pp. 195-216 in Jasanoff, S. and Long, M. (eds) ***Earthy Politics: local and global in environmental governance*****, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.**

Chapter 7

Social movements and environmental democratization in Thailand

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Much recent environmental debate has suggested that social movements perform a crucial role in communicating "local" environmental knowledge to policy processes. Arturo Escobar (1996: 65), for example, remarked that "we need new narratives of life and culture… they will arise from the mediations that local culture are able to effect…. This is a collective task that perhaps only social movements are in a position to advance." Building on this, Peet and Watts (1996) have described a new approach to environmental politics called "Liberation Ecologies" in which social movements may democratize environmental discourse towards more locally determined concerns.

This chapter takes a more critical view. In contrast to these statements, the chapter argues that there is no necessary and logical connection between social movements, the elevation of local knowledge and concerns, and environmental democratization. Instead, there is a need to understand how the ideology of environmental globalism may shape the perception of what is considered to be "local," and how apparently "local" social movements may adopt "global" discourses. Indeed, political activism through social movements may not result in environmental democratization, but in a reinforcement of pre-existing political hegemonies.

The chapter illustrates these points by discussing two examples of social movements in Thailand: opposition to the filming of the Hollywood movie, *The Beach*, and political activism concerning community forestry. As one rapidly industrializing country, Thailand is an appropriate example of where social movements have voiced concern against apparently global forces of environmental degradation. Yet, these disputes contain further social divisions and contestations about environmental policy that draw into question common uses of the terms "local" and "global."

Such political construction of these concepts needs to be acknowledged before social movements or knowledge can be claimed to be "local."

Social movements and environmental democratization

There is now little doubt that social movements are a key component of a full and inclusive civil society. Indeed, Cohen and Arato (1992: 492) noted, "social movements constitute the dynamic element in processes that might realize the positive potentials of modern civil societies." Social movements have also been largely responsible for establishing environmental concern as a significant topic of national and international politics. Indeed, some have argued that the combination of a successful civil society and environmental social movements may be called "environmental democratization:"

> Environmental democratization is defined as a participatory and ecologically rational form of collective decision making: it prioritizes judgments based on long-term generalizable interests, facilitated by communicative

> political procedures and a radicalization of existing liberal rights (Mason, 1999: 1).

But can the process of "environmental democratization" be defined simply in these terms? While Mason is clearly correct to point out the need to privilege the existence of rights under democratization, he overlooks the diversity of perceptions of the environment, or how social movements themselves may shape, rather than act upon, notions of environmental concern. For example, Mason does not discuss how, and for whom, collective decision- making may be "ecologically rational" or with "long-term generalizable interests." We will see in this section how social movements may be associated with different and competing visions of ecological rationality, and why these differences are important for environmental democratization.

Environmentalism has been described as one of the classic "new" social movements that developed in Europe and North America during the 1960s, resulting from resistance to the perceived instrumentality of modern industrial life (see Tourraine 1981). As such, new social movements are

claimed to be different from "old" social movements based on historic class divisions because they concern topics such as environmentalism, gender, or racial rights, which (allegedly) cannot be expressed in terms of class alone. Yet, significantly, new social movements have often been composed of relatively more powerful middle classes who have sought to achieve reform for the sake of all classes. Giddens (1973), for example, claimed that new social movements are "class-aware" but not "class-conscious." Offe wrote:

> New middle class politics, in contrast to most working class politics, as well as old middle class politics, is typically a politics *of a* class but not *on behalf of* a class (Offe, 1985: 833, his emphasis).

And Beck, writing about the "risk society," proclaimed: "With the globalization of risks a social dynamic is set in motion, which can no longer be composed of and understood in class categories" (Beck, 1992: 39).

These claims that class does not influence environmental concerns associated with social movements are questionable. US environmental historians, for example, have highlighted how perceptions of wilderness as fragile or beautiful was limited to the emergence of urban middle classes (see the seminal work of Nash, 1982). Giddens (1994), again, has linked the desire to conserve nature to the anxieties about then perceived "loss of tradition" in late modernity, rather than to real environmental threats. Marxist theorists have also claimed that environmentalism, and wilderness-based approaches to conservation fail to acknowledge the kinds of environmental risks that affect less powerful workers. Enzensberger famously commented:

> The social neutrality to which the ecological debate lays claim having recourse as it does so to strategies derived from the evidence of the natural science, is a fiction… In so far as it can be considered a source of ideology, ecology is a matter that concerns the middle class (Enzensberger, 1974: 10).

