

# ***SOCIAL FORESTRY NETWORK***

## **FROM THE FIELD Shorter Contributions from Networkers**

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## **FROM THE FIELD**

### **Shorter Contributions from Networkers**

### **A NEW SERIES**

This is the first of our new omnibus papers 'From the Field': a collection of shorter contributions bound as a single network paper. The series is in response to our concern that excellent short contributions to the newsletter tend to 'get lost' because newsletters are so much more ephemeral than full-length network papers.

It makes sense for both users and would-be-authors if such pieces have a slightly longer shelf life. We also hope that a specific slot for short items might encourage networkers who hesitate to write at length. We especially welcome case-histories, problem-oriented pieces and comments, and contributions sent in response to the most recent set of network papers.

The first 'From the Field' contains pieces on the role of monks in Thailand as extension workers; on Social Forestry in China; and on an NGO farm forestry programme in Timor, Indonesia; finally, we publish two case-history responses to our mailing on nurseries and sustainability, one from India and one from Senegal.

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# BUDDHIST MONKS AND SOCIAL FORESTRY IN THAILAND

*Dusit Wechakit*

## INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist kingdom of Thailand occupies the Indo-Chinese peninsula of South East Asia. In former times, the population grew rapidly and much forest area was devastated in meeting the increased demand for forest products and agricultural land. The forested area declined from 53% to 29% of the total land area between 1971 and 1985 (Wacharakitti, 1988). The Thai people have experienced the direct and indirect effects of this devastation, for example the severe flooding in southern Thailand in 1988.

The government and the Royal Forest Department (RFD) has tried different methods to solve the problem of deforestation. For a long time, RFD activities were limited to forest protection and reforestation. Forests were protected by proclaiming national conservation and recreation areas (now totalling 52,815 km<sup>2</sup>). These include watershed catchment areas, national parks, forest parks, wildlife conservation areas, no-hunting areas, wildlife parks, botanical gardens and arboretums (Planning Division, RFD, 1986). A second protection activity was the establishment of forest protection offices and mobile forest protection teams. Reforestation efforts focused on planting valuable species (i.e. those sought by loggers, fast-growing trees, teak and hardwoods) such as *Melia azedarach*, *Cassia siamea*, *Leucaena leucocephala*, *Casuarina* sp, and *Eucalyptus* sp.

However, these activities failed to reduce deforestation, because of local people's perception that forests did not belong to them. Local people continued to encroach into forest areas for agricultural land. In response to the increasing forest degradation, the Royal Forestry Department began to implement social forestry projects. These include forest villages, village woodlots, agroforestry systems in reforestation projects, and social forestry. The last took the form of a pilot project that was established in 1988 with funds from the Ford Foundation.

## SOCIAL FORESTRY

Current forestry projects face many problems. Forest officials are attempting to cooperate with the villagers to solve them, but some problems persist. This paper will show some methods through which these can be remedied using local institutions, in this case Buddhist monks.

Buddhism, the Thai national religion, established itself in Thailand about 800 years ago (Tambiah, 1970; Mole, 1973). Most Thais (95%) are Buddhists, and Thai males will, at some time in their lives (usually at 20 years of age, after completing their basic education and before marriage), live as monks.

The close connections between Buddhism and forests are reflected in the chosen location of temples where the Buddhist monks live which are always located in forests and near villages. There is a close association between the Buddhist monks and the villagers based on exchange of food and guidance by the monks of the villagers' spiritual well-being.

## **ATTITUDE TOWARDS TREES AND FORESTS IN BUDDHISM**

Forests and trees are important in Buddhism because of the central role they played in Lord Buddha's life. Buddha was born, enlightened and died under the sala, bo, and rang trees, respectively. The Thai government's action in designating Visaghabucha day, when the birth, enlightenment and death of Lord Buddha are remembered, as National Tree Planting Day in Thailand shows the interconnections between Buddhism and forests.

Today, there are more than 300,000 Buddhist monks living in more than 20,000 temples all over Thailand. About 50% of the temples are located in cities or in villages and another 50% are located in forests or in groves of trees near villages (personal communication, 1989). Whenever a new village is established, the villagers invite a monk from another village to build the village's temple. The location chosen for the temple is almost always in the forest, to ensure the peace necessary for meditation.

