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**BETWEEN CONSERVATIONISM, ECO-POPULISM AND DEVELOPMENTALISM –
DISCOURSES IN BIODIVERSITY POLICY IN THAILAND AND INDONESIA**

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ABSTRACT

The present paper analyzes the role of discourse in conflicts concerning nature conservation in tropical countries. We focus on the contested question as to whether and to which extent local communities should be allowed to live and use resources inside protected areas. Applying the concepts of belief-systems, story-lines and discourse coalitions, we analyze two empirical case studies dealing with this conflict: The first case study is concerned with a policy process at the national level that aimed at passing a community forestry law in Thailand to make the establishment of community forests in protected areas possible. The second case study deals with the proposed resettlement of a village from the Lore Lindu National Park in Sulawesi, Indonesia. In both cases, three discourses could be observed: a conservationist discourse, an eco-populist discourse, and a developmentalist discourse. The case studies show that the conservationists and the developmentalists were able to form a discourse coalition, which was challenged by the proponents of the eco-populist discourse. The analysis also demonstrates that establishing story-lines in the discourse can lead to the neglect of facts and problems that do not fit in either discourse. The paper draws attention to the role of science in the different discourses and concludes that scientists should become more aware of the role they play in the different discourses.

Keywords: discourse, biodiversity conservation, protected area management

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a legacy of colonial times, conventional approaches to deal with biodiversity management and nature conservation in tropical countries have been characterized by the creation of protected areas and efforts to minimize human interference with those areas. In view of a limited state capacity and a high dependence of local communities on natural resources in the tropics, this “fences and fines” approach was, however, largely doomed to fail. It became subject to criticism both on conservation and on humanitarian grounds (see, e.g., Wells and Brandon, 1992). Against this background, the last decades have seen an increasing trend towards the establishment of management structures that are characterized by the participation of local communities and the creation of economic benefits from conservation. Such strategies have been labeled participatory management, community-based management, integrated conservation and development and collaborative management (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2000). At the international level, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) reflects this change in nature conservation: The conservation and sustainable use of biological resources and the sharing of the benefits arising from the use of biodiversity are considered as equally important objectives in the first article of the CBD.

Economic analyses of this change in approaches to nature conservation have focused on the creation of incentives and potential gains in efficiency arising from user participation, taking transaction costs into account (Hanna, 1995, Mburu et al., 2003, Birner and Wittmer, forthcoming). While the actors remain silent in these explanatory approaches, sociological and

anthropological studies have highlighted the role of discourse in the changing approaches to biodiversity management. In this literature, the concept of narratives and counter-narratives plays an important role (Fairhead and Leach, 1995, Leach and Mearns, 1996, Adams and Hulme, 1998, Campbell, 2000, 2002). Traditional conservation narratives focusing on the separation of nature and communities (“fortress conservation” narratives) are contrasted with counter-narratives that highlight sustainable use of natural resources and community-based conservation as key concepts. Kirkby (2000) uses the concept of ideology and applies the label “eco-imperialism” to the traditional conservation narratives and the label “eco-populism” to the counter-narratives. The concept of narratives and counter-narratives has also been applied to analyze development approaches (Roe, 1991). The radical anti-development critique of the 1990s (e.g., Escobar, 1995) has been interpreted as the establishment of a counter-narrative to the traditional and growth-oriented development narratives (Ausdal, 2001).

In this paper, we use two case studies to analyze the role of discourse in *conflicts* concerning nature conservation. As an example, we use an important and recurrent dispute about nature conservation in tropical countries: the question as to which extent local communities should be allowed to practice traditional land use systems inside protected areas. One case study deals with the national policy process of establishing a community forestry law in Thailand. The question of whether or not community forests should be allowed within protected areas has been the major contested issue in the debate about this law. The other case study is concerned with the struggle of a local community against resettlement from a protected area in Indonesia.

