

**Shaping public understandings of environmental degradation:  
measuring public participation in environmental narratives about  
Thailand's forests, 1968–2000**

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**Abstract**

This paper advances a new methodology for understanding the evolution of ‘environmental narratives’ in developing countries based on the historic analysis of newspaper reporting. The method employed presents a quantitative measurement of different participation in newspaper reports about forest conflicts in Thailand between 1968 and 2000, and an indication of how forest conflicts were framed as either conservationist, livelihood-oriented, or pro-industrialization. The method allows new steps to be taken in understanding the impact of participation upon redefining environmental narratives, and of means of understanding environmental history critically as a powerful, yet politically-shaped contributor to environmental narratives.

**KEYWORDS:** community forestry, environmental politics, environmental history, narratives, methodology, Thailand

## **Shaping public understandings of environmental degradation: measuring public participation in environmental narratives about Thailand's forests, 1968–2000**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper contributes to debates about environmental governance by applying new thinking about environmental narratives to the emergence of participatory, or so-called 'community' forestry in Thailand. In particular, the paper analyzes the evolution of public participation in debates about forestry between 1968 and 2000, and how far such participation has resulted in a more participatory or inclusive governance of forests in Thailand. The paper then draws some lessons for current policy debates about increasing participation in forest debates.

The term, environmental narratives refers to institutionalized beliefs in media or policy debates about environmental problems 'where each of these narratives has persisted in the face of strong empirical evidence against its storyline' (Roe, 1991:288). The term has been discussed within development studies since the late 1980s, when scholars argued that such institutionalized, or uncriticized assumptions about the nature and causes of environmental problems posed an important barrier to effective and equitable environmental policy (e.g. Thompson et al 1986). Indeed, research in forest policy in various developing countries has suggested that many underlying assumptions about the impacts or causes of deforestation are inaccurate, and hence may impact negatively on poorer farmers and forest users, plus overlook more effective means of controlling forest degradation (e.g. Fairhead and Leach, 1998).

But since the start of debate about environmental narratives in the 1980s, academic approaches to both explaining and governing narratives have diversified. While early approaches to narratives sought to question the scientific status of apparent truth claims about environment, increasingly scholars are looking instead at the social conditions that make alternative narratives seem legitimate, or 'truthful.' These newer approaches require analyzing how narratives emerge within different social contexts, and how far such contexts are challenged or replicated through civil society. Indeed, such debates reflect broader trends in the social sciences towards assessing the political influences on supposedly neutral science and expertise (Jasanoff et al, 1995). They also indicate that superficial approaches to increasing political participation may be insufficient to create effective environmental

governance, and that civil society activity also needs to reconsider the underlying assumptions and narratives about degradation.

There are two important aspects to such an enhanced political participation in environmental policy. First, narratives reflect the level of public participation in framing and defining environmental problems. Consequently, increasing inclusivity of environmental debate will result in more representative and relevant forms of environmental explanation. Secondly, however, all environmental debate inevitably uses concepts defined by previous discussions, and hence these too have to be assessed for historic influences from previously restricted political debate. As a result, redefining environmental narratives requires both increasing public participation in environmental debates, but also acknowledging that the concepts and narratives used to define and frame environment are shaped by previous history, rather than objective and universally transferable terms.

This paper contributes to these debates by demonstrating a methodology that allows the measurement of public participation, and the history of environmental narratives, contemporaneously. To do this, the paper uses historic newspaper reporting as an archival source. ‘Journalism,’ so the saying goes, ‘is history’s first draft,’<sup>1</sup> and hence may offer the freshest and most influential means through which the diverse events and experiences of environmental conflicts become translated into historic events with implications for the future. Yet, analyzing newspaper reporting also allows researchers to adopt a critical view to the history itself, in terms of how different events and actors were represented, and whether an apparent increased in public participation in debates resulted in the replacement, or replication of environmental narratives.

Thailand is a fitting location to study the emergence of participatory, or so-called ‘community forestry.’ Thailand has experienced intense public debate about forestry issues, since the rise of environmentalism as a topic of overt political concern in the 1960s, and then emergence of democracy in the 1980s and 1990s. Public participation in forestry debates is symbolic not just of managing forest resources, but of emerging civil society and democratic governance in general. Such debates are currently informing the negotiation of a new, community forestry bill, which will formalize structures by which local citizens can co-manage forests with the state. But little research has assessed how far such debates replicate environmental narratives, or how far increased public participation may result in more locally governed approaches to forests.

The paper discusses the emergence of forest politics and narratives in Thailand in more detail in later sections. First, the paper reviews theoretical concerns about environmental narratives, and describes the method used to assess them

## **2. ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVES AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

For some years, development scholars have acknowledged that institutionalized policy beliefs or knowledge claims about environmental degradation need to be researched for their impacts on development practice. One particular concept associated with this research is ‘environmental narratives,’ which have generally become known as succinct summaries of the causes, impacts, and presumed solutions for environmental problems, but which are increasingly challenged by research findings and practical experience in diverse localities. The crucial questions associated with narratives are why do they emerge, and why do they persist? Scholars have suggested a variety of characteristics and causes for them.