Environmentalism associated specifically with middle classes not only places high value on threatened wilderness, but may influence the use and interpretation of scientific knowledge. In particular, the overt focus upon the preservation of wilderness has prompted links between the environmentalism of the new social movements with so-called "balance of nature," or equilibrium-based, notions of ecological fragility (see Botkin, 1990; Zimmerer, 2000). These approaches are generally associated with beliefs that ecosystems illustrate principles of entropy, balance, and progression to pre-defined points of stasis, such as the original model of vegetational succession (Clements, 1916). Increasingly, however, these approaches have been questioned by so-called "non-equilibrium" or "new" ecologies reflecting insights from chaos theory. Non-equilibrium ecology urges more attention to the influence of disturbance as a creative and influential force in ecology and landscape. In valuing wilderness as "pristine" or fragile activists also appear to favor ecological stability over ecological change (Adams, 1997). Yet, such notions of stability and fragility may sometimes be used to legitimize policies – such as resettling villages, or

forbidding some agricultural practices – that might otherwise attract criticism for their impacts on forest settlers or shifting cultivators (Leach and Mearns, 1996; Zimmerer, 2000).

The environmentalism of new social movements and equilibrium-based approaches to ecology illustrates one key point. Social movements represent no uniform and universally agreed form of environmentalism. Indeed, middle-class environmentalism may not always acknowledge diverse alternative framings from different classes, or other social divisions such as gender, caste, or age. Consequently, environmental social movements, *per se*, may not necessarily lead to a universally agreed form of "environmental democratization." Reflecting such concerns, Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) have urged recognition of "varieties of environmentalism," based on class differences, and have called for an "environmentalism of the poor," which focuses less on landscape conservation, and more on sustainable local livelihoods and environmental protection for poor people. But there are also wider reasons to worry that international environmental social

movements may represent, or impose, environmental agendas of poor people.

There has been a trend in recent years to highlight the beneficial role of international alliances or advocacy coalitions in assisting grassroots or livelihood struggles in developing countries. Bryant and Bailey (1997: 190), for example, argued that environmental grassroots activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) represent a "natural alliance" against states and transnational corporations. Keck and Sikkink (1999: 215) claimed that international advocacy coalitions among environmental NGOs and campaigners in different countries allow "ecological values to be placed above narrow definitions of national interest." (While NGOs, or grassroots organizations, of course, are not social movements *per se*, they often represent the political expression of movements, and can help institutionalize the activism associated with social movements.)

Critics have suggested that these views overlook how more powerful agendas may be imposed on less powerful local activists. The concept of expanding "ecological values" via epistemic communities,[1] for example, has been criticized

for overlooking divisions within such “communities” and the social or political factors necessary for networks to be extended (see Jasanoff 1996; Lahsen, this volume). Some critics have also suggested that “green globalism” represents innate tendencies for control within Western cultures (Lohmann, 1993). More pragmatically, the act of alliance itself may also weaken less powerful voices. Covey (1995), for instance, demonstrated that alliances between middle-class NGOs and grassroots organizations in the Philippines became dominated by the NGO concerns, and consequently led to an avoidance of poverty-related aspects of environmental policy.

Yet, it is still unclear how far it is possible to represent such weaker, “local” voices. Vandana Shiva, writing about the apparent misappropriation of local livelihood struggles by global environmentalism, wrote:

> In recent years, the two decades of the green movement are being erased. The “local” has disappeared from environmental concern. Suddenly, it seems only “global” environmental problems exist, and it is taken for granted

> that their solution can only be "global:… The "global" in the dominant discourse is the political space in which a particular local seeks global control, and frees itself of local, national and international restraints. The global does not represent the universal human interest, it represents a particular local and parochial interest which has been globalized through the scope of its reach (Shiva, 1993: 149).

Yet, Shiva herself was later criticized for allegedly falsely representing subaltern voices either through her own statements or by allowing other critics to use her voice (Jackson, 1995: 139).

Similar concerns have also surfaced around scientific principles underlying environmental management. Studies of scientific discourses in developing countries have often revealed that many popularly established notions of environmental degradation such as deforestation or desertification may not be simply blamed on local land uses or increasing populations as commonly suggested (see

Thompson *et al*. 1986; Leach and Mearns, 1996). Many locally-based studies of land management in supposedly fragile environments have revealed that common assumptions about the universal applicability of concepts of environmental degradation may neither be considered degrading by local inhabitants, nor necessarily caused by their activities (see Forsyth, 2003).