We use these case studies to show that three different discourses play an important role in contested issues of nature conservation: We label them the conservationist, the eco-populist and the developmentalist discourse. The two case studies show that the value orientations of the

different actors, their relation to science and to local knowledge, as well as their ability to relate their story-line to a more general socio-political discourse and to form discourse coalitions play an important role for the outcome of the conflict. The two case studies also serve to identify the mechanisms by which the three discourses are reproduced at different levels, ranging from local to international.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the analytical concepts used in this study. Section 3 presents the two empirical case studies. Section 4 analyzes the three discourses observed in the two cases. Section 5 discusses the findings and Section 6 concludes.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As the above account shows, the concepts of both ideology and discourse have been applied to analyze problems of nature conservation in tropical countries. In the theoretical literature, the concept of ideology assumes relatively stable ideas and values. Van Dijk (1998) defines ideologies as the “basis of the social representations shared by members of a group,” which “allow people, as group members, to organize a multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, *for them*, and to act accordingly.” (Van Dijk, 1998: 8, emphasis in original). Van Dijk argues that ideologies are relatively stable, but their expressions and uses in the discourse are variable, strategic and context-sensitive (van Dijk, 1998: 57). Van Dijk shows that an ideology typically provides a positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, which is connected to the evaluative beliefs characterizing an ideology. He also argues that an important function of an ideology is to create legitimacy and facilitate collective action. Such a concept of ideology is largely consistent with considerations in economic theory, according to which ideologies help to overcome free-rider problems, thus reducing the

transaction costs of collective action (North 1981). In the economics literature, ideologies have also been modeled as tools strategically used by rational actors to promote their interests (Roemer, 1985). This concept of ideology is also consistent with theories of the policy process, which attribute a central role to value- and belief systems that encompass rather stable “core beliefs.” Sabatier’s advocacy coalition framework (1988) is a prominent example of this approach. Using the term “value- and belief systems”, this literature avoids the term ideology, which has a pejorative connotation in everyday language, implying a system of false or distorted beliefs, typically held by the political or social opponents.¹

The idea that actions and perceptions should be understood on the basis of deeply held beliefs or belief-systems has been criticized by Hajer in his seminal study on the politics of environmental discourse (1996: 59). Referring to Foucault, he argues interests cannot be assumed as given, but that they are intersubjectively constituted through discourse (Hajer, 1995: 59). A central argument in his framework holds that the emergence of a new policy discourse “may actually alter the individual perception of problems and possibilities and thus create space for the creation of new, unexpected political coalitions.” According to his definition, discourse should be understood as “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given physical and social realities” (Hajer 1995: 44). By creating new meanings and altering cognitive patterns as well as positionings, he emphasizes, discourse plays a central role in policy change.

Hajer analyzes the role of story-lines and discourse coalitions in influencing environmental policies. He defines a story-line as a generative sort of narrative on social reality

¹ See van Dijk (1998) for a history of the concept.

“through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (Hajer, 1995: 62). He shows that a story-line essentially works as a metaphor, because by uttering a specific element, the speaker can effectively invoke the storyline as a whole. The adoption of policy instruments implied by a certain story-line and the need of actors to refer to this story-line to legitimize their arguments are seen as indications of discursive hegemony. As Hajer (1995: 59) points out, the struggle for discursive hegemony, in which actors try to secure support for their interpretation of reality, is determined by three factors: (1) credibility, (2) acceptability, and (3) trust. Credibility does not only depend on the plausibility of the argument, but also on the authority of the authors. Acceptability implies that the position is considered as attractive or necessary. Trust leads to the suppression of doubts and can be derived, for example, by referring to the procedure by which a definition of reality was reached.

3. TWO EMPIRICAL CASES: CONFLICTS ABOUT RESETTLEMENT OF PEOPLE FROM PROTECTED AREAS IN THAILAND AND INDONESIA

THE THAI CASE

The empirical information on the Thai case is based on interviews with experts and representatives of different interest groups held in July/August 1999 and March/April 2000 and on an internet-based review of newspaper articles on the topic that appeared between 1997 and 2002.² The efforts to establish a Community Forestry Law in Thailand date back to the early 1980s, when local communities and NGOs struggled against the establishment of government-supported commercial forest plantations on traditional village forest resources. In the middle of the 1990s, the Royal Forest Department and the organizations representing the local

² See Brenner et al. (1998) and Birner and Wittmer (2003) for more detailed accounts of the policy process concerning the community forestry bill in Thailand.

communities reached a consensus on a Community Forestry Law, which envisaged to formally grant use and management rights for designated community forests to local communities. Due to frequent changes in the government, the legislative process was, however delayed. From the middle of the 1990s onwards, the draft law was confronted with increasing opposition after a small group of conservation-oriented NGOs entered the political arena. They argued that the state had to protect the forests, especially those located in upper watershed areas, as a national public good. In particular, the conservation-oriented NGOs wanted to prevent a provision in the draft law that made the establishment of community forests in protected areas possible.