## **TRADITIONAL ROLE OF MONKS IN FOREST MANAGEMENT**

### **Protection**

Because of their desire for seclusion, monks customarily protect and maintain the trees around their temples. The monks mark the boundaries of their temple grove or forest and do not allow anybody to cut trees within this area. Local villagers usually gladly help the monks protect these forests and groves, scolding anybody who cuts the monks' trees.

### **Tree-Planting**

Within the boundaries of their temple's territory, monks also reforest bare land and degraded forest areas. The land immediately around the temple is reforested first and more distant areas included gradually. Some less desirable trees are removed and replaced by more desirable trees.<sup>1</sup> The local villagers may help the monks in this activity, especially on important Buddhist days such as Visaghabucha day, Makhabucha day (a commemoration of the day when the Buddha assembled his disciples to teach them the fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Those trees that are particularly important to Buddhists and those that are less significant will be discussed later in

principles of Buddhism), and Asarahabucha day (which marks the day when Buddha first began teaching his disciples).

Of the 227 precepts that Buddhist monks must follow, the first is to abstain from destroying living creatures, to refrain from taking life (Government of Thailand, 1988; Mole, 1973). Thus, monks customarily show a great deal of kindness to living creatures, including the wildlife of the forest. Not only do the monks not chase away the animals, but they also try to feed them. Sometimes they ask people to give them wild animals that have been captured; these they feed or release in the temple grounds. No one will disturb any animal living within temple boundaries. The respect accorded to the monks ensures that animals under their protection are also respected by local people.

Monks routinely meet with local villagers in the course of their religious duties and act as facilitators for encouraging social forestry initiatives. The monks use these meetings to discuss environmental issues with villagers and encourage villagers to plant trees and conserve existing ones. Buddhist doctrine also teaches that the relationship between Buddhists and living things, including trees and forests is one of protection and conservation.

## **IMPACT OF MONKS' MANAGEMENT ON THE FOREST**

### **Forest Structure**

The location of forest temples depends on the location of their corresponding villages, which differs from one part of Thailand to another. In the north, the villages - and thus their temples - are always located on the flat arable lands at the base of mountain slopes. In central Thailand, villages are located near streams to facilitate transportation. In the south, villages are located near streams or the sea for the same reason. In the northeast, which has little water-travel, villages are located near footpaths.

Within their temple grounds, monks remove some undesirable trees, for example thorn trees and undergrowth, replacing them with the bo tree and other trees important to Buddhism (eg sala, rang). Shady and wide canopy trees (e.g. *Ficus* sp, *Eugenia* sp) and flowering forest trees (e.g. *Lagerstroemia* sp, *Delonix regia*, *Tabebuia* sp, *Cassia* sp) are usually also found around the temples. Fruit trees (eg mango, jack fruit, tamarind) are planted near the monks' dwellings, and valuable timber trees (e.g. *Tectona grandis*, *Hopea* sp, *Dipterocarpus* sp, *Pterocarpus macrocarpus*, *Xylia kerii*, and other hardwoods) are planted in the vicinity of the temple. Since shade is valued, some fast-growing tree species are also planted (eg *Terminalia catappa*, *Samanea saman*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Cassia siamea*). The number of species found on the temple grounds is often greater than that found outside the temple boundaries due to the monks' many and varied tree-related needs.

Forest management carried out by monks also includes replanting gaps in forests. Consequently, the overall density of trees in forests adjacent to temples is higher.

Temple territories frequently increase in size over time, either because adjacent landowners donate their land to the monks, or because the village offers the monks money to buy some land. These additions to temple lands are always planted with trees; thus, the monks not only prevent forests or tree cover from shrinking, they actually increase the land area planted with trees.

## **Forest Protection**

Since the rural population is increasing rapidly, there is a continuing need for land for house construction and agricultural cultivation. As a result, villagers and farmers are encroaching on the forest, except for the forested land belonging to the monks. The livelihood of many villagers depends heavily on trees and forest products. They cut the trees and gather forest products such as wood, rattan, bamboo, and orchids for their own use and for sale. Again, however, villagers avoid the temple grounds and territories when pursuing these activities. Sometimes, monks establish temples in concession forests, and when commercial firms log these forests, they are careful to operate outside temple boundaries. If logging within a temple boundary is unavoidable, they will first ask the monks' permission. Local feeling towards the monk's forests is so strong that if concessionaires logged these forests without permission they would be attacked by the villagers. Temple grounds, which may be considered wildlife conservation areas, usually have much greater numbers and varieties of wildlife than surrounding areas. Since birds, monkeys, and squirrels help spread forest tree seeds, they are also an indirect benefit to forests.