First, narratives emerge from a desire to simplify complex and uncertain sequences of cause and effect into convenient summaries, or ‘development blueprints’ (Roe, 1991). As Roe (1991, 1995) has argued, such simplifications, while attractive, do not acknowledge the implicit and culturally specific framings they contain, and which make narratives not as meaningful when placed in locations or cultures with different circumstances or evaluations of environmental problems. Second, narratives are often associated with the actions of outsiders to a region, most classically colonial scientists and governments, but also development agencies, who reaffirm narratives when they evaluate their own development interventions. Thirdly, narratives are frequently associated with notions of crisis as a rationale for development assistance or land management. Roe (1995:1066) argued that crisis narratives are used to justify stewardship of resources by outsiders. It is worth noting, though, that the analysis of crisis narratives does not necessarily mean the rejection of any form of developmental or environmental crisis, but a consideration of when, and for whom, crisis exists, and the impacts on policy of asserting there is a crisis.

In environmental terms, the term, narrative has been used to describe a variety of concepts and well-known explanations or summaries of problems. Perhaps the most discussed environmental narrative is the so-called ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin, 1968), which proposes a formulaic sequence of overexploitation caused by private interest resulting in ecological collapse. This narrative has been proposed in a variety of locations, but has also been criticized by research within community-based natural resource management (CBNRM)

for overlooking the institutional factors that may enable cultures to adapt to shortage (e.g. Tiffen and Mortimore, 1994). Moreover, the term, narratives may be used to refer to commonly-heard generalizations or summaries of environmental problems that often fuel debates about human impacts on environment, but which have been questioned by research focusing on the relative impacts of anthropogenic versus non-anthropogenic change; or the actions of poor farmers themselves in reducing impacts on environment. Indeed, environmental agencies such as UNEP, the World Conservation Monitoring Center, and the ‘Alternatives to Slash and Burn’ initiative of the CGIAR have been criticized for allegedly repeating colonial narratives about the impacts of local agriculture on environmental degradation, and accordingly for encouraging land-use policies that restrict local livelihood strategies (Thomas and Middleton, 1994; Fairhead and Leach, 1996; Bassett and Crummey, 2003; Forsyth, 2003:146).

Governing narratives, or making them more transparent and open to challenge, however, is highly contested, and still largely unclear within development studies. Emery Roe, writing in the early 1990s, urged that narratives should be challenged through the development of counter-narratives, frequently based upon alternative and pro-poor framings of environmental change (Roe, 1991:288). Yet, at the same time, Roe pointed out that the essence of narratives is the tendency for them to reinforce perceptions of how environmental or developmental objectives should be in developing countries. He wrote: ‘Development narratives tell scenarios not so much about what should happen as about what will happen according to their tellers – if the events or positions are carried out as described’ (Roe, 1991:288). These two statements, however, contain a tension that has influenced research on narratives since.

On one hand, much initial research concerning narratives has sought to replace apparently ‘false’ narratives with more accurate counter-narratives as an issue of greater accuracy and truth. Accordingly, such approaches – influenced heavily by positivist methodologies – have tried to redefine concepts such as desertification, or the impacts of deforestation, through more detailed local research. For example, some social scientists have argued that the so-called ‘Universal Soil Loss Equation’ (USLE) is flawed simply because it was developed in the lower plains of the USA and is hence not easily transferable to sites with more complex topography, climate, and land management (Hallsworthy, 1989). Such approaches, however, have been criticized for suggesting a linear and optimistic transmission between science and policy, which is belied by the very existence of narratives. Consequently, critics have proposed that the explanation of narratives needs to acknowledge complex social processes linking the co-production of environmental knowledge and politics, and particularly the role

of civil society in both framing, and then communicating underlying beliefs about environment.

On the other hand, more sociological approaches have not sought to find greater ‘truth’ but to demonstrate the social conditions that make narratives (i.e. truth claims) appear truthful. Yet, there are divergent approaches here too. Under Cultural Theory, analysts of narratives have explained narratives as resulting from four essential groups in society characterized by different worldviews, which influence the framing and experience of environmental problems. In terms of common environmental contests, *egalitarians* (e.g. NGOs, campaigning journalists) are usually seen to be contesting *individualists* (e.g. businesses), who both seek to influence *hierarchists* (e.g. government, or rule makers). A fourth group, *fatalists* comprise less powerful voices (e.g. peasantry, factory workers), whose voices are often co-opted into alliances with egalitarians who seek to represent their cause.<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting that Cultural Theory influenced much early work on narratives (e.g. Thompson et al, 1986), and clearly influenced much of Roe’s seminal papers on narratives (see Roe, 1996).<sup>iii</sup>

A second sociological approach rejects the social classifications of Cultural Theory, and instead explains narratives as historically evolving incidences of institutionalized discourse. Influenced by poststructural social theory, this approach identifies narratives as ‘storylines’ (e.g. Hajer, 1995), which carry with them the impact of successive public debates that defined and framed the concepts referred to by narratives. Consequently, narratives reflect the historic conditions of political participation. Yet, narratives may be self-replicating because once established, political actors may repeat them in order to gain visibility and alliances in environmental debates. Hajer (1995) uses the term, ‘discourse coalitions’ to refer to occasions when different political actors agree on specific framings or pieces of information about environment, which lead to the formation of conditions in which such information is seen as true. Indeed, ‘storylines’ (or narratives) are historic accumulations of such discourse coalitions, and storylines act to identify causes, and effects, plus victims and villains in specific environmental debates. Storylines are also similar to the ‘actor-oriented approach’ of Long and Long (1992) of seeking to establish who has defined, and with which power, the frameworks by which we evaluate environmental change.

The implications for both governing dominant narratives, and developing counter-narratives, vary greatly between these approaches. Under Cultural Theory, opposing narratives are seen to be both inevitable and incommensurable. Consequently, policymakers must avoid trying to calculate which social group is telling the truth, and instead devise policy arenas that acknowledge the diversity, and inevitable incommensurability, of each perspective. Against

this, some observers have feared that this kind of narrative analysis proposes a hopeless relativism in assessing competing truth claims, or the necessary and stark choice between visions of environmental crisis on one hand versus universally optimistic claims on the other. (For example, the recent debate about *The Skeptical Environmentalist* by Bjorn Lomborg may be classified as such a choice).