After a government with a populist orientation was elected at the end of 2000, the House of Representatives eventually passed a Community Forestry Bill in 2001 which included such a regulation. However, intensive lobbying by the conservation-oriented NGOs had the effect that the Senate withdrew this provision after deliberating the bill in 2002. By the end of 2004, the law had still not been passed and a committee was to negotiate a solution between both Houses.

THE INDONESIAN CASE

The Indonesian case study deals with a conflict of resettlement at the local level. The study is based on interviews held with the leaders of a village to be resettled from the Lore Lindu National Park in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, and representatives of government organizations, NGOs and an integrated development and conservation project involved in the resettlement issue. The interviews were conducted during several research visits between 1999 and 2002. In addition, a random sample of 25 households in the village that was supposed to be resettled were interviewed in 2002.

The Lore Lindu National Park was established at the end of the 1990s by joining three wildlife reserves that had been declared in the 1980s. Several village clusters located inside the

Park area were officially declared as enclaves, and the villagers were granted the right to stay. The village under consideration, however, was not part of a village cluster and was supposed to be resettled. The village had been established at the end of the 19th century. After Indonesia's independence, the village was resettled under a government development program that aimed at moving people from "remote" places closer to areas with better infrastructure, including roads and schools. According to the interviewed village leaders, the land resources in the resettlement areas were insufficient and of low quality, so that the villagers decided to return to the original location. Due to that experience, they resisted the government plans for a second resettlement in connection with the declaration of the National Park.

An integrated conservation and development project that was administered by the regional planning agency and funded by the Asian Development Bank provided the plan and the budget for the resettlement. With the support of a local NGO advocating for indigenous rights, the village leaders negotiated for a several years with the management of the National Park, the local administration and the integrated conservation and development project in order to avoid the resettlement. Supported by the NGO, the villagers conducted a participatory resource mapping to provide evidence that, on the basis of their indigenous knowledge, they were able to manage their resources in a sustainable way. They also declared that they would not expand their traditional area of cultivation and use of forest resources. As result of the negotiation process, the manager of the National Park finally granted the village the right to stay inside the Park in a formal agreement.

4. THE THREE DISCOURSES OBSERVED

Three different discourses could be observed in the two case studies. As mentioned in the introduction, we label them “conservationist”, “eco-populist” and “developmentalist”. Table 1 gives an overview of the three discourses.

CONSERVATIONIST DISCOURSE

Proponents of the discourse

In the Thai case, the proponents of the conservationist discourse comprised members of the state forest administration and the NGOs that were characterized above as “conservation-oriented.” In the Indonesian case, the proponents of the conservationist discourse included members of the public administration and the integrated conservation and development project that aimed to resettle the village in question. One international conservation-oriented NGO, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), was indirectly involved by advising the administration of the National Park.

Story-lines

In Thailand, the major focus of the conservationist story-line was placed on watershed protection. The central argument can be summarized as follows: Deforestation, which is caused by people settling in the upper watershed areas, destroys the hydrological functions of the forests.

Table 1--Overview of the three discourses

	Conservationist	Eco-populist	Developmentalist
Typical proponents (organizations and disciplines)	- Conservation NGOs - Biologists, ecologists	- Advocacy NGOs - Cultural anthropologists	- Development organizations (state, NGOs, donors) - Economists
Central argument of the story-lines	- A minimum area of undisturbed nature needs to be preserved to avoid species loss and to maintain the ecological balance, including the hydrological functions of the forests	- Local/indigenous communities are the only true stewards of the environment. They have proven that they can preserve forest resources better than the state.	- Population increase and poverty are the main causes of deforestation and biodiversity loss; Poverty reduction is essential for saving the environment.
Priorities / Mission	- Nature conservation, protection of endangered species.	- Allowing local people to maintain their traditional lifestyle	- Poverty alleviation
Positioning of proponents (Self-representation)	- Defendants of nature and endangered species	- Defendants of indigenous rights	- Defendants of the poor
Positioning of opponents (other representation)	- Local people seen as destroying natural resources - Eco-populist NGOs seen as neglecting ecological necessities	- State and private sector seen as depriving local communities - Conservationists seen as neglecting human rights	- Eco-populists seen as romanticizing and instrumentalising local people - Conservationists seen as neglecting the need for poverty alleviation
Relation to science	- Results of natural sciences (conservation biology, ecology, hydrology, etc.) as unquestionable basis for the argumentation	- Postmodern criticism of science; - Reliance on qualitative social science studies and on natural science studies challenging “orthodoxies” - High valuation of local knowledge	- Reliance on technical disciplines (agronomy, engineering, etc.) and on socio-economic studies