Indeed, in relation to the Machakos region of Kenya, for example, Tiffen and Mortimore (1994) famously found that “more people” may mean “less erosion” because of the importance of local land-management practices. Similarly, in Guinea, West Africa, Fairhead and Leach (1996) also found that villagers had contributed to the growth of forest “islands” in the savanna–forest convergence zone, rather than causing deforestation as commonly assumed by generations of expert scientists and policymakers. In such cases, the “local knowledge” of land management and conservation had been overlooked by the universalistic and globalizing discourses of many conservationists. Consequently, social movements adopting global discourses may not succeed in environmental democratization because they may instead re-impose such unrepresentative

explanations in locations where they are not warranted (see Agrawal, 1995).

So, how can the “local” be represented – especially if it lacks sufficient power to achieve its own voice, or if engaging in social movements risks sacrificing that voice? The example of Vandana Shiva above illustrates an important paradox in the harnessing of “local” versus “global” knowledge in environmentalism. In order to gain legitimacy, environmentalism has called upon global science and universal ecological principles to highlight environmental fragility and the need for conservation. Yet, at times it has also called upon “local” knowledge or the local adoption of its principles to legitimize these claims politically. The criticisms of sociologists and researchers of environmental science have indicated that universalizing ecological principles overlook insights from local or unrepresented social groups. But perhaps the most important question to ask first is how to achieve local representation when the very definitions of “local” and “global” are so insufficiently understood, and so open to manipulation.

Social movements and ecological discourse in Thailand

Thailand is, most obviously, a rapidly developing country in which struggles over natural resources occur, and policy is affected by a variety of global scientific discourses and local activism. Yet, perhaps less visibly, Thailand is also a site of environmental conflict that represents in many ways the tensions between local resistance and global invasion. Now a major tourism destination, Thailand epitomizes many projections about beautiful paradise and complex oriental cultures. Many activists see Thailand as an innovative site of local resistance against the material impacts of globalism (such as industrialization), as well as more discursive effects of imposing western visions of nature and culture upon distant people. As the only country never to have been officially colonized by western powers, Thailand has a history of asserting independence. These factors are influential in the case studies of Thai social movements and environmental activism discussed in this section.

Many commentators trace the emergence of environmentalism as a politically potent social movement in Thailand to the years 1988-1989. In 1988, a long-term

campaign finally succeeded in persuading the government to postpone the construction of the proposed Nam Choan dam in a rainforest in western Thailand. Later in the year, a related campaign to ban all forms of logging within Thailand also finally succeeded in enacting a logging ban effective in 1990. Before these successes, overtly "environmental" concern in Thailand was almost totally restricted to the activities of urban, educated citizens, such as the Association for Wildlife Conservation of Thailand, or specific locations such as the mountain of Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai where residents proposed a cable car.

The activism in 1988 coincided with the election of Thailand's first long-term democratic government. Some analysts have argued that environmentalism has always been linked with democratization, by demonstrating the importance of natural resources to small communities, or by providing a means of political expression during periods when more overt activism would have been suppressed by military governments (e.g. Hirsch, 1997). Campaigns after 1988 also opposed the state in various ways: rejecting corruption (or illegal logging by officials); exposing inefficiencies (such as the inability of the centralized

Royal Forestry Department to protect resources); protesting the use of public resources by private companies; or resisting enforced reforestation and resettlement of villages on land officially owned by the state.

Concern about deforestation, in particular, reflects a variety of deep-rooted political and ecological uncertainties (Hirsch 1997, 1998). The common and overriding concern is that Thailand, having lost some 50 percent of its forests within the last 40 years, has been deeply degraded by rapid industrialization and agricultural extension, with subsequent loss of wilderness, and biodiversity. Rapid social change and perceived “loss of tradition” have also arguably increased the perception of a loss of heritage (Stott 1991).

These framings have influenced environmental discourse, and the selection of “local” knowledge as both a target and source of environmental policy. Deforestation in the northern mountains, for example, has been blamed for water shortages in the central plains and cities, but such an explanation may overlook both the increased demand for water, or the ability of upland farmers to protect resources (e.g. Alford 1992; Forsyth 1996). Similarly, some

Thai scholars and social activists have deliberately sought to promote the concept of so-called "community (or "local") culture" (*wattanatham chumchon*) on the basis that "village culture" is older, better, and worthier than state-led development. Yet other critics have suggested this is both romantic and counter-productive to development (Rigg 1991).