Yet, under the storyline approach to narratives, there is greater chance to tailor environmental explanations to specific locations by increasing public participation in the formulation of narratives. This approach need not also deny the existence of crisis as one option, but instead comment on how such notions of crisis have been reached. But extra care needs to be taken on the effectiveness of public participation. Superficial forms of participation, or those based on alliances with dominating actors outside localities, may only reaffirm existing narratives if local people see replicating narratives as necessary in order to gain visibility, or if dominant actors perform selective consultation of known allies in order to gain the appearance of local support.<sup>iv</sup> Achieving successful local participation in the formulation of environmental narratives depends on building effective and inclusionary forms of local environmental governance that enable citizens to challenge existing environmental narratives and shape them according to their needs and experiences, rather than simply increasing public debate about environment without redefining environmental narratives.

Such dilemmas have already been recorded in forest conflicts. Classic historians of environmentalism have argued that the increasing perception of forests as fragile and threatened wilderness worldwide has been associated with social changes, such as the rise in urban middle classes, and growing concern at the impacts of industrialization (Nash, 1982; Cockburn and Alexander, 1989). Furthermore, the emergence of political activism about forests has seen diverse social alliances and oppositions. On one hand, some conservationist groups have vilified shifting cultivators for allegedly causing deforestation (a so-called ‘green discourse’). On the other hand, other conservationists have sought to represent forest dwellers as closer to nature or in union with middle-class activists (a livelihoods approach, or so-called ‘red-green’ discourse). In Thailand, this has arguably been shown by the so-called ‘Karen consensus’ among some writers that the Karen ethnic group are representative of farmers who know how to manage forest resources effectively, in contrast to other groups (most commonly the Hmong) who do not. Scholars have argued that these representations show attempts by analysts, journalists, and campaigners to harness these groups in ways to empower their own political campaigns rather than necessarily be an accurate representation of different land use patterns (Walker, 1999; Forsyth, in press). Building more effective forms of environmental

governance therefore requires not just increasing public participation in shaping narratives, but in being critically aware of the process of participation itself.

This paper demonstrates an approach to achieving this analysis by using historic newspaper reporting of forest conflicts in Thailand. The purpose of this analysis is to assess the evolution of narratives over time, and to assess the impact of increased reported political participation on the evolution of narratives. The next section now outlines this method.

### **3. THE METHOD: ASSESSING NARRATIVES AND ENVIRONMENTAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH HISTORIC NEWSPAPER REPORTING**

#### *Background*

The purpose of the method is to collect is to collect detailed empirical information about the history of environmental conflicts in Thailand, and the level of public participation in both framing and in contesting environmental problems. Four objectives were sought:

- Quantitative indication of the timing and relative importance of different environmental stories
- Quantitative indication of political participation by different types of actors
- Quantitative and qualitative indication of how stories and actors are represented by journalists as historians
- Comparison between different stories, and different types of stories, for political participation and framing.

By achieving these objectives, the method can show both how apparent changes in political participation or civil society activity can influence the democratic governance of natural resources. More critically, too, the method can assess how far the appearance of greater participation has actually resulted in changing underlying narratives of environmental change.

The method is the first time both historic framings and participation have been measured quantitatively from newspaper sources. But the research is rooted within well-established means of analyzing discourse and text based on identifying framings, or the inherent assumptions that underpin reporting (Rein, 1986; Silverman, 1993; Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1995; Branston and Stafford, 1996). Framings are defined as assumptions about what is meaningful that have to be adopted in order to make any report or political discussion logical.



Accordingly, news stories that described incidences of ‘corruption’ leading to the failure of forest protection policies might be said to reflect framings of both ‘state failure’ and ‘ecological threat’ because the story would not be meaningful if these concepts were not seen as worthy of discussion. The objective of measuring framings is to indicate how news reports representing ‘news’ and – in effect – contemporary history of environmental politics as they happen, may also contain values and assumptions that influence the reports, but are not always made explicit. By doing this, the method acknowledges that journalism is not free from biases, yet are frequently used as a supposedly objective indication of environmental problems, and hence a means by which environmental narratives are replicated.

### *Selection of sources*

Clearly, different newspapers adopt varying styles and practices for reporting, and these may vary over time and between individual writers. Research for this paper, however, was based only upon one source, the *Bangkok Post*, for various reasons. First, the Bangkok Post is Thailand’s oldest and best-known English-language daily broadsheet (newspaper), and adopts a style of presenting day-to-day news updates for different stories, supplemented by occasional features, that provides the possibility for long-term analysis of how stories are formed to a much greater degree than other newspapers in Thailand. (News reports are generally at the start of a paper, and are generally short, an ideally as removed of opinion as possible; news features are generally at the back or middle of newspapers, are longer and focus on lengthy discussions of topics or people). Secondly, the Bangkok Post has an in-depth archival library that allows easy access to old news stories, and which already has classified different reports under specific story names, thus removing that responsibility from the researcher, with his/her potential biases. Thirdly, the Bangkok Post is published in English, and therefore allowed easier reading and understanding. (It is worth noting the author is fluent in Thai, but that English allows greater speed). It is also worth noting that despite the use of English, the Bangkok Post is overtly aimed at a Thai readership, and employs predominantly Thai writers. Finally, the selection of a single newspaper simplified analysis greatly, when time is limited. Nonetheless, some occasional comparison of reporting styles and techniques were undertaken for specific stories with some Thai-language daily newspapers, (particularly *Thai Rath*, *Phutthadkaan*, and *Matichon*). This comparison (not reported here) indicated that no other newspaper adopted the same day-by-day coverage of environmental news reports as the Bangkok Post, and that the other newspapers used a reporting style that could be described as more anecdotal and immediately judgmental than the English-language press.<sup>v</sup> (It is also not clear how far some newspapers use the Bangkok Post itself as sources of news). Clearly, a thorough analysis of how all news reporting affects the production of