Source: authors

A frequently used metaphor in this story-line was the role of forests acting as sponges by storing water in the rainy season, thus avoiding flooding, and gradually releasing it during the dry season, thus ensuring a continuous water supply for downstream agriculture. The argument to ensure water supply for irrigated agriculture, which is the backbone of Thai’s rural economy, can

be seen as the major strategy to create acceptability in the struggle for discursive hegemony. This story-line emphasizes that the people settling in upper watershed areas and destroying the forests are mainly ethnic minorities, who migrated to the area. The policy prescription following from this story-line is that upper watersheds should be left undisturbed, that is free from human settlement in order to maintain the hydrological functions of the forests. To create credibility and trust, this story-line emphasizes the alleged scientific basis of the major arguments. For example, the Dhammaanat Foundation emphasized referred to hydrology in formulating the story-line (Svasti, 1998). According to the accounts of conservationists involved in lobbying, the story-line was rather effective in mobilizing politicians that were formerly less concerned with the deforestation problems as well as lowland farmers against the proposed community forestry law.³

In the Indonesian case, it was the protection of the habitat of endangered and endemic species that dominated the conservation discourse. The conservationist story-line emphasized that the expansion of the conversion of forests to agricultural land by the local population reduces the habitat of endangered animals. Hunting of endangered animals constitutes an additional threat. Just as in the Thai watershed protection discourse, efforts to create credibility and trust for this story-line consisted in emphasizing a scientific basis, in this case species surveys conducted by conservation biologists. The policy prescription following from this story-line is that the protection of the endangered species requires sufficiently large forest areas that are undisturbed from human activity. As in the case of the watershed protection story-line, the state and its legal and administrative apparatus are seen as responsible for the declaration, management and enforcement of protected areas. The proponents of this story-line frequently

³ Interview with leader of conservation NGO, 23.07.1999.

emphasized that a comparatively high number of species, for example 70 percent of the bird species found in the Lore Lindu National Park, are endemic to Sulawesi, which implies a special responsibility for their protection. In Hajer's terms, this can be interpreted as an attempt to promote the acceptability of this story-line in the struggle for discursive hegemony. Even though the conservationist story line in the Indonesian case focused more on endangered species, the major conservationist NGO in the area increasingly included the watershed protection argument in their public awareness campaigns.⁴

In both cases, the story-lines imply a clear positioning for the proponents and their opponents, corresponding to the positive self-representation and negative other representation in van Dijk's terms. The proponents of the conservationist discourse consider themselves as defendants of nature, while the opponents are seen as either destroying nature or as being ignorant and unconcerned with its implications. In the Thai case, one senator was quoted as follows in the debate of the Senate concerning the amendment of the Community Forestry Law that would prevent the establishment of community forests in protected areas: "Local people are like weevils, they eat up all the wood. If we pass this bill [unamended], it is like we open all the protected forests to all the communities." (Laungaramsri, 2002).

Other conservationists in the Thai case addressed socio-economic factors that may induce local communities to convert forests, but the argumentation nevertheless implied that indigenous groups are responsible for destroying the natural resources and that the NGOs supporting them try to conceal these facts. A similar tendency could be observed in the Indonesian case.

⁴ The TNC used to distribute posters in the villages surrounding the Park, which show endangered animals, such as hornbills. More recently, they also used posters showing irrigated paddy farming in the foreground and the Park in the background, with an explanatory text highlighting the role of the Park for water supply.

Relation to more general discourses

In the Thai case, one could observe a strong relation between the conservationist discourse and a nationalist discourse. As Laungaramsri (2002) points out in her review, the conservation concept that was introduced in the end of the 19th century in Thailand by British foresters was mainly oriented towards protecting the forest resources as a “national capital” from overexploitation. According to the same author, forests were treated as a national symbol in the concept of protected areas for biodiversity and watershed conservation, which was mainly introduced by international organizations after World War II. As Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, who ruled the country at the end of the 1950s was quoted as saying: “Forests are significant natural resources for the lives of Thai people and the existence of Thailand. Those who destroy the forests are the enemy who destroy the nation’s security” (cited in Laungaramsri, 2002).

In the Indonesian local-level case study, a similar relation between the conservationist discourse and a nationalist discourse was not observed.

ECO-POPULIST DISCOURSE

Proponents of the discourse

In the Thai case, an eco-populist discourse was practiced by the supporters of the regulation that community forests should be allowed within protected areas and that people should not be resettled from such areas. These supporters comprised a network of more than 700 village-based forest and watershed management organizations, and a network of NGOs operating at regional and national level that supported the community-based organizations. Academics, mostly social scientists, also supported these organizations.

