
Anyone who has visited Thailand over the past two decades would be aware of the concerns about the environmental crisis the nation faces. Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker are no exceptions. In their book, however, they challenge the ways in which the crisis is talked about and even the severity of many aspects of it. Using the concept of “environmental narratives,” they critique the discourses surrounding the environmental crisis in northern Thailand.

Environmental narratives are simplified cause-and-effect explanations of environmental problems that emerge from and reinforce the social and political aspects of environmental knowledge. These narratives underlie critical debates about environment and development. Forsyth and Walker present, then unpack and dispute, several environmental narratives that they argue drive environmental policy. Four dominant themes frame the debates in northern Thailand: water supply and watershed functions; forest protection and biodiversity; agricultural mismanagement; and ethnic conflict. The latter forms the main motivation behind the book. These narratives surround the debate about the environmental impact of upland farmers. Upland ethnic minority farmers are seen as either “forest destroyers” or “forest defenders.” In either case, the authors argue, these labels are applied based on simplified and generalized understandings of the upland ecosystems.

In nine detailed and accessibly written chapters, Forsyth and Walker show how these narratives developed and are misused to promote particular social and political positions. They present how the narratives thrive in the popular imagination, and how they are used by government officials, conservationists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) alike to inform policy. Rarely are the perspectives of upland farmers themselves considered in the framing of these narratives. A central example is that “the key resource provided by the forest is water” (87). From that narrative, several others arise, including descriptions of erosion and soil degradation, the impact of agrochemicals on lowland water quality, a focus on upland water supply rather than lowland water demands and the loss of biodiversity, to name a few.

Given their focus on northern Thailand, the authors emphasize issues that surround upland minorities. Early in the book, they devote a chapter to upland people. They contrast how the Karen and the Hmong are represented, the former as engaging “traditional environmental knowledge” to promote environmentally friendly and sustainable livelihoods, and the latter as environmentally destructive. These ethnic stereotypes pervade environmental narratives, often creating situations of racial discrimination. At times, Forsyth and Walker make their case too strongly and stridently. Even as they complicate both the environmental and the cultural contexts of upland northern
Thailand, they come close to stereotyping the lowland Thais in the region. They accurately mention that the dominant environmental narratives ignore ethnic lowland Thais who farm in the uplands. What they do not discuss is that some lowland Thais, including some NGOs, academics and government officials, themselves challenge the environmental narratives that exist.

One example is their brief discussion of the use of Buddhism to contribute to these narratives. The only environmental monk Forsyth and Walker mention is the controversial Phra Phongsak Techadhammo, and his conservationist organization, Dhammanaat Foundation. I agree that Phongsak and Dhammanaat provide good examples of how some “deep green” conservationists use environmental narratives to serve the social and political interests of lowland Thais, especially against those of the Hmong. Their actions can even be called racist. Phongsak does not, however, represent the majority of monks who have concerns about the environment. Most complicate the issues in ways that Forsyth and Walker argue needs to be done, looking at local ecosystems and the diverse approaches and explanations given by both the people living there (upland minorities and lowland Thais) and the scientific “experts.”

In their discussion of biodiversity and the reasons upland farmers engage in cash and monocropping, the authors provide a somewhat limited explanation. Forsyth and Walker challenge the dominant narrative about the evils of monocropping only through its advantages for farmers and how it can contribute to biodiversity. They do not raise factors such as the debt farmers incur through cash cropping.

Forsyth and Walker raise provocative questions about the environmental situation in northern Thailand. Their critical dissection of environmental narratives forces the reader to rethink assumptions. Grounded in thorough research, they offer a valuable contribution to environmental studies in Thailand. Their book is well worth reading, and it promotes thinking about the complexities of the situations they discuss. While I do not always agree with their interpretations of the debates or how various actors engage these narratives, they challenge how we think which is crucial to moving the social and political understandings of environmental situations forward.

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