environmental narratives would require analysis of more news sources than one prominent broadsheet. But it is acknowledged that such a comprehensive approach may not be possible in this initial study, and that the Bangkok Post may be the best indicator for all the press. Furthermore, it is also acknowledged that the Bangkok Post and all journalism also transformed over time, and hence straight comparisons between different years need to consider such changes.

### *Analysis*

Information was collected in three main stages. First, stories were selected for relevance to the forest debate in Thailand. This selection resulted in two main categories: general news stories and features relating to forestry (using the years, 1968-71; 1978-81; 1988-91; and 1988-2000 as samples); and then specific ‘stories’ about forestry usually related to particular scandals, projects or debates. The specific news ‘stories’ multiplied during the 1990s and hence reduced the number of stories in the general forestry category. Analysis started in 1968 because this year is generally considered to be the time when environmentalism became a force in international politics, and fortuitously because this is also when the Bangkok Post file for ‘forestry’ began.

Secondly, stories were then measured in chronological order for the following information:

- (i) A measurement of importance (column inches per story; total number of stories);
- (ii) Participation of different actors (the number of references to actors in different social or political niches)
- (iii) Framing of stories (the number of times a specific frame was apparent in a story)
- (iv) Any other aspect of the story, such as the obvious uses of a metaphor, links with other political debates, or characterizations of different actors.

The different political actors considered for participation included state actors (such as politicians or government departments); international actors (such as the UN, or investors); business groups (whether Thai or international); experts (individuals represented as having official authoritative expertise, be they state or non-state); ‘middle class’ and ‘working class / peasantry’ actors. (Clearly, the classifications of class may be difficult to identify, and so general rules were developed and applied. For example, urban-based conservation NGOs were considered to be middle class activists, but poor farmers and factory workers were considered working class / peasantry. Student actors raised certain problems of classification. When acting as political activists, students were considered ‘middle class,’ but if passive victims – such as school children affected by factory emissions – they were considered working class.<sup>vi</sup> Similarly, analyzing actors according to gender may also have been of

interest, but raised a number of problems of actually achieving this, such as when speakers were mentioned anonymously. It was also not always clear that simply measuring different representations of gender would necessarily have indicated a greater understanding of gender differences within environmental politics without further analysis.)

Similarly, identifying framings in stories also risked imposing categories of importance to the researcher rather than within the journalist's mind. Consequently, framings were identified late on in the analysis after detailed reading of many stories, and on an *a posteriori* basis, which sought to represent information as presented rather than as expected by the reader. A variety of topics were identified in this way (see tables below), and so to simplify these, frames were then condensed into a smaller number of categories to reflect themes of 'green;' 'red-green;' 'pro-industrialization' ('modernization'); 'state success' (or strength) and 'state failure' (or corruption); and 'democratization' (community strength). It was also noted if stories attributed a strong sense of blame for environmental problems, particularly representing villagers as blameworthy (commonly a 'green,' rather than 'red-green' framing); villagers as 'victims' (commonly referring to 'state failure'); or business investment to blame (commonly an anti-industrialization, or 'green' framing). It was possible for different stories to have more than one framing.

The third stage of analysis was to use the quantitative information provided from stage two to conduct comparisons between different types of story; different periods of time; and to draw conclusions about how far public participation within stories has, or has not, challenged or replicated environmental narratives. The identification of people as either 'victims' or 'to blame' for environmental problems also helped indicate the emergence of alliances between actors (including journalists themselves) with different social groups.

#### **4. ANALYSIS: PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVES IN THAILAND**

##### *Background*

One of the most important features of environmental politics in Thailand is the sudden rise of civil society activity relating to the resistance of dams, deforestation, or other aspects of environmental protection since the late 1960s. This period, however, has experienced intense changes in other aspects of politics within Thailand, notably the rise of industrialization – with associated growth in cities, industrial workers and middle classes – and the emergence of

Thailand's first nominally democratic governments in the last 1980s and early 1990s after years of oppressive military rule. Indeed, military rule was also associated with violent reprisals against pro-democracy demonstrators in 1973, 1976 and 1992.

Environmentalism and democratization are therefore entwined in Thailand, and it is perhaps not surprising that the first major successes of environmentalism – the postponement of a scheduled dam in Nam Choan, in western Thailand, together with the ban on logging, in 1988–1989 – coincided with the country's first formally democratic government. Yet, before this period, forests always had political meaning, being sites of temples, and the place of refuge for political activists during the 1970s. The government officially closed access to many forest zones during the 1970s and 1980s in order to control alleged insurgency. Much land in Thailand is officially sanctioned as 'forest reserve' and is consequently formally owned by the state, even if such land may not have had forest for decades, and is currently settled. Access to forest land inspires deep political views from various factions. According to the Forest Act of 1941, 'forest' is defined as 'the land area which no-one has authority to occupy or use' (in Anat et al, 1988:142). Hence, entering forests may represent both an assault on the authority of the state; a short-term, if illegal business opportunity; or an act of assertion by poor and disadvantaged settlers.

