

## **Natural Resources-Related Conflict Management: A Human Rights Perspective\***

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Let me first of all heartily congratulate Khon Kaen University in taking up the issue of natural resources management in this distinguished forum. In view of the natural crisis and catastrophe all around us, this is a most propitious time for our collective resolve, North and South/East and West, to enlighten ourselves. And hopefully, that would also help stimulate the process of social learning further down to the grassroots people and communities as part and parcel of our invaluable resource base. That is certainly one main function and commitment for all institutions of higher learning. For reasons to be later touched upon, it has particular relevance to Southeast Asia, and Thailand for that matter, which is the focus of our attention here. By its own nature, it is bound to have a great bearing on the matter of life and livelihood, that is to say, basic human rights. That is why the whole issue comes well within the purview of our National Human Rights Commission here in Thailand in carrying out its task of human rights promotion and protection.

Incidentally, there is one interesting point to be observed in passing here, that is, the very name of our organizing host: Institute for Dispute Resolution. Curiously enough, in Thai it reads Sathaban Santi Suksa, or literally Institute for Peace Studies. Both of course amount more or less to the same social objective, and could be said to be complementary to one another. While the former, “dispute resolution”, deals with day-to-day affairs, the latter, “peace studies”, is basically concerned with bringing about a process towards long-term solution of sustainability and peaceful coexistence in society with dignity, freedom, and justice. In this sense, what is being termed “conflict management” is both structural and institutional, involving people at all levels of society, indeed a truly democratic process that is so lacking in Southeast Asia. And that is the crux of the whole problem that urgently needs to be looked into.

### **Getting to know Southeast Asia**

To begin with, it is the question of how Southeast Asia is to be looked at and objectively understood. So a brief description may be in order here. The region has generally been known for its geo-political and military position as the strategic sea route from the Middle East to the Pacific coast. That is only part of the whole story, however. Of more import still, and inherent in its strategic status, Southeast Asia constitutes one major part of the world’s biologically diverse tropical forests. With less than 7 % of the Earth’s land surface, these habitats accommodate more than half the species in the entire world biological resources and diversity. Of some estimated 3 to 10 million species that exist globally, about 70% are in the tropical forest areas.<sup>1</sup> As we all know, these plant species serve as the vital sources of food, medicine, shelters, and clothing: in short, all the necessities of our daily life dubbed “four-fold livelihood” in a Thai jargon. For all the vast quantity of the tropics’ genetic resources, fortunately or unfortunately, the state of human knowledge is still extremely limited. Of some 125,000 known plant species in the tropical forests,

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researchers have taken a cursory look at barely one in 10, and a close look at only one in 100. It means that, in spite of centuries-old deforestation and depletion of species and bio-diversity, there still remains a great potential for the creative future of mankind.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is a matter of human own choice. This is exactly the question of management and the conflicts involved we are concerned with here at this forum. It is then not just a matter of “dispute resolution” per se, but fundamentally part of the political process towards more intelligent future.

But before coming to that point, let us take a closer look at the delicate and sensitive nature, as well as cultural dimension, of bio-diversity itself. In the first place, the tropical forests and bio-diversity are not just patches or pieces of genetic resources that could be taken out at will. Within each region, they constitute one continuous space and inter-related whole. That is the reason why it is to be understood and acted upon as *one unifying resource base* transcending the international boundaries and internal divisions among localities and communities. Its integrity and sustainability must needs be a prerequisite, and conservation be upheld as a matter of principle in dealing with bio-diversity. Secondly, associated with this holistic worldview is also the inter-relatedness between various parts of the tropics: from the mountaintops down through lowlands to maritime areas. All so delicately exist in ecological equilibrium. Fragmentation of tropical forest space, for whatever reasons, poses a threat to their natural habitats and rapid destruction. And once they get lost, they are gone forever and further endangering to all the rest. For all the great variety of human mismanagement, it is estimated that 20-50% of the world’s species have by now become extinct, and for the most part they occur within the tropical forests.<sup>3</sup>

And finally, along with the forests and bio-diversity, there also co-exist humans and society. That, again, poses the question of relationships between man and nature, and for that matter, management and utilization of natural resources. In a way, one is not quite sure if the term “management” is actually appropriate in this context. It sounds as if nature is entirely under human control or even worse, domination and manipulation. That, unfortunately, seems to be the case with modern scientific thinking and practicing of the scientific West. At any rate, it is otherwise in traditional Southeast Asia. In spite of century-old modernization and so-called development, it still remains tradition-bound for the most part of its rural sector, that is, as far as relationships with nature is concerned.

