
Thailand: Diversity and community forest use versus monocultures and parks

The road linking Trang and Krabi in southern Thailand is an example of what economists call development. What used to be lush tropical forest has been converted into endless rows of either oil palm or rubber trees. The monotony is only broken here and there by a few houses and shops surrounded by a sea of tree monocultures. At the end of the road, shrimp farms occupy the place of mangrove forests, and only a thin row of mangrove trees bordering the river have been spared from destruction. The monoculture model appears to have defeated the rich diversity of the region.

When faced with criticism to such model, government officials will quickly respond that biodiversity has been taken care of within a number of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, that ensure the conservation of native species of flora and fauna.

However, many local people are unhappy, both in relation to monocultures and to official forest conservation policies and have set up organizations to make things change. One such organization is the "Network of People Organisation for Bantad Mountain Range", which has brought together people facing similar problems.

The problems arose some 30 years ago, when the government began to establish different types of protected areas in forests where local communities have lived for centuries, such as in the case of the Sakai ethnic group. In order to be able to remain in the area they had to prove that they had lived there before the forest law was enacted. More importantly, they would be authorized to carry out their traditional activities in the forest if: 1) the area is not considered to be "at risk" or to be "sensitive" by the government 2) the slope is less than 30%. The result of the application of those two conditions make most activities illegal, given that any area can be classified as being "at risk" or "sensitive" and that local communities traditionally use all the different altitudes for different purposes.

What the above conservation model hides is the historical role of the government in forest destruction, both by the promotion of monocultures and through logging concessions.

In the case of monocultures, members of the Bantad Mountain Range Network explain that "the Rubber Tree Fund is part of government. Officials from the Fund come to the area to promote rubber plantations. The local farmers are provided with funds to plant monoculture as a contract on individual land. People are initially happy, but problems later arise. Before, they had integrated garden with rubber, but now it is a monoculture and there are landslides. People lose their traditional means of livelihoods. Other impacts include increased government control, whereby local people's activities are declared illegal and punished. People are controlled by rangers and even with helicopters. People are facing many legal procedures (13 court cases at the moment) and also fines, ranging from 100,000 to 5 million bahts. The community has to pay guarantees to get people out of jail."

The government is also responsible for forest destruction resulting from past logging concessions. Representatives of a member community of the Bantad Mountain Range Network explain that they

came in with the logging company and later stayed in the area. They have now established a system of integrated traditional gardens, where rubber trees are intermixed with fruit trees, bethel, pepper, beans and a long list of other plants that provide for their needs. The community is therefore improving an environment previously degraded by the government-awarded logging concession.

In spite of the positive role they are playing, the communities are having problems with the government. They explain that they have little land area for agriculture (1-5 hectares per family) and that they use the forest as part of their means of livelihoods. Most people live from the gardens, supplemented with hunting (without firearms), fishing, collecting snails, mushrooms, bamboo shoots and other gathering activities. But according to the government, most of this is illegal. "Everything is in fact illegal", they claim. The government tried to relocate them, but they didn't accept and resisted in every way possible. Their struggle is for food security, for the right to choose, for "the right to set the future for ourselves".

One aspect that deserves being highlighted is the access road to the abovementioned community. One of the arguments used by governments for opening roads into the forest is that they will enable people to link with the outside world. However, most roads are truly built to serve the interests of companies wishing to access natural resources (wood, minerals). They are therefore sufficiently wide so that big trucks can extract those resources, but in the case of this community, the road is a peoples' road, adapted to the local situation, where most families own a motorbike. The road is therefore less than 1 metre wide and paved only in some parts having steep slopes. People have easy access, companies don't.

Another interesting process that is developing in the region is the Alternative Agriculture Network. Given the current high prices of oil palm and rubber, local farmers are earning high incomes from these crops. At the same time, high oil prices have resulted in chemical fertilizers becoming very expensive. Added to the health and environmental problems linked to the use of agrottoxics, this has resulted in a situation where more farmers are willing to embrace a more diversified and organic type of agriculture. Chemical fertilizers are being replaced with organic inputs to the soil and many other plants (for food, timber, medicines, fibres) are being introduced under the monoculture plantations. Although the output of the main crop is slightly reduced, this is compensated with the lesser cost and with the large number of other products for self consumption and marketing. This is also seen as a safeguard for possible falls in the international price of rubber and palm oil, as has happened in the past, particularly with rubber.

In sum, local people and communities have organized themselves to protect their environment, livelihoods and rights. The government-promoted package of monocultures, agrottoxics and anti-people protected areas is being changed into a diversified, community based and ecologically respectful system. As local people say, "we want to be proud of what we are and what we are doing." They certainly can.

Article based on local testimonies from a field trip carried out by WRM in July 2008