
Thailand: Long March for Community Forestry

Phrue has been walking for 49 days. Together with ninety eight companions, he set out on the 7th of November on an epic march from Chiang Mai to Bangkok to save the people's component of Thailand's Community Forest Bill (CFB).

The bill, originally advanced by farmer organizations and NGOs to enable communities to protect their forests, is now in danger of being twisted into its opposite. In September 2005, the committee overseeing the drafting of the bill decided to prohibit community forests in special conservation zones (see WRM Bulletin 99).

For Phrue, a Chgor Karen from Chiang Mai province, this would compound decades of injustice at the hands of the Royal Forest Department (RFD) and would threaten his community with eviction, as well as his whole way of life.

His village, Ban Pa Khuanai, typifies the conflict between two contradicting forest management paradigms that has been raging in Thailand for over a century. The Karen have been using forests in a sustainable way long before the RFD was founded. According to Phrue, nature, forest, land and water all have a spirit. Cultural beliefs and superstitions protect certain areas as cemetery forest and holy places. Using the forest and cutting down a tree is done with respect for the interconnectedness of all life.

But this relationship with the forest was challenged, first by a concession allocated to a logging company by the RFD, and then by the announcement that their forest and their homes lie within a national forest reserve and a national park. The villagers, led by the teacher activist Nit, fought back. Nit was killed for leading the struggle against the loggers, but eventually, the villagers prevailed, and earned the right to manage their forest with the permission of the local authorities.

The CFB in its present form would take away any legal security for Phrue and his neighbours, and would undermine their efforts to protect the forest. So, villagers from the North set out on their "Nature Walk" (Thammachat Yatra) to show their determination to fight for their way of life. As a cabinet meeting was scheduled to discuss the bill in mid-December, the marchers decided to travel to Bangkok by truck after reaching Phitsanulok. They were joined by thousands more farmers from the North and the Northeast.

Phrue, however, had sworn an oath that he would walk from his home to Bangkok, and he continued on alone. After a while, he was joined by six others. Their journey is met by impressive solidarity. Each night, they are invited to sleep at the local temple or sub-district office. Villagers from the area bring food and often, a meeting or exchange is organized, where the marchers explain what they are fighting for, and why forests are more than just a resource to be exploited. They aim to reach Bangkok by the end of December and will hold a series of events to gather support for people's community forestry.

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