All this consideration brings us further to the question as to how indigenous people and communities fare and sustain their lives in such highly delicate and yet sustainable natural surroundings for centuries, generations after generations. The first thing, as one sees it, is a real need for a hard rethinking about what is termed “tradition”. For one thing, it is certainly not just about religious rites, beliefs, superstition, or what not. In essence, it represents a unique learning culture with spiritual value and awareness, and yet not without scientific connotation and intuition. And this, despite backwardness and underdevelopment, as is often assumed especially among national modernizing elite within Southeast Asia themselves. As well respected Indian scholars instructively put it thus:

*For the cultures of Asia, the forest has always been a teacher, and the message of the forest has been the message of interconnectedness and diversity, renewability and sustainability, integrity and pluralism.* And that,

*The cultural lessons that Asian societies draw from the forest apply at two levels: the relationship between society and Nature on the one hand, and between people within society on the other. Societies modeled on the forest are based on the lessons of diversity and democratic pluralism .....<sup>4</sup>*

Here then is the key phrase “diversity and pluralism” with a view to renewability and sustainability. This is what popularly called traditional wisdom and knowledge. Indeed, if there were to be any sense of positive “resources management” at all, it would rather incline towards human self-management with a deep sense of spiritual and intellectual attachment to Nature and its integrity. “Scientific” or not, the end result is certainly creativity and sustainability, as we keep crying for nowadays.

### **Question of Integrity and sustainability**

By contrast, the Western values and practice are being tied up with and determined by the historically Scientific Revolution and subsequent Industrial Revolution. All of which gives rise to the creed of economic liberalism and free market imperialism with the strength of capital and modern scientific technology. In actuality, it is all for the ultimate purpose of domination. More often than not, it extends itself to the extent of absolutism, or even totalitarianism in the current age of Neo-Liberalism. As a result, materialism and industrialism have gone to the extremes, such that human and nature mean nothing other than commodities: i.e. as labour and raw materials for the sole purpose of profit maximization.<sup>5</sup>

All this serves as cultural and ideological background to the current Western-styled management of natural resources. Hence colonization of highly rich and productive tropical forests, all in the name of private property rights and so-called forest “scientific management”, by way of selective logging for example. But that only amounts to fragmenting the tropical resources base, and thus jeopardizing its ecological equilibrium, as earlier mentioned. This is the main and primary cause of deforestation as we all are witnessing today. All the reforestation attempts and projects only are bound to fail to reverse those destructive trends. But, then, logging business is only part of the whole story. Industrial-styled plantations also play their part in accelerating deforestation and loss of bio-diversity. As we all know, most plantation schemes are dominated by large-scale monocultures of exotic industrial species like eucalyptus, thus encroaching upon the basic principle of natural diversity and integrity.<sup>6</sup>

There is also another side of the story, that is, concerning indigenous people and communities’ predicaments under the circumstances. It is succinctly illustrated by one distinguished economic historian, Karl Polanyi, in his classic *The Great Transformation* as to rural dislocation and disruption of cultural institutions inherent in an organic society and community. The term “organic society” significantly conveys a strong sense of self-identities of indigenous people and communities. It explains why the idea and practice of “collective rights” have now been emerging, after being subject to domination and exploitation ever since the heydays of colonialism and modernization. That social and cultural disintegration inevitably means a great human loss. The point is that the survival of tropical forests and therefore bio-diversity integrity depend in the last analysis on the survival of human societies themselves. These adverse and negative effects clearly explain how the scientific management of natural resources has been working. In effect, it is life-destroying, in contradistinction to life-enhancing that is characteristic of traditional way of co-existence with the Nature.<sup>7</sup>

Hopefully, all the above is not too long-winded. It is one necessary way of demonstrating what it means to Southeast Asia concerning conflict management of natural resources. It has historical and ideological connotation to the problems involved. In this very sense, it is far beyond a mere matter of management technicality for day-to-day dispute resolution. As earlier pointed out, it is basically the issue of power structure and relationships. As a prerequisite, therefore, it is to be concerned with basic political and institutional reform with a view to democratic pluralism

and political process, that is, in line with reality of Southeast Asian societies, where the tropical resources base together with a great potential for self-reliance and self-development are at stake. That would then provide a positive and creative framework for natural resources-related conflict management. The point is to make it open, transparent, participatory, and hence truly legitimate.

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<sup>1</sup> E.O. Wilson, “The Current State of Biological Diversity”, and Ariel E. Lugo, “Estimating Reductions in the Diversity of Tropical Forest Species”, in E.O. Wilson, ed., *Biodiversity*, Washington D.C, Washington Academy Press, 1988 pp. 8 and 60.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Myers, “Tropical Forests and Life on Earth”, in Suzanne Head and Robert Heinzman, *Lessons of the Rainforest*, San Francisco, Sierra Books Club, 1990, pp. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Sumontha Prombun, “Bio-Diversity”, in *Bio-Diversity in Thailand*, (in Thai), Bangkok, Learn on Line 2002, pp. 9-11.

Somsakdi Sukwonges, “ Conservation of Bio-Diversity “, in Wiwat Katithamnit, ed., *Bio-Diversity and Sustainable Development*, (in Thai), B.E. 2536, pp. 63-64.

The specific point concerning the tropical forests’ inter-relatedness and unifying entity was already raised in the speaker’s keynote presentation at the III MMSEA (Montane Mainland Southeast Asia) Conference, Lijiang, Yunnan, 25-28 August 2002.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bankyopadhyay and Vandana Shiva, “ Asia’s Forests, Asia’s Cultures “, in Suzanne Head and Robert Heinzman, ed., op. cit. pp. 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1957, pp.33-42.

<sup>6</sup> J. Bankyopadhyay and Vadana Shiva, op. cit. pp. 68-70.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Polanyi, op. cit. p. 159.  
J. Bankyopadhyay and Vadana Shiva, op. cit. pp. 73-74.