In the Indonesian case, an eco-populist discourse was practiced by the NGO that assisted the village in their struggle against the resettlement, as well as by other NGOs operating in the

area of the National Park. The manager of the National Park who granted the village the right to stay explicitly refers to himself as “eco-populist”. This term has also been used in the local press to describe his position.

Story-lines

The story-line of the eco-populist discourse holds that indigenous communities, with their traditional knowledge and institutions, have been able to maintain the forest resources and use them in a sustainable way for generations. The story-line relates forest protection and sustainable use to a deep, often spiritual respect for nature. In both cases, ethnographic accounts of local resource use practices and participatory methods, such as participatory resource mapping were used to create trust and credibility in the story-line. According to this story-line, state management of forest resources has largely failed and led to serious forest degradation (see, e.g., Makarabhirom, 2002, for the Thai case). In the struggle for discursive hegemony, the question of indigenous rights played an important role. The declaration of protected areas in areas inhabited by people was criticized for violating the indigenous rights of the local communities. The declaration of protected areas was also seen as invading the rights of local people who need the resources for their subsistence.⁵ As a consequence, involuntary resettlement of people from protected areas and restrictions on their traditional land use practices were seen as unjust expressions of power.

The self-representation of the proponents of the eco-populist discourse can be described as defendants of indigenous peoples and their rights. In the Thai case, the eco-populist story-line identified three opponents, to whom a negative other-representation was ascribed: (1) the

⁵ The simplifications sometimes implied in such studies can be counterproductive by limiting the possibilities of the social groups concerned uphold their claims for resource management if their practices change and thus limit their development options as Walker shows for the Karen in Northern Thailand (2001). Also compare Peluso et al. (1995) on the evolution of discourses on forestry and the perception of the impacts of human resource use in forests in South-East Asia over the past 30 years.

commercial sector, which was criticized for violating traditional community rights and destroying the community forest resources for commercial interests; (2) conservationist groups, which were criticized for serving the interest of an urban elite in a “pristine nature”, while disregarding rural communities as uneducated destroyers of the forest; and (3) the forest administration. The proponents of the eco-populist discourse concentrated mostly on the state forest administration as the “major adversary”. On the one hand, the state forest administration was criticized for corruption problems and collusion with the commercial logging sector. On the other hand, the administration was blamed for its conservationist policies that perceived local communities as a major threat to the forest resources (compare Laungaramsri, 2002).

In the Indonesian case, proponents of the eco-populist story-line mainly criticized the general administration and the ADB-funded integrated conservation and development project that wanted to resettle the village. The head of the National Park, who referred to himself explicitly as “eco-populist”, was quoted in a national newspaper as saying: “Eco-populism is the opposite of ‘eco-fascism’, the removal of indigenous people from the conservation concept.” (Banjar, quoted by Jawara, 2002).

Relation to more general discourses

While the conservationist discourse in Thailand is related to a nationalist discourse, as outlined above, the eco-populist discourse is placed into the context of a human and indigenous rights advocacy framework. Within this framework the claim for management rights in protected areas for ethnic minorities is placed in the context of claiming comprehensive citizen rights for these groups, which in turn implies a more inclusionary definition of the Thai “nation” (compare Vandergeest 2003: 33). The eco-populist discourse also has to be seen in the wider context of the NGO movement in Thailand, which is referred to as “People’s Movement” and characterized by

an outspoken critique of Western concepts of development and international financial institutions. In line with this relation between the eco-populist discourse and an Anti-Western discourse in Thailand's NGO movement, eco-populists also criticized the entire concept of protected areas as a neo-colonialist model. A similar argumentation was observed in the Indonesian case, especially by the NGO that supported the village that was supposed to be resettled.

DEVELOPMENTALIST DISCOURSE

Proponents of the discourse

In both cases, the developmentalist discourse was most explicitly practiced by organizations working in the surroundings of protected areas with the primary mission to alleviate poverty. An example is the international relief organization CARE, which played a role both in the Thai and in the Indonesian case. A developmentalist discourse was also prevalent in state institutions in charge of service provision, such as the agricultural extension service. However, one could observe that groups that practiced a conservationist discourse also engaged in a developmentalist discourse. In the Thai case, one of the leading NGOs of the conservationist movement used developmentalist arguments and operated a development program, which included the provision of irrigation facilities. Most of the interviewed members of the forest administration in Thailand also combined a conservationist with a developmentalist position. The Forest Department defended its proposal to allow villagers to practice commercial forestry in community forests with the aim to provide income and development opportunities for the local communities. The eco-populists strongly objected this provision (Hongthong, 1999).