The following example reveals two markedy different discourses of "local" wisdom concerning watershed degradation in the far northern hills of Thailand. The first is from an environmental magazine that described the types of environmental problems experienced by poor farmers in Thailand:

> When I was a boy, our village was surrounded by dense forest. There were tigers and lots of big trees, some two meters in diameter. When I was about 30, I saw the forest beginning to disappear, but then there was still water in the streams. Fifteen years later, the stream had disappeared too. Now we only have artesian wells which are so inadequate that people fight over them.[2]

Although this statement is represented as being from one “local” inhabitant, and a victim of environmental degradation, it may also be seen to reflect a variety of classically middle class concerns. These include the loss of wildlife; a sense of lost equilibrium or harmony in the countryside; and encroaching conflict and strife as a result. This quotation, however, stands in stark contrast to the views of another “local” inhabitant collected during my own in-depth research in the hills. A highland farmer (Iu Mien, or Yao) who historically practiced shifting cultivation including the occasional burning of forest, and who traditionally lived high up in the hills rather on the plains beneath them, spoke as follows:

> It has been a saying in our people for many, many years that in order to get a regular, year-round long-term supply of water you need to cut down the largest trees around the village. I have seen it myself. It is only since we arrived in Thailand that we have heard people claim that this is not the case, and it

is the Thai extension workers who tell us this.[3]

These statements represent radically different evaluations of environmental change based on contrasting experiences of hydrology and water supply. (Indeed, water shortages are a major problem for middle classes and peasantry alike). Rather than assessing why each statement may be considered accurate by each speaker, it is important to note that government policy and middle-class actors in Thailand generally consider the first to be the more accurate and urgent. Water shortages are among the most common and politically potent social problems in Thailand. Yet debate focuses more on presumed causes of declining water supply in the uplands than on increased uses of water in the lowlands from practices such as irrigation of fruit crops and rice fields, industrial estates, and cities.

Government policy has generally been to restore lost forests through plantation reforestation, and to restrict upland agriculture where it is seen to be threatening to forests or watersheds. Yet, these policies may also be justified for many potentially more controversial reasons,

such as the middle-class concern at lost forests and wilderness; the historic government desire to gain control over land lived in by mountain minorities; or the need to somehow maintain a supply of wood from forest plantations for construction and industry. "Scientific" (or "global") ecological principles are likely to be used to legitimize such policies. Below, we consider two more detailed case studies exemplifying different uses of "local" and "global" concepts of environmental knowledge and social activism.

Enforcing the balance of nature: resisting "The Beach"

The first case concerns the dispute associated with the filming of the Hollywood movie, *The Beach*, in 1998–1999 (also see Forsyth 2002). In this case a campaign dominated by middle class activists adopted both "global" principles of ecological balance and fragility, and an emphasis on "locality" to enhance its objectives.

Protests against the film centered on the decision of the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) to allow a foreign company access to a national park in the Phi Phi Islands, in Krabi province, south of Phuket in 1998. During the 1970s, a distinctive limestone cave in neighboring Phangnga Province became known as "James Bond Island" after *The Man*

with the Golden Gun was filmed there, and has remained a tourist attraction since. It was hoped that *The Beach*, starring the Hollywood idol Leonardo Di Caprio, and featuring a story about backpackers, drugs and self-exploration, would also generate a flow of tourism and publicity for Thailand.

Unfortunately, however, the film crew wanted to change the physical properties of the selected beach in Maya Bay, Phi Phi Leh Island. Bulldozers were used to widen the area covered by sand in order to shoot a soccer game, and 60 coconut palms were imported and planted on the beach in order to make it conform to the desired image of a tropical paradise. This was in clear contravention of the 1961 National Park Act of Thailand that made it illegal to damage or change any aspect of landscape in parks. The decision by the RFD therefore appeared to be a case of the government both bending national laws for international investors, and failing to protect natural resources.