In simple terms, the history of forest politics since the 1960s can be sketched by listing a number of key disputes concerning forests that have often been represented as a transition from state control towards greater public governance (e.g. Hirsch, 1997). Some notable disputes (for forests) have included opposition to a proposed cable car in the Doi Suthep national park near Chiang Mai (during the late 1960s and early 1970s, re-emerging in the 1980s); and then opposition to the proposed Nam Choan dam (during the 1980s). These were then followed by the eventual implementation of a national logging ban (1989), and then a series of scandals during the early 1990s that focused on allegedly corrupt politicians accused of breaking the ban. In the later 1990s, attention turned to further cases of apparent state failure through the authorization of infrastructure projects (such as gas pipelines from Myanmar and Malaysia), or the inability of the state to prevent illegal logging in important national parks (such as the Salween national park, on the far northwestern border with Myanmar). Throughout the 1990s, however, the most important debate has been the formulation of the so-called Community Forestry Bill, which aims to define the legal framework to devolve forest governance to localities. A crucial, and contested, theme of this proposed legislation is the impact on the Royal Forestry Department, established in 1896 largely to oversee logging operations, and which critics suggest represents an important barrier to democratic governance of forests because of entrenched bureaucracy, vulnerability

to corruption, and vested interest in maintaining the status quo (e.g. Hirsch and Lohmann, 1988; PER, 1991).

### *Political participation*

Initial analysis of the participation in different stories about forest conflicts reveal important changes in the composition of activism. Table 1 shows the basic levels of political participation for different actors for forest stories in the 4-yearly periods of 1968-1971; 1978-1982; 1988-1991 and 1998-2000 (5 years). This table shows that news coverage of forest stories rose considerably from 26 in 1968 to some 205 in 1989, and that average column inches of stories grew from close to 10 inches between 1968-1971, to close to 20 inches in 1988-1991. After 1991, it is difficult to assess the importance of general forest stories, because of the growth of specific stories relating to individual themes (see Table 3), meaning that all remaining general forest stories are small news items. Most specific forest stories in Table 3 have average column lengths of more than 20 inches.

The number of state actors mentioned per story decreased over time, from at least one per story, to much less than one (Table 1). Middle class and working class activists have grown in number over this time, although do not feature as frequently. In terms of specific stories, it is worth noting that different actors feature more prominently in various stories. Stories relating to lowland protests against upland agriculture in Chom Thong (Chiang Mai province), in the late 1990s featured the highest number of ‘peasant’ actors in stories, plus a high level of middle-class NGOs and conservationists. The most prominent campaigns with middle-class presences were those involving opposition to the construction of the Myanmar-Thailand gas pipelines (Yadana pipeline), and the general problem of encroachment on national parks throughout the 1990s. References to businesses and international actors remain stable in the general news stories, but in the specific stories, the Chiang Mai cable car, and Salween national park scandal featured both categories prominently. These figures indicate that the main trends in reporting have been to report comments or activities of citizens more frequently, and that this trend varies with specific stories.

### *Framings of stories*

Framings were conducted in two stages. Tables 2 shows some initial categorizations of frames from the first stage of analysis. Tables 2a and 4 show these frames reduced into simpler categories in order to indicate broad trends of ‘green’ (conservationist); ‘red-green’

(livelihood-oriented); weak and strong state; pro-industrialization; and pro-democratization (referring to ‘community strength’).

The general forest stories (Table 2a) reflect broad changes to acknowledge an increasingly ‘green’ agenda in environmental politics (from close to 10 percent of all framings between 1968-1971, to closer to 20 percent in the late 1970s to 1990s (again the figures are affected by the diversification of reporting into specific stories during the 1990s). A ‘red-green’ (livelihoods) agenda is clearly growing throughout the period, as is attention to democratization. Accordingly, discussions of industrialization as the dominant theme for reporting have dropped remarkably, from some 50 percent in the late 1960s to between 0 and 5 percent in the 1990s. Such changes may reflect the dropping of political controls on news reporting. But it is also interesting to note that reporting of apparent state successes (such as in successful implementation of new protections, or harnessing of loggers) has remained consistently strong throughout the research period. Similarly, reporting of state failures (such as alleged corruption, or failures in policies) have risen slightly, but were initially strong between 1968-1971 too.

The framing of specific stories (Table 4) indicate that stories represent different themes, rather than consistent themes relating to all aspects of forest conflict. The predominantly ‘green’ news stories are the Nam Choan dam and Yadana gas pipeline (both of which had a prominent international following, and was largely middle class). Predominantly ‘red-green’ stories were those predominantly featuring the resettlement of villages by the military state during the early 1990s for reforestation, and reclaiming of state land, such as the occasions of Pa Kham, and Dong Yai and other forest evictions. Some other stories were specifically focused on other aspects of the state. The case of the Tha Chana forest reserve in southern Thailand (where a politician was accused of breaking logging and commercial plantation rules), the chief framing is clearly of a strong state in enforcing sanctions against the accused man. The only other framing in this story is of alleged state failure, in allowing this to happen.

#### *Participation and redefining narratives*

The results discussed so far clearly indicate that the framings of forest conflicts have changed from largely being concerned with industrialization towards a greater consideration of both ‘green’ and ‘red-green’ frameworks. One useful comparison is to analyze the different way in which the Chiang Mai cable car dispute was framed initially (between 1969 and 1971), and then between 1985 and 1989, once environmentalism had become established as a legitimate political force. During the first stage, this story (of building a cable car to the renown

Buddhist shrine of Doi Suthep in a protected national park) was presented mainly as an opportunity for industrialization and modernization. Yet, by the 1980s, this framing had declined, and green and democratization concerns had risen. This transition may be partly due to reporting restrictions at the time of the first conflicts, but may also reflect the greater awareness of environmentalism as a form of popular protest during this period.