In the Indonesian case, the representatives of the integrated conservation and development project, as indicated by its name, practiced both a conservationist and a

developmentalist discourse. The members of the regional planning agency in charge of its implementation, which is responsible for coordinating the development activities in the province, were also proponents of a developmentalist discourse.

Story-lines

The developmentalist story-line holds that increasing population and poverty are the main reasons for environmental degradation, including the degradation of resources in protected areas. As a consequence, measures to promote agricultural intensification and rural development outside of protected areas are seen as a major strategy to improve protected area management. Both in the Thai and in the Indonesian case, resettlement of people from protected areas was considered to be compatible with this story-line because the possibilities to provide development assistance were perceived to be better outside the protected areas. The emphasis on the goal to alleviate poverty as a *moral* imperative can, in Hajer's terms, be interpreted as a strategy to gain acceptance in the struggle for discursive hegemony.

Concerning the strategies that are necessary to combat poverty, one can observe a reliance on technical solutions, mainly based on agronomy and engineering. Due to the vivid criticism of top-down approaches in rural development projects during the last decades and the focus on participatory approaches, there often is an emphasis on community-based approaches in the developmentalist discourse that shares features with the eco-populist discourse. The integrated conservation and development project in the Indonesian case was designed to follow a participatory approach and had village facilitators employed in each of their target villages.⁶

Both in the Thai and in the Indonesian case, the conservationist actors who also practiced a developmentalist discourse blamed the eco-populist NGOs as instrumentalising local and

⁶ However, many of the interviewed villagers criticized that the demands formulated by the villagers in participatory planning processes were not followed up later by the project.

indigenous communities for their political purposes, and for denying them a right to development. Developmentalism, of course, does not necessarily have to be associated with conservationism. One could also observe positions in the developmentalist discourse that disapproved of the conservationist position. The leader of one foreign-funded development project, for example, criticized that conservationists were only interested in the preservation of “exotic” animals while neglecting the situation of the human beings and the need to reduce poverty.

RELATION TO OTHER DISCOURSES

In both cases, the developmentalist discourse was closely related to a more general modernist discourse. Market integration and the adoption of new technologies were seen as essential prerequisites for development. As a consequence, negative influences of commercialization on the environment tended to be underemphasized, in contrast to the eco-populist discourse, which typically entailed a strong criticism against large-scale development projects. In the Indonesian case, the relation to a modernist discourse was facilitated by the prominent role that a Western-style model of economic development had played in the Suharto regime.

5. DISCUSSION

DISCOURSE COALITIONS

A remarkable feature in both cases is the formation of a discourse coalition between the proponents of the developmentalist and the conservationist discourse. Even though their story-lines originally focused on different problems, they are compatible and rest on the same modernist foundations. This discourse coalition makes it possible to address poverty problems and conservation problems within the same framework and helps to shield both groups against

criticism. The watershed protection story-line is particularly suited for a coalition with the developmentalist story-line, since agricultural intensification is dependent on water supply, whereas the function of protecting endangered species for agricultural development is less clear. Due to the discourse coalition with developmentalists, conservationists become less susceptible to the criticism that they defend elite interests at the expense of local communities, a criticism that was formulated by eco-populists in both cases. Developmentalists become less prone to the criticism that they neglect negative environmental impacts of the development activities they promote. In the Indonesian case, development organizations working in the surroundings of the Park, such as CARE, had to deal with the criticism that their efforts to improve the returns from agricultural production constitute a major incentive for farmers to expand the area under such crops, thus increasing deforestation. With regard to the conflict concerning resettlement, conservationists could in both cases use the additional argument that the development options for the communities are better outside protected areas, where there is more access to infrastructure.

The formation of a discourse coalition does not imply that the organizations involved necessarily give up or compromise their original mission. For example, the mission statements of international organizations such as TNC and CARE published on the internet underline their priorities. TNC's mission is described as "to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive."⁷ CARE describes itself as a "unified force dedicated to helping the world's poorest communities to solve their most threatening problems."⁸

As can be derived from the above account, the eco-populists did not form a discourse coalition with either the developmentalists or the conservationists. They rather challenged this

⁷ See <http://nature.org/aboutus/howwework/>.

