

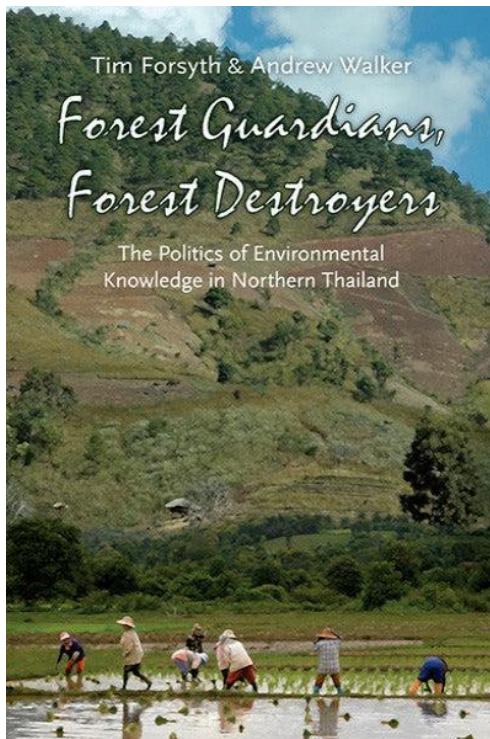
Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers: The Politics of Environmental Knowledge in Northern Thailand.

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In this book, the authors explore how the environmental problems of northern Thailand have been defined and represented and the gap in addressing the main issues. The book is very helpful in understanding the process of state-making, the simplified nature of development, and the politics of environmental knowledge. The book questions the simplified representation of environmental problems and asserts that these general interpretations hinder environmental management and sustainable development. In reverse, these interpretations have to be deeply analyzed both biophysically and politically to address actual environmental changes. Politically, northern Thailand is very important and has become a highly researched area of Southeast Asia. Ethnic minorities of the upland are so different from their lowland neighbors that they have always been of interest to researchers, development, and NGO workers. To discuss the issues of environmental change without understanding this region's complex political history is very difficult, and this instability creates two types of debate:

1. Nature-Oriented: the main aspect of this group is to protect upland lands to continue the active flow of water in lowlands and conserve forests.

2. People-Oriented: aims to protect the lifestyles of the uplands.

However, the book critiques both groups as each reflects certain social and political implications of environmental knowledge production. Accepting the importance of positivist science, the authors said that positivist science does not consider the impacts of language while addressing environmental problems, as a single word contains important information on environmental issues. As a result, scientific knowledge increases the state's authority rather than determining the real problem.

The loosely termed local knowledge has been cited problematically in this book. First, anthropologists have questioned what it means, as local knowledge can often vary by wealth, gender, status, and other social determinants (Geertz, 1983; Pottier, Sillitoe & Bicker, 2003). Besides, uplanders are perceived as "exotic" and "distant" in the guise of local knowledge, which marginalizes rather than empowers them (Cohen, 1989).

The book beautifully shows how the lowland people are socially and politically dominant over the neighboring uplanders. The differences between upland and lowland have widespread cultural importance, and lowlanders are seen as the seat of chief power and civilized, as well as the holders of proper cultural and agricultural development of northern Thailand. Culturally, lowland livelihood is considered naturally suitable for Thai people to live in, and there is a common notion that hills are areas covered by plants and wild animals where evil spirits roam. Actually, this notion spatially and symbolically divides the upland and lowland. Though, formally, upland is counted as forest in a true sense, lowlanders consider upland culturally backdated and savage, and a common tendency of lowlanders is to denote them as civilized and culturally powerful.

One of the important aspects of this book is how the "Hill Tribe" categorization helps establish discourse coalitions in which debates about environmental management in the uplands focuses selectively on certain groups and certain forms of agricultural activity that are seen as problematic. Politically and numerically, the dominant Khon Muang people are considered the principal victims of upland environmental degradation, whereas upland Hmong farmers are considered the main culprits for upland environmental degradation as they (used to) cultivate opium. Actually, the Hmong are the main targeted group for development interventions. Still, due to the simplified notions of development and lack of proper research, these interventions had negative impacts on the upland environment and Hmong society.