But sometimes it is clear that the forest conflicts have been framed predominantly in terms of conflicts between state and society, rather than in any specific sense of a 'green' versus 'red-green' interpretation. In this sense, the presentation of 'democratization' as a key framing in environmental stories is not always associated with a pro-poor, or livelihoods ('red-green') approach. For example, the conflict of the Nam Choan dam was clearly framed in terms of increasing democratization, yet was largely 'green' in its agenda. Similarly, some predominantly 'red-green' stories (such as the forest evictions from Pa Kham and Dong Yai, etc.) are generally not represented as 'democratization' stories. Furthermore, many specific stories relating to the implementation of the logging ban during the 1990s feature state success and failure as the main topics of concern, rather than specific issues of environmental explanation. For example, the Suan Kitti and Salween national park scandals are represented mainly as criticisms of government. Such examples suggest that increased public participation may not result in the redefining of norms of environmental explanation, but that environmental concerns are used to make other criticisms of the state.

A similar sense of conflict is shown in debates relating to community forestry. These stories, more than others, show a combination of various perspectives, including 'green' and 'red-green,' plus criticisms and endorsements of the state. These ranges of viewpoints are also illustrated in Table 5, which shows some overt statements of blame within news stories concerning the role of non-state actors, including poor villagers. In some stories, villagers are openly defined as causing environmental problems when they are accused of causing deforestation, or disobeying government rules, including attempts to resettle them. Yet, at the same time, these stories also include some references to villagers also being 'victims' of the state or of other social groups. Interviews with journalists have suggested that such diverse opinions may simply reflect the different views of journalists themselves. The implication of these kinds of debates is that local conflicts need not result in a redefinition of environmental narratives in newspaper reporting, but that these conflicts are frequently represented in terms of other narratives such as more general counter-oppositions of state and society.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE**

This paper has demonstrated a method for assessing public participation in environmental narratives, as reported in newspapers. This is the first time such a technique has been demonstrated, and it offers in-depth means of measuring the co-evolution of environmental history, political participation, and the underlying framings of environmental debate. The chief contribution of this approach is that it provides detailed information about the exact participation and framings of storylines as they emerge. By so doing, this approach allows the mechanisms of science–policy within civil society to become more transparent, and hence helps avoid generalizations or simplistic explanations based on pre-assumptions about different political actors, and their positions vis-à-vis state, society and economy.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of this paper is that the rise of environmentalism in Thailand has been associated with criticisms of state weaknesses, plus reaffirmations of the role of the state in defining and implementing policy. The focus on the state, however, has taken precedence over aspects of how forest policy is applied at the local level. Opposing the state through environmentalism is sometimes presented as democratization in itself rather than in assessing and challenging the basis of the environmentalism discussed. In this way, civil society activism replicates narratives rather than redefines them, and the press has an important role in framing each event to appear functional in wider struggles between state and society, or in reiterating wider, even global, narratives about the conservation of wilderness and natural resources.

Of course, this study has focused only upon news reporting in one newspaper, albeit the most authoritative and long-term source in Thailand. Yet, evidence suggests that the kind of reporting undertaken may not allow a local redefinition of narratives, but may allow a more national or universal reassessment of norms used to frame environmental reports from within journalists themselves. The overriding focus on industrialization and state control in forest stories from the 1960s and 1970s has now been replaced by a desire to focus on pro-poor policies, bound by the clear desire of some journalists to make politics more inclusive. While this clearly is progressive, it is not clear how far local actors can shape the resulting news reports (and hence, environmental history) to their own self-defined needs. The new forms of reporting environmental news, by representing more non-state actors, and members of peasantry or working class, suggest that these news reports may not be as pro-poor as they seem. It may be misleading to assume that civil society can be seen to be one undifferentiated group, or that ‘social’ actors can be united in opposition to state or business aims (as sometimes assumed in Marxist, or Cultural Theory approaches). Instead, it is clear that different social groups within civil society may adopt different underlying assumptions and



framings of environmental change than commonly predicted. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that reporting of environmental conflicts either in newspapers, or through commonly reported memories fed by news reports, may need to acknowledge greater diversity in opinion about the very environmental framings of conflicts.



**Table 1: Representation of different actors in general news stories about logging**  
*(using stories classified under 'Logging' file in Bangkok Post library)*

Year	Summary of key events	Total stories per year	Average column inches per story	References to state actors per story	References to foreign organizations or actors per story	References to business actors per story	References to official 'experts' per story	References to middle class actors per story	References to working class / peasantry actors per story
1968	Vietnam War era; Emergence of first environmental campaigns	26	13.2	1.1	0.4	0.5	0	0	0
1969		46	7.8	1.1	0.3	0.4	0.2	0	0.2
1970		32	7.2	1.2	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.03	0.1
1971		72	8.7	1.1	0.2	0.5	0.1	0	0.03
1978	Government seals entry to forests in 1979 to enhance national security	131	10.3	1.0	0.4	0.5	0.1	0	0.2
1979		24	11.6	1.4	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1
1980		42	10.2	1.2	0.05	0.3	0.1	0	0.02
1981		62	10.3	1.1	0.06	0.3	0.1	0.05	0
1988	Logging Ban passed 1988, enforced from 1989; first nominal democratic government	165	17.4	1.4	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.2	0.2
1989		205	17.7	1.2	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.1
1990		132	21.2	1.1	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.3
1991		105	16.4	1.1	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.3
1996	Community Forestry debate growing	46*	12.9	1.1	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.4
1997		78	7.3	0.6	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2
1998		90	5.8	0.4	0.04	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2
1999		76	5.9	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2
2000		65	2.7	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.02

Source: *Bangkok Post* daily newspaper.