Throughout the dispute, campaigners sought to represent the actions of the RFD as an assault on a unique and fragile ecosystem. A woman campaigner, who had been

active for years as a freelance journalist and environmentalist, was quoted as saying:

> If they were just shooting the film, that would be fine, but they're going to take out the indigenous plants and keep them in pots in a nursery. The place is beautiful but it's not Hollywood's idea of a tropical island. For them a tropical island needs coconut trees so they're going to plant 100 coconut trees. This is a major ecological disaster.[4]

A particularly graphic editorial in *The Nation*, an English-language national daily newspaper also stated:

> Imagine filming an ambitious Hollywood blockbuster on Phi Phi Island, one of the most beautiful islands in the Pacific. All the elaborate and crushing equipment and ravaging crew laying waste to most of what they touch. This is what is about to descend on Phi Phi if

20th Century Fox gets the final go ahead from the Thai Government to shoot *The Beach*.[5]

Much concern focused on the disturbance to the plants, sand and coral in the bay. Newspaper reports and information on web pages mentioned exotically named local plants such as Giant Milkweed, Sea Pandanus, Spider Lily and other beach grasses. Some journalists also suggested that introducing coconut palms to the island might be damaging because they might not be indigenous. A university biologist also expressed concern at the company's restoration efforts, saying: "From years of experience and numerous experiments around the world, there's never been a case where the altered environment can be completely restored."[6]

Meanwhile, the campaign also maintained pressure on the RFD and its high-profile head, Plodprasob Suraswadi, for alleged corruption in overturning national legislation, and also for accepting a payment of some $200,000 from the company to assist with cleaning up the site. Fishing communities and villagers on neighboring islands and the mainland also joined the protest, although newspapers

reported that many villagers supported the filming. Although middle-class activists dominated the campaign, the national labor organization, the Assembly of the Poor, sent representatives to show support. Indeed, several organizations supported a lawsuit against the RFD in Thailand, and some 20 civic and environmental groups filed a petition to the US Department of Justice alleging that Fox had acted corruptly by offering the RFD a bribe.

The campaign effectively ended when the filming stopped and when the film was eventually released to poor reviews. Although the campaigners had failed to stop the filming, or successfully initiate a lawsuit, they did succeed in drawing attention to the apparently undemocratic and highhanded actions of the RFD. A discourse of ecological fragility was used to generate public concern, even when statements were exaggerated. Under “new ecological” thinking, for example, it is not surprising that “there has never been a case where the altered environment can be completely restored” (as stated by the biologist above) because such environments are constantly changing. Coastal beach environments are well known to be dynamic and changeable over short time scales. Erosion on

beaches is common and not always problematic. Suggesting that coconut trees might damage the ecosystem because they are not indigenous ignores the fact that such palms are found throughout the region, and that the various influences (other than filming) act upon the Maya Bay landscape.[7] Indeed, the film company claimed to have removed some two tons of garbage left on the beach by tourists, and which the RFD had not removed.

In fighting the RFD, the campaigners therefore relied mainly upon the construction of the beach itself as a fragile and exotic locality. Such "locality" was further reinforced by the emphasis on endemic (and exotically named) species. The filming was also said to offend national sensibilities by superimposing foreign conceptualizations of landscape upon the beach, and transcending national laws for the sake of foreigners. The campaign permitted activists from various social backgrounds to resist undemocratic behavior from the state. But it adopted and reaffirmed a dominant ecological discourse in order to empower their action in one locality, rather than seek to define a new and more locally determined discourse.

Challenging the balance of nature: community forests

The second case centers on the debate about community forests in Thailand and reflects both the adoption of "global" ecological principles of fragility and balance and "local" campaigns to reverse such thinking in favor of more locally determined and locally governed resource use.

The term "community forestry" refers to the governance and management of forest resources by local people, such as villagers. "Community forests," however, suggest an alternative conceptualization of forests from that usually associated with the scientific discourses of "forestry." Indeed, "community forests" are often governed by lay people, rather than through consultation with or control by external experts in forestry science.[7] According to one internationally respected Thai scholar of forestry, the key difference between so-called "community" and "scientific" forestry is in the villagers' rejection of plantations as a sustainable and usable form of forest:

> The village people look at forests as the whole of nature rather than just as a monoculture. This is a different view from that of a

> forester… Forestry education follows the curriculum and style of Western forestry education... it ignores the local knowledge as it not scientific.[8]

Proponents of community forestry – such as many villagers, academics and social development NGOs – claim that it allows greater access to forests by different stakeholders, with the intention of safeguarding local livelihoods, plus better management and protection than possible from a centralized body such as the Royal Forestry Department (RFD). Opponents – such as conservationist NGOs, and the RFD – have generally claimed that increasing access to forests will only increase deforestation. It is worth noting, however, that many different concepts of community forestry exist, and the debate mainly focuses on defining where, and by whom, forests may be communally governed. The debate has gone on for years in Thailand, and since 1996, the government and activists have proposed and rewritten several drafts of a proposed community forestry bill, intended to become law in the early 2000s (see Johnson and Forsyth, 2002).