⁸ See: <http://www.care.org>.

discourse coalition by establishing a competing story-line which provided the frame for a different understanding of the deforestation problem. Both in the Thai and in the Indonesian case, the argument that local communities can use forest resources in a sustainable way - based on their traditional knowledge and institutions - was the crucial challenge to the conservationist-developmental discourse coalition, which favored the separation between people and nature. Eco-populists also challenged the modernist foundations of this discourse coalition from a post-modernist perspective. In both cases, they questioned the exclusive reliance on modern science and stressed the role of local knowledge. In both cases, they relied, however, on ethnographic case studies, which dealt with traditional institutions for natural resource management. As Walker (2001) points out, eco-populists also refer to natural science in order to challenge the alleged scientific foundations of the conservationist discourse, and to identify points of convergence between science and local knowledge.

The case studies also show that making reference to more general discourses that are not specific to natural resource management and rural development plays an important role in providing additional legitimacy to the respective story-lines: Conservationists in the Thai case made reference to a nationalist discourse, eco-populists in both cases referred to an indigenous rights discourse, and groups focusing on agricultural rural development made reference to a more general modernist development discourse. These references did not represent a systematic effort to establish discourse coalitions by integrating the story-lines. They can rather be interpreted as an attempt to invoke other story-lines that were considered to be appealing to at least a part of the constituencies of the respective discourses. Such efforts were, however, also used by members of competing story-lines to de-legitimize the respective position. For example, in the Thai case, the reference of conservationists to a nationalist discourse led to accusations of fascism and

disregard for indigenous groups. In both the Thai and the Indonesian case, conservationists challenged the reference to the indigenous rights movement made by the eco-populists. They pointed out that the communities in question had not lived since “time immemorial” in the areas from which they were supposed to be resettled, but rather migrated to the respective areas within rather recently. In the indigenous rights movement, “time immemorial” is, however, often used for defining indigenous peoples.⁹

INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE

The fact that remarkably similar story-lines, discourse coalitions and references to more general discourses were observed in different countries and at different levels (national level, community level) is not surprising, given the comparatively high influence of international organizations on biodiversity management in tropical countries. The same international conservation or development organizations, such as TNC and CARE, work in different tropical countries. Moreover, local NGOs in different countries receive their funds from the same international donor organizations. Apart from these economic aspects, the possibility to refer to international stakeholders adds legitimacy to the respective local and national discourse. As Hajer (1995: 59) reminds us, the plausibility of a discourse depends not only on the plausibility of the facts, but also on the authority attributed to the authors. The possibility to refer to authoritative institutions at the international level thus fulfils an important function in creating acceptability and trust in the struggle for discursive hegemony at the national and local level. The use of the internet, which was widely practiced by the NGOs in both cases, made it easier for the stakeholders to access information available at the international level.

⁹ See, for example, the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at http://www.treatycouncil.org/section_21151311.htm.

DISCOURSE AND CONFLICTS

The case studies show that discourse plays an important role in conflicts concerning natural resources. On the one hand, the mission underlying each discourse helped to facilitate collective action. Likewise, the creation of convincing story-lines, and the solutions they offer, provided a basis for collective action. These findings are in line with the theoretical positions on the functions of value- and belief systems and discourse in facilitating collective action, as discussed in Section 2. The Indonesian case also showed that discourse can play an important role for empowerment of disadvantaged groups. The eco-populist story-line helped a comparatively small community of villagers with very limited economic and human resources, supported by a relatively small local NGO, to defend their interests against the state apparatus and a powerful international donor organization. Li (1996) also emphasizes the role of using this story-line strategically to defend the rights of communities vis-à-vis states. She uses different cases to illustrate this argument, including another case from Central Sulawesi. Thus, discourse can be considered as a type of “political capital,” defined as resources actors can use to promote their political interests. In the Thai case, the different actors at the national level could also use their story-lines as political capital to promote their version of the community forestry law (Birner and Wittmer, 2003).

The case studies also highlight some problematic aspects arising from competing discourses with regard to the settlement of conflicts. The analysis showed that all three discourses had an explicit negative other-representation, which can diminish the basis for cooperation with other stakeholders. In the Thai case, the conflicts between the eco-populists and the conservationists delayed the passing of a Community Forestry Law for more than a decade. Likewise, the conflicts between the local communities and the state forest administration are

likely to destroy the basis for a cooperation which is foreseen in all drafts, including the People's draft, of the community forestry law.