\*Note: the smaller number of stories and shorter column lengths in these years is partly caused by the emergence of new files dealing with specific logging conflicts separately. The most important of these separate conflicts are listed in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 2: Underlying themes and framings in general news stories about logging**  
*(Number of themes identified per news story)*

Year	Ecological threat	Threat to people	Villagers are 'victims'	Villagers are 'to blame'	Opposition to reforestation	National security threatened	State failure / corruption	State success / enforcement	Democratization / community strength	Modernization / pro-industry
1968	0.2	0	0	0	0	0.04	0.2	0.3	0	0.7
1969	0.04	0	0	0.1	0	0.1	0.1	0.3	0	0.6
1970	0.2	0	0	0.1	0	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.06	0.4
1971	0.1	0	0	0.1	0	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.01	0.3
1978	0.2	0.01	0	0.1	0	0.02	0.04	0.5	0.01	0.4
1979	0.3	0.1	0.1	0	0	0	0.1	0.6	0.1	0.2
1980	0.2	0	0	0.1	0	0	0.2	0.7	0	0.02
1981	0.2	0.02	0	0.1	0	0.02	0.2	0.5	0.02	0.2
1988	0.3	0.1	0.04	0.01	0.04	0	0.2	0.6	0.1	0.1
1989	0.2	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	0	0.03	0.7	0.1	0.1
1990	0.2	0.1	0.02	0.02	0.04	0	0.1	0.6	0.1	0.03
1991	0.1	0.1	0.04	0	0.04	0	0.1	0.7	0.1	0
1996	0.2	0	0.04	0.1	0	0	0.2	0.4	0.2	0
1997	0.4	0.1	0.03	0.1	0	0.01	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.04
1998	0.2	0.03	0.1	0.1	0	0.03	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.01
1999	0.2	0.1	0.04	0.1	0	0.01	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.1
2000	0.1	0.1	0.02	0.1	0	0.03	0.2	0.6	0.1	0.1

Source: *Bangkok Post* daily newspaper.

**Table 2a: General news reporting about forest conflicts in Thailand: dominant framings**  
*(Framings per story classified according to dominant themes, in percentage of all framings found)*

Year	Forest conflicts represent threat to environment (green agenda)	Forest conflicts represent threat to people (red-green agenda)	Forest conflicts show examples of State success / progress (strong state)	Forest conflicts show examples of State failure / corruption (weak state)	Forest conflicts show examples of business interests / economic growth (industrialization)	Forest conflicts show examples of people power / community strength (democratization)
1968	13	0	17	11	54	0
1969	3	0	24	7	57	0
1970	11	0	30	11	36	4
1971	7	0	39	12	35	1
1978	14	1	35	3	34	1
1979	18	5	36	8	10	5
1980	15	0	47	14	3	0
1981	16	1	36	13	13	1
1988	19	10	42	11	5	4
1989	16	2	57	3	7	7
1990	14	7	49	9	3	7
1991	11	6	59	10	0	5
1996	17	0	33	14	0	12
1997	26	9	27	12	3	11
1998	16	2	31	20	1	9
1999	16	6	29	18	5	7
2000	6	4	44	17	7	8

Source: *Bangkok Post* daily newspaper.

**Table 3: Specific forest conflicts in Thailand (not included in general news stories): Representation of different actors**

Conflict (and province)	Summary of key events	Dates (* indicates conflict is on-going)	Total number of news stories	Average column inches per story	References to state actors per story	References to foreign organizations or actors per story	References to business per story	References to official 'experts' per story	References to middle class actors per story	References to lower class / peasantry actors per story
Chiang Mai cable car (Chiang Mai)	Cable car proposed to Buddhist shrine in national park (2 periods of reporting)	Mar 1969– Mar 1971	15	7.6	1.2	0.5	1.5	0	0.1	0
		Apr 1985 – May 1989	19	12.5	1.4	0.1	1.1	0.3	0.5	0
Nam Choan (Kanjnaburi)	Proposed construction of dam in rainforest	Apr 1982 – Jun 1989	147	19.2	0.9	0.2	0.6	0.4	1.2	0.1
Suan Kitti (Chachoengsao)	Senator accused of flouting logging / plantation laws	Jan 1990 – Dec 1990	63	24.2	1.7	0.1	1.0	0	0.1	0.1
Pa Kham (Buri Ram)	Villagers resist resettlement and reforestation in northeast	Jun 1989 – Feb 1995	48	21.7	1.2	0	0.02	0.1	1.0	0.9
National Park encroachment by tourism (nationwide)	Various alleged cases of encroachment from tourism development in National Parks	May 1993 – Feb 1999*	58	29.3	1.4	0.03	0.17	0.4	1.1	0.2
Dong Yai, Thap Lan, Tah Takiab (various provinces in northeast)	Other cases of villagers resisting resettlement and reforestation	Feb 1994 – April 1994	26	17.8	1.7	0	0	0	0.5	0.8
Yadana Pipeline (Kanjnaburi)	Gas pipeline through western forests	Jan 1995 – Mar 1999	199	22.9	0.7	0.1	1.5	0.3	1.1	0.1
Tha Chana	MP accused of flouting	Jan 1996 –								