The debate about community forests illustrates social divisions between activists seeking to protect forests by restricting public access and campaigners seeking to increase public participation in resource management. Yet, the underlying themes are complex. The RFD has generally opposed liberal approaches to community forestry because it challenges the central management role performed by the Department since its establishment in the late nineteenth century. This position is shared by many conservationists (often middle class) who oppose community forestry because they fear it will never allow sufficient protection of biodiversity, or will be abused to allow more commercialized forms of logging and mining concessions.

Against this position, many pro-development activists support community forestry because it may offer a model for devolved governance. Indeed, the 1997 Constitution of Thailand was considered the most democratic to date because it allowed public participation in decisions about resource use and infrastructure. The debate also concerns the long-standing problem of addressing the issue of upland minorities (so-called "hill tribes") in northern Thailand, who are commonly blamed for causing deforestation and water

shortages, and for whom the RFD has traditionally proposed enforced plantation reforestation and resettlement as a means of land management. Indeed, one representative of such a "hill tribe," the Karen, commented:

> Community forestry's main concern is the livelihoods of local people and local communities… Scientific foresters [such as the RFD] assume that humans only make problems in a protected area, but our work is to let outsiders understand how local people conserve the forest… Community forestry is about decentralized management by communities, but conventional scientific forestry is about centralized management.[9]

Much initial debate about community forestry in the 1990s focused on the attempts of the state to reforest and forcibly resettle villages on state-owned land in northeastern Thailand, particularly around the locality of Pa Kham in Buri Ram province. Such action by the (then military) state was considered insensitive to local

development, and helped enforce a new discourse of poverty and environment. As one campaigning journalist later expressed it: “We must ...stick together, work together, and we just couldn’t kick the poor out of the scene just to save the trees.”[10] Indeed, sentiment like this was not restricted to community forestry, but was also important in public protest against the construction of dams in rural areas involving the destruction of agricultural land and fisheries.[11]

Protests like these sought to represent previously unrepresented “local” people in the policy process concerning natural resources management. There have also been attempts to highlight the role of “communities” in protecting forest or watershed resources, in apparent contradiction to orthodox scientific beliefs about ecological fragility. For example, a variety of Thai and foreign researchers have argued that upland agriculture by ethnic minorities may not be as damaging to forests and soils as commonly thought, and that lowland activities such as irrigated rice and fruit trees may also share responsibility for apparent water shortages (e.g. Hirsch 1997; Anan 2000). Activists have hoped that highlighting

these additional concerns might indicate that state-controlled plantation reforestation and resettlement of villages in the uplands may not be necessary, and that more locally governed forest management may be achievable by working with, rather than against, village practices.

Clearly, however, these campaigns also use “local” knowledge to further their non-political interests or to counter the opposition’s claims. For example, many observers have criticized research on local forest management for commoditizing and romanticizing village wisdom at a time when the pressures on forests and so-called traditional rural lifestyles has never been higher, and arguably no longer necessary for resource management (Walker, 2001). Some critics have also suggested that the attention to colorful minorities (or “hill tribes”), with distinctive costumes and historic involvement in opium production, may reflect an interest in the exotic that overlooks both their environmental impacts and also the rights of lowland Thai groups who are comparatively less researched. For example, one recent colorful coffee table book about the Akha ethnic minority used the title, *Akha: Guardians of the Forest* (Goodman 1998) because the Akha

have a reputation for protecting forest zones close to villages for spiritual purposes. Research on Akha shifting cultivation, however, has suggested that agricultural land tended by Akha is less biodiverse than land tended by other groups such as the Karen and Lawa (Schmidt-Vogt 1999).

Opposition to the community forestry campaign has reflected a continued adoption of the discourse of the balance of nature. The RFD director, Plodprasob Suraswadi, has on various occasions stated that “man [sic] and nature cannot coexist” in order to use scientific discourse to weaken any proposal for community forestry. Similarly, in discussions and interviews, Plodprasob also refers to the purpose of upland land management purely in terms of generating water supply for the lowlands; national security (in excluding migrants); or protection of wilderness and biodiversity. Such clinical descriptions of the problem restrict the debate to the perspectives of the state and lowlanders.