## **Relations between Forest Temples and the Royal Forest Department**

Today, most forest temples are located in national reserve forests. It is very difficult, given forest laws, for the government to recognise their legality. Nevertheless, the Royal Forest Department does accord them legal status in some cases, but this recognition extends only to the monks' dwellings and not the surrounding forest.

The monks implement their own forestry activities, with occasional help from the villagers. They receive no direct financial support from the government, the Royal Forestry Department, or other government offices. They do get some informal support such as seedlings and advice from the local forest office or forest officials.

## **Potential Role of Forest Monks**

Unlike forest officials, monks live in the forest. Hence, forest protection and work is more easily undertaken by them. They can monitor forest conditions on a daily basis. Since monks live in forests they have accumulated much practical knowledge. They understand the forest micro-environment, a knowledge which they use to choose appropriate tree species, planting locations, seasons, and edaphic conditions; they are also fully aware of potential pests and diseases. Monks are skilled at nursery establishment and maintenance of trees. One of their major advantages over the Royal Forest Department lies in their rapport and understanding with villagers.

Since monks interact daily with the villagers they understand their lives. In addition, they enjoy the respect and obedience of the villagers, especially with regard to the forest in which they live. Monks have also established the custom of working side-by-side with villagers in reforestation activities.

Finally, the monks have a greater interest in forest conservation than any other group: the villagers cut trees for fuel and timber; the contractors cut trees for market. Even foresters give concessions for the harvesting of forest products. The monks alone are not interested in cutting and exploiting the forest.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RELATIONS**

### **Legalisation of Temples within Forest Areas**

The government and the Royal Forest Department, in cooperation with the Department of Religious Affairs, ought to solve the problems of illegal forest temples immediately. The solution is complicated by the fact that forest temples are always associated with villages, and whereas temple monks are always conservation-minded, villagers are not. Nevertheless, an interim solution can be suggested, which is to legalise the status of temples in production forests but not in protection forests.

### **Sharing of Expertise**

Most monks rely on their own experience and have no formal training in managing forests, so mistakes sometimes occur. Moreover, they may convey incorrect information to the villagers. Since the monks have such an important role as social forestry facilitators it is important that they receive appropriate training from the Royal Forestry Department. The training might include reforestation, nursery techniques, social forestry, forest management, and conservation.

In addition, because of their long and close relationship with villagers, the monks know the villages better than the foresters, particularly aspects such as the characteristics of the micro-environment and motivation of the villagers. An effective dialogue should be established between the monks and the foresters in order that both parties can learn from the other's experience. The monks' knowledge could provide the basic data for bottom-up planning.

## **SUPPORT FROM THE ROYAL FOREST DEPARTMENT**

Forest management initiated by the monks could be more successful if their activities were directly supported by the government. The Royal Forest Department could help by contributing funds, seedlings, tools and professional advice. In addition, the collaboration between the RFD and the forest temples should include the preparation, publication, and distribution of informative newsletters, brochures, and other extension materials.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This paper began with the suggestion that some of the problems of deforestation in Thailand could be reduced by the forest conservation activities of Buddhist monks. Monks are an important focus within rural areas for social forestry activities, since their temples are ideally located within the forest, and the monks play a positive role in forest management (eg through tree protection and planting, wildlife conservation, and motivating the public to assist in conservation efforts). Their management activities have a distinct impact on forest structure, area, and integrity.

The next section of the paper discussed the current lack of coordination between the Royal Forest Department and the forest monks, and the potentially important role that the monks could play. Finally, several recommendations were offered for future collaboration between foresters and monks in social forestry.

The data presented in this paper show that Thai monks conserve forest resources. They and their forest temples are not enemies of either the Royal Forest Department or the forest. Therefore, the RFD should take steps to involve monks in social forestry. More generally, there should be more cooperation between religious communities and the government in performing conservation work. This analysis has clearly demonstrated the importance of religion in environmental conservation.

These conclusions lead to several recommendations. First, the RFD should cooperate with the Department of Religious Affairs to organise a seminar on the role of Buddhist monks and social forