, discussed in the following chapter, are not connected to supply problems. Rather, they are caused by a huge increase in water demand induced by the expansion of commercial agriculture into the dry season, particularly orchards. Rather than scapegoating upland agriculture, as in the Chom Thong case, the authors point out that solutions for the problem of competition over water need to focus on the demand side of the problem. And this is a general problem of the lowlands, rather than a specific one of the uplands.

The book is full of detailed case studies and draws on a large amount of research to uncover the complex reality of environmental change in the North. By examining different but interrelated issues, the authors carefully dissect a narra-

tive that simplifies them into one "environmental crisis." The interdisciplinary approach, using knowledge from natural sciences in a creative way informed by social sciences as well as a combination of empirical studies with a more abstract level of analysis makes this a thoughtful work. A key theme of the book is a view of upland farmers as rational human beings who make informed decisions about how they manage their land and who have a right to grow crops and a right to development.

In order to back up their own "narrative" of the existence of one converging and false narrative of environmental crisis, however, Forsyth and Walker often overstate their case. In their discussion of the climatic effects of forests, for example, they neglect the effects of evapotranspiration on local and regional climate. In the chapter on agrochemicals they talk of a "backlash against agrochemicals" (181), which is a grossly exaggerated warning given the hitherto niche existence of organic farming. Rather naively, they claim that "agrochemicals have played a role in supporting vulnerable livelihoods, encouraging the transition away from opium production, and reducing pressures to clear forested areas for cultivation" (182). Later, however, they reveal that thousands of upland farmers have been seriously poisoned by agrochemical use. In general, the authors seem to have a bias against environmentalists, as shown by their attack on James D. Fahn's book, *A Land on Fire: The Environmental Consequences of the Southeast Asian Boom* (Basic Books, 2003).

More seriously, the "narrative approach" is not really grounded in a serious discussion of social change, power relations, and different and competing regimes of natural resource appropriation. There is a tendency to portray them as misguided views that can be overcome by more careful definition of problems and "proper" participatory land use management schemes (238–46). Subsuming two very different and contradictory political economies of land and forest use downplays the real conflicts over access to natural resources. Forest conservation is not just a bureaucratic or NGO concern but is one that affects a great number of farmers who have resisted the destructive practices of logging companies and the RFD. The demand for community forestry arose out of long and protracted struggles and was put forward by farmer networks together with demands for the right to remain living in forest areas, for land reform, and for more sustainable agricultural practices. This was the basis for common action between ethnic minorities and lowland Thais against a real environmental crisis caused by capitalism.

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