Conservationists have also used “local” knowledge for their own purposes. In 1991 an Australian television documentary about forest disputes in northern Thailand used the title: “*The Monk, the Princess and the Forest*” (van

Beld 1991) in order to focus on one particularly notorious conflict at Chom Thong, where lowland villagers, with the support of a local monk and royal benefactor, were working to exclude highland farmers from the forest. The documentary inaccurately described the local forest as "rainforest" and claimed the dispute was a good example of grassroots resistance against environmental degradation. Later analysts have criticized this group as racist and inflammatory for their actions, and particularly for erecting a new barbed-wire fence with posts painted in Thai national colors around land used by upland farmers (Pinkaew 1997; Lohmann 1999). Indeed, the use of Thai colors in this context again highlights nationalism as another means to define locality, or the boundary around which certain actors will allow debate to take place. Nationalist discourse again surfaced at a conference in Chiang Mai in 2001, when members of this conservationist group sought to delegitimize scientific statements from foreign academics on the grounds that they were "foreigners" who wanted to "steal Thai nature from Thai people."[12] Some activists have resisted the ratification of the international Convention on Biological Diversity because it may allow foreign

companies to “steal” Thai biodiversity. In these cases, the national territory itself is being used as a form of dominant locality, a device to include or exclude participants in debate.

Some of the barriers to community forestry are more direct. In May 1999, for example, some 5,000 upland and lowland farmers demonstrated outside the provincial hall of Chiang Mai with a variety of demands including better access to Thai citizenship and an end to unwanted reforestation. The protest was forcibly broken up by RFD and police. When Thai academics called for a more informed approach to forest rights and citizenship, the governor of Chiang Mai denounced them as “traitors”. In 2001, a coalition of pro-democracy groups also called on Plodprasob to resign because of his use of force to resist calls for community forestry, and his tendency to declare agricultural or settled land as “sanctuary forest” in order to legitimize resettlement.[13]

Such conflicts have had varied impacts on environmental discourse. While public concern at the plight of different “communities” seems variable, there still seems little general rethinking of scientific discourses

about ecological fragility or deforestation. When poor farmers protested the government reforestation of land in Dong Lan in Khon Kaen province in the northeast in 1999, newspapers generally reported the event as lawlessness and trespassing by the villagers. The land was described as "degraded," and reforestation (generally of eucalyptus plantations) was seen to be progressive.

Yet, while such descriptions generally increase criticism of the concept of community forests, there also seems to be a simultaneous transition to construct other local groups as protectors of forest. The Karen are Thailand's largest "hill tribe" group, and live, generally, in the northwest of Thailand on the Thai-Burmese border among the teak forests of the Salween and Ping basins, and unlike more recent migrants to Thailand such as the Hmong or Akha, they have lived in Thailand for some 200 or more years. The Karen, stereotypically, have adopted a "rotational" form of shifting cultivation that allows the cultivation of regular units of land over a cycle of some years, and therefore allows the recovery of forest land, and permits villages to remain semi-permanent for some years at the same site. (Other forms of shifting

cultivation may use land continuously until it is exhausted, and hence imply that villages have to relocate every 10–20 years: see Grandstaff, 1980). Such rotational shifting cultivation is now increasingly referred to with the words, “local knowledge.” While represented in the 1970s as another form of “hill tribe” with potential security threats, Karen people are now increasingly held up as examples of *phumibanyaa chaobaan* (local wisdom) because of their willingness to protect forestland despite shifting cultivation, and their extensive knowledge of plants and trees. Indeed, arguments *against* community forests have increasingly cited the potential risks of lead mining or deforestation to Karen as forest dwellers and potential victims of development. This new representation of the Karen as both a defined “community” and as protective of forest may indicate how one “local” ethnic group has been used by both proponents and opponents of community forestry to support their respective campaign (Walker 2001).

Different actors in community forestry in Thailand, therefore, have adopted concepts of “local knowledge” in order to empower their own campaigns and to define who is to be included in or excluded from the debate. Proponents

of community forestry have sought to represent "local" people and environmental knowledge to create alternative framings of environmental problems to those of so-called scientific (or plantation) forestry, and the problems faced by marginalized social groups. Opponents of community forestry, however, have sought to discuss "locality" in terms of demonstrating the fragility of specific forest ecosystems; the nationalistic unity of Thailand; and the small-scale, and unusual, and hence allegedly illegitimate, practices performed by minorities.

Conclusion

How far can social movements democratize environmental discourse by allowing the communication of "local" as opposed to "global" knowledge to science and policy debates? This chapter's main conclusion, based on the analysis of the discourse of ecological fragility and exclusion of people from forests in Thailand, is that social movements have not succeeded in such democratization, and indeed may strengthen pre-existing discourses. In particular, social movements may powerfully reproduce and reinforce equilibrium, or "balance of nature," conceptualizations of ecology that may overlook

underlying ecological complexity, and may lead to repressive land-use policies despite evidence that suggests such policies may be unnecessary.

