

Review: Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers: The Politics of Environmental Knowledge in Northern Thailand

By Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker

Reviewed by Matthew J. Forss

Forsyth, Tim and Walker, Andrew. *Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers: The Politics of Environmental Knowledge in Northern Thailand*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008. 302 pp. ISBN: 978-0-295-98822-1. US\$25.00, paper. Printed on 90 percent recycled acid free paper from at least 50 percent post-consumer waste.

Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker's lifetime of working in northern Thailand certainly provides a more than cursory examination of the political ecology of the region. This book does not, "...suggest that environmental problems do not exist or that environmental policy is unnecessary" (p. 3). However, the chapters contain, "...a deeper political analysis of how and why---and with whose influence--- environmental problems are defined the way they are" (p. 3). Essentially, Forsyth and Walker incorporate well-defined arguments of environmental topics related to water supply, forest protection, biodiversity, agricultural mismanagement, ethnic conflict, and policymaking. The aforementioned topics are also heavily cross-referenced with nearly 400 sources used throughout the book.

An important aspect of environmental politics revolves around narratives. Environmental narratives are, "...simplified explanations of environmental cause and effect that emerge in contexts where environmental knowledge and social order are mutually dependent" (p. 17). Yet, Forsyth and Walker are cautious to point out, "...environmental narratives frequently impose meanings that are acceptable to their creators or users, but which may contain unwelcome implications for other social actors and high levels of simplification of complex and uncertain physical processes" (p. 17). Moreover, "...narrative framing is evident in the common tendency for environmental debate to bifurcate into two positions: that upland farmers are either forest destroyers or forest guardians" (p. 19). The crux of the issue depends on an overly-simplified view of environmental crises, rather than a realistic understanding of the role of forests in upland ecosystems. Throughout the chapters, Forsyth and Walker raise questions and answer them by providing comparative and original research. The multifarious nature of environmental politics provides a complex picture of past, present, and future narratives.

Another strength of the book is the identification of the interconnectedness of the spatial and temporal distribution of the ethnic groups of the upland (*pa*) and lowland (*muang*) regions of northern Thailand. The Hmong, Mien, Akha, Lahu, and Lisu ethnic groups tend to favor the top 1,000 meters of the uplands, while the Karen and Lua groups inhabit the middle uplands, and the Northern Thai inhabit regions close to sea level to approximately 1,300 meters. This is essentially a study of ethnoecology, but one that warrants attention in order to understand the wider implications of environmental politics. The reasons for specific ethnic group locality and elevation are multifactorial and complex. For instance, certain groups inhabit specific elevations based on historical or cultural traditions, agricultural endeavors, meteorological conditions, political laws, and other interrelated conditions discussed by Forsyth and Walker.

What is the solution to environmental management in northern Thailand? Forsyth and Walker recognize the difficulty in reforming state bureaucracies on resource and land use. In fact, "...reforming state bureaucracies to overcome decades of organizational heritage is a profound challenge, requiring careful campaigning, engagement with elements within organizations that are self-critical, and taking opportunities to create alternative knowledge networks" (p. 246). This book, despite its depth, serves as an introduction to the wider role of political ecology in northern Thailand, "...until widespread reform of government agencies can be achieved, challenging underlying narratives that add legitimacy to their policies and regulatory interventions" (p. 246).

Many of the studies are accompanied by numerous black-and-white photographs, tables, diagrams, and charts to allow for an easy-to-read analysis of the material. In addition, nine pages of chapter notes are included. Overall, the inclusivity of the content to northern Thailand is beneficial for researchers of the

region. This is highly recommended for the cross-disciplinary student of undergraduate and graduate studies in anthropology, ecology, sociology, global studies, ethnic studies, and Southeast Asia.

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Electronic Green Journal, Issue 27, Fall 2008, ISSN: 1076-7975