DISCOURSE, SCIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The case studies show that there is a tendency in each of the three discourses to neglect certain aspects of the reality, which are, however, important for finding a balance between ecological, social and economic objectives, as foreseen in the CBD and the principles of sustainable development. The Thai case indicates that the conservationist discourse can be associated with “environmental orthodoxies”, such as the function of forests as sponges that ensure a stable water supply. While this argument sounds plausible at first sight, it is not consistent with the findings of hydrological studies. The relations between forest cover and hydrology are complex and “more trees” do not necessarily result in “more water”, as the conservationist story-line suggests. The paper by Forsyth (1999) quoted above summarizes the results of recent hydrological, pedological and ecological research projects in Northern Thailand, which contradict the conservationist story-line that the alleged watershed degradation has led to reduced stream flow during the last decades.

A problematic aspect of the eco-populist discourse is its tendency to romanticize indigenous communities and to ascribe them rather generally the capacity and interest to manage natural resources in a sustainable way, instead of examining the conditions under which this is actually the case. Agrawal and Gibson (1999) have shown that social science research should question the assumption of communities as small, homogenous units with shared interests and norms, and pay attention to multiple interests, power structures, local political processes and specific institutional arrangements. The Indonesian case study illustrates this concern. The traditional institutions, which the advocacy NGO attempted to enforce in indigenous villages, are

related to a very hierarchical traditional social structure, consisting of nobles, commoners and slaves. The potentially problematic equity implications of fostering such traditional institutions appeared to be rather neglected in the eco-populist discourse. This can be interpreted as an indication for the priority that eco-populists attribute to their mission of defending indigenous rights.

The strong focus on poverty as major cause for environmental degradation in the developmentalist discourse also has tendencies to neglect certain aspects of reality. Post-developmentalists (see Section 2) argue that developmentalists focus on technical solutions, while neglecting the political conditions of development. The case studies confirm this criticism to some extent. In both cases, the development organizations tended to be closer associated with the formal government institutions and to engage less in political struggles than the conservation and the advocacy organizations. They did, however, acknowledge the institutional dimension of development and engaged in creating and strengthening local institutions such as farmers' groups.

The two case studies indicate that science can play an important role in addressing the neglected aspects of reality in the three discourses. As the research review by Forsyth (1999) quoted above shows, natural science research can help to overcome "environmental orthodoxies." As the study by Agarwal and Gibson (1999) quoted above suggests, social science research can address the questions of heterogeneity and power structures within communities and analyze the political frame conditions. What would be required, however, are more systematic, interdisciplinary studies that aim to provide long-term representative data for larger settings both from a natural and a social science perspective. Such studies, however, are costly and difficult to implement. Moreover, they may not meet the specific interests of researchers, who – depending

on their discipline - often associate themselves more or less with one of the different discourses identified here (compare Table 1).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The two studies have shown that analyzing competing discourses offers important insights in struggles over nature conservation in tropical countries, such as conflicts over resource use in protected areas. The framework developed by Hajer (see Section 2) provides useful tools for such an analysis, especially by highlighting the role of story-lines and discourse coalitions. This framework emphasizes the constitutive power of language and the interaction between ideas and discourse. The two case studies are consistent with this view. They show that certain concepts, such as participation, gain discursive hegemony, which is indicated by the fact that proponents of all three discourses acknowledge participation as relevant. However, the case studies also suggest that the proponents of the three discourses were motivated by three different core objectives, in the sense of Sabatier and van Dijk (see Section 2): conserving nature, defending indigenous rights and eradicating poverty. Even though members of most organizations acknowledge two or all three of these goals, their mission typically concentrates on one goal, to which they attribute priority, and which they are unlikely to compromise, if trade-offs occur.

Considering that studies on ideology and discourse, which focus on social construction and framing of reality, may easily lead to misunderstandings, a final remark maybe in order. Acknowledging that problems are socially constructed and framed in specific discourses does not imply that these problems do not exist in reality: People live in poverty, species become extinct from the planet and indigenous communities are driven away from their land. The consensus on

sustainable development achieved at the Earth summit in Rio, as well as in sub-sequent meetings and a large number of international conventions, has established a strong commitment of states and civil society to address these problems simultaneously. This requires the willingness of the different actors to critically examine their own discourse, to become aware of neglected aspects of reality and of orthodoxy or romantization inherent in their discourse, and to combine their specific practical expertise in conservation, development and advocacy. Our findings suggest that researchers of different disciplines can contribute to this goal, if they are aware of the role they play for the different discourses.

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