Indeed, the case studies support a need for wider work on the potentially repressive impacts of "balance of nature" approaches to ecology, and on conservation strategies based on globalized scientific statements of causality rather than looking to see how local experience may contradict such statements. As Zimmerer noted:

> Many abuses that have stemmed from conservation policies are rooted in the belief, held by policymakers, politicians, scientists, and administrators, of a balance or equilibrium-tending stability of nature (Zimmerer, 2000: 357).

Thus instead of seeking to extend "ecological values" across national boundaries and enhance so-called epistemic communities of ecological rationality, as some have proposed (e.g. see Keck and Sikkink, 1998, above), a more effective and socially just form of environmental

democratization is to allow greater participation in the formation of such concepts of ecology in the first place. Such participation may be achieved both by seeking to represent "local" (or in some way previously socially marginalized) knowledge, but also through an appreciation of the temporal and cultural specificity of such statements of supposed ecological rationality.

The examples relating to protests against *The Beach* and the campaign for community forestry show that activists have used the concept of "local knowledge" in a variety of ways both to strengthen their campaigns, and to recruit or exclude other actors. Activists arguing in favor of ecological fragility have used the word "local," particularly about places, to indicate uniqueness, nationalism, and the need to protect against unwanted outsiders. Indeed, the perceived threat of global culture, as symbolized by Hollywood, and its apparently unlawful alliance with part of the Thai State, may be seen as particularly hostile by concerned activists who have seen Thailand transformed radically in the space of some decades, with loss of historical and cultural identities.

On the other hand, activists seeking to challenge ecological fragility and promote devolved governance have applied the term “local” more specifically to people and their alternative perspectives on ecological processes and land management. At times, such perspectives may have led to the construction of “hill tribes,” and the Karen in particular, as discrete social units exemplifying alternate forms of sustainable development. In both cases, environmental activism has reflected these wider social framings, rather than just the short-term details of each specific case.

These findings, then, stand as a pessimistic response to the optimism of much writing on social movements as instruments of environmental democratization (such as Peet and Watts’ (1996) discussion of “Liberation Ecologies”). It is sometimes more important to analyze what forms of environmentalism are being communicated by social movements, and who wins and loses from environmental discourses, rather than simply to assume that environmentalism or “ecological values” are necessarily progressive. Yet rather than abandon hope of democratizing environmental discourses on behalf of “local” or

unrepresented groups, it may be more productive to change the focus of debate from the avoidance of particular perspectives to the reform of the debate itself. Instead of assuming the benefits of what we may think is "local" before joining the debate, perhaps the best route to environmental democratization is an analysis of how different actors use the term "local." A politically powerful "localization" of environmental discourse may depend in the end on granting identity and meaning to disadvantaged groups and neglected locations.

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1 Haas (1992) defined an epistemic community as follows: "An epistemic community is a network of professional with recognized experience and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area…. What bonds members of an epistemic community is their shared belief or faith in the verity and the applicability of particular forms of knowledge or specific truths" (Haas, 1992:3).

[2] *Watershed* magazine 1:1 (1990)

[3] Forsyth (1996)

[4] *Bangkok Post* 18th October 1998

[5] *The Nation* 17th October 1998, page A4

[6] Surachet Chetmas, Dean of Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University, quoted in *The Bangkok Post* 19th December 1998

[7] *Bangkok Post* 18th February 1999

[8] Dr. Somsak Sukwong, Director, Regional Community Forestry Training, Center, Bangkok, quoted in *Watershed* 6:2, 12 (2001)

[9] Saw Frankie, Coordinator of Karen Education Information Center in Bangkok, quoted in *Watershed* 6:2, 22 (2001)

[10] Santisuda Ekichai, *The Bangkok Post*, personal interview with author 19th March 1999

[11] Several dams have been proposed and opposed on these grounds. The most famous is the Pak Mul dam in Ubon Ratchatani province, in eastern Thailand, which has been claimed to destroy local fishing livelihoods without adequate creation of electricity generating capacity.

[12] Personal observation at: International Symposium on Watershed Management, Highland and Lowland in the Protected Area Regime: Towards New Principles and Practices, International Center, Chiang Mai University 23-26 March 2001

[13] *Bangkok Post* 30th July 2001