Another strength of this book is that it identifies how a hydrological statement was transformed into a political debate by blaming a specific group. Actually, the Chom Thong dispute is very important in understanding the relationship between the state-making process and social order- the state legitimizes the repressive activities. In northern Thailand, a symbolic relationship has been drawn between forests and water, and the role of forests has been given the top priority above water resources. Seemingly, "the forest is the source of water," which is a process of state-making and validating this process, during which different knowledge has been produced. The most prominent knowledge is that the main reason for water shortages in northern Thailand is deforestation by upland farmers, especially for shifting cultivation. This concept is very important to perceive the production and use of environmental knowledge. However, these environmental knowledge productions are supported by specific groups and fields, and statistical information shows that there is no relationship between forests and rainfall. Undoubtedly, forests contribute to

atmospheric moisture, and this information does not fully deny the popular concept that rainfall decreases due to forest clearance. However, rainfall in northern Thailand is mainly monsoonal and comes from marine sources. Astonishingly, based on these shallow concepts, the forest department and state relocated the upland farmers to avoid the disruption of water supply and river flow. Bamboos have been painted with the colors of the Thai flag in forest-conserved areas to uphold the notion that forests are an integral part of Thailand and, indeed, draw a symbolic relationship between forests and Thailand. In fact, these types of selective narratives clearly represent the interests of socially and politically dominant groups.

In this book, the authors perfectly summed up the problems of scientific generalization. In a true sense, environmental narratives of northern Thailand are determined by different famous hypotheses both in and outside of Thailand, which hardly count the actual contexts of the upland. For instance, the application of the Universal Soil Loss Equation (USLE) -famous in the USA - in northern Thailand could not bring any effective result as slope length, rainfall, and soil management practices are totally different from the USA. This ineffective USLE method considers shifting cultivation as the main factor for soil erosion where there is enough evidence that supporting shifting cultivation increases soil fertility as farmers adopt the soil mounds method, an innovative conservation practices that carefully preserves and improves soil fertility. This evidence challenges the popular statement that is influenced by state officials regarding environmental degradation. Despite proper evidence, these narratives are widely used to justify the control over upland agriculture. In reality, upland areas are being geologically eroded through naturally occurring deep gullies, which is why agriculture is not the prime factor for downstream sedimentation.

The authors depict how dominant perceptions of agrochemicals are shaped by political concerns. These concerns represent the appropriate upland livelihoods rather than clarifying the proper benefit and loss of using agrochemicals. In the environmental politics of northern Thailand, Hmong farmers are seen as being linked to excessive chemical use and as responsible for producing vegetables with chemicals. These stereotyped notions claim that chemical use is responsible for soil degradation and contamination of the water supply, and this viewpoint regarding environmental crisis helps spread rumours. In fact, the common vision of biophysical processes and stereotyped beliefs about environmental degradation help to control and limit the activities of upland farmers. However, deeper analysis and investigation must be needed to detect real problems.

Addressing the environmental crisis, the authors said that specific reasons that claim environmental degradation are not fully appropriate as there is a lack of valid evidence. As a result, in spite of being researched by different disciplines, environmental problems are influenced by common, misleading, and highly selective environmental beliefs, and state officials take innovative steps, e.g., presenting news on television and newspapers to recognize these general environmental beliefs. Moreover, value-laden knowledge is produced by different parties to facilitate different visions and policies for the upland, and surprisingly, all of these aspects create a common environmental discourse that the upland is in danger. The main element of this process is problem closure, where a certain way of environmental change has strengthened, and it is the starting point of developing discourses. Therefore, scientific knowledge simply supports conserved observers - state regulators and lowlanders - which is why the views of hill tribe farmers are considered environmentally destructive.

Considering the upland's environmental crisis, different groups support different approaches to proper environmental management. Conservationists and state bodies use different language and uncontested certainty of science. On the other hand, another group implies that indigenous knowledge is very important to overcome environmental crises. Nevertheless, this book depicts that it is a very unproductive debate about uplanders: Are they forest guardians or destroyers? It relies on many hypotheses and questioned beliefs regarding environmental processes. State regulators also talk with experts about environmental issues curtailing the uplanders, which indeed is a bridge between environmental knowledge and the state-making process.

Finally, to perceive the problems of environmental knowledge, a lot of research and effective communications are needed, and due to the communication gap between scientific research and policymakers, this actually does not happen. Though research is being done, it is failing to change society's prevailing attitudes. In fact, scientific research strengthens the dominant existing views.

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