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(Surat Thani)	logging laws	Sep 1998	79	21.4	1.8	0	0.9	0.05	0.1	0.1
Chom Thong (Chiang Mai)	Lowland farmers protest against deforestation by 'hill tribes'	Dec 1996 – June 1999*	29	34.7	1.1	0.2	0.03	0.6	0.8	1.4
Community forestry (including Dong Larn dispute) (nationwide)	Debate about community management of forests, illustrated by encroachment of farmers onto plantation in N.E.	Jan 1996 – Mar 1999*	242	24.8	1.4	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.6
Salween scandal (Mae Hong Son)	Illegal logging of national park	Jan 1998 – May 2000*	104	22.2	2.2	0.02	0.7	0.1	0	0.2

**Table 3a: Dominant framings in news reporting of specific forest conflicts in Thailand**  
*(Framings per story classified according to dominant themes, in percentage of all framings found)*

Conflict (and province)	Summary of key events	Dates (* indicates conflict is on-going)	Conflicts represent threat to environment  (green agenda)	Forest conflicts represent threat to people  (red-green agenda)	Forest conflicts show examples of State success / enforcement  (strong state)	Forest conflicts show examples of State failure / corruption  (weak state)	Forest conflicts impact on business interests / economic growth  (industrialization)	Forest conflicts show examples of people power / community strength  (democratization)
Chiang Mai cable car (Chiang Mai)	Cable car proposed to Buddhist shrine in national park (2 periods of reporting)	Mar 1969– Mar 1971	13	0	0	0	81	6
		Apr 1985 – May 1989	27	0	14	0	45	14
Nam Choan (Kanjanaburi)	Proposed construction of dam in rainforest	Apr 1982 – Jun 1989	33	2	10	10	16	29
Suan Kitti (Chachoengsao)	Senator accused of flouting logging laws	Jan 1990 – Dec 1990	5	1	51	34	4	3
Pa Kham (Buri Ram)	Villagers resist resettlement and reforestation in northeast	Jun 1989 – Feb 1995	5	42	22	8	0	12
Dong Yai, Thap Lan, Tah Takiab (various provinces in northeast)	Other cases of villagers resisting resettlement and reforestation	Feb 1994 – April 1994	21	18	18	14	0	0
Yadana Pipeline (Kanjanaburi)	Gas pipeline through western forests	Jan 1995 – Mar 1999	34	12	5	12	4	17
Tha Chana (Surat Thani)	MP accused of flouting logging laws	Jan 1996 – Sep 1998	0	0	71	29	0	0



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Chom Thong (Chiang Mai)	Lowland farmers protest against deforestation by 'hill tribes'	Dec 1996 – June 1999*	12	8	8	52	0	4
Community forestry (including Dong Larn dispute) (nationwide)	Debate about community management of forests, illustrated by encroachment of farmers onto plantation in N.E.	Jan 1996 – Mar 1999*	20	9	27	17	2	9
Salween scandal (Mae Hong Son)	Illegal logging of national park	Jan 1998 – May 2000*	6	0	51	43	0	0
National Park encroachment by tourism (nationwide)	Various scandals of encroachment from tourism development in National Parks	May 1993 – Feb 1999*	23	1	8	19	6	23

**Table 5: Expressions of blame beyond the state in news reporting of forest conflicts in Thailand**  
*(Framings per story classified according to dominant themes, in percentage of all framings found)*

Conflict (and province)	Local people ‘to blame’	Local people are ‘victims’	Business investment ‘to blame’
Nam Choan (Kanchanaburi)		1	
Suan Kitti (Chachoengsao)			1
Pa Kham (Buri Ram)	8	41	
Dong Yai, Thap Lan, Tah Takiab (various provinces in northeast)	29	18	
Yadana Pipeline (Kanchanaburi)			3
Chom Thong (Chiang Mai)	16	8	
Community forestry (including Dong Larn dispute) (nationwide)	6	5	3
National Park encroachment by tourism (nationwide)		1	8

*Source: framings from the Bangkok Post, ‘victims’ are a subset of framing in Table 4 that ‘forest conflicts represent threat to people’*

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<sup>i</sup> This statement is commonly attributed to Philip Graham, the publisher of the Washington Post between 1946 and 1963.

<sup>ii</sup> One illustration of this classification is given in the following quotation: ‘If you think of the Brent Spar saga, Shell was the actor from the market (or individualist) solidarity, the government experts who okayed the deep ocean disposal were the hierarchical actors, Greenpeace (whose eleventh hour intervention drastically upset this negotiated outcome) was the egalitarian actor, and those (like myself) who found themselves totally convinced by whoever they last heard arguing the case on television were the fatalists’ (Thompson 2000:114).

<sup>iii</sup> Roe (1995) specifically thanks the well known Cultural Theorist, Aaron Wildavsky for his influence.

<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, there are similarities here to arguments of political theorists of science about the disciplining of scientific networks who have argued that apparent scientific ‘certainties’ have often resulted from strong disciplinary boundaries, and the informal exclusion of dissenting voices, e.g. Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993.

<sup>v</sup> The comparison of how different environmental stories are represented in Thai versus English language press in Thailand is of course a complex undertaking, requiring analysis of different means of expression and the various readerships for each newspaper. For example, in regard to the Dong Larn dispute concerning the destruction of forest plantations by northeastern farmers, one article in *Matichon* daily described a visit to the site by the Thai prime minister by using the word ‘to wade’ (as through mud) to indicate his visitation. The implication of this nuance in the reporting was that the prime minister was clearly undertaking an unpleasant task in dealing with the protestors.

<sup>vi</sup> In one interview with the author, a Thai journalist explained that anyone with a university education in Thailand was generally considered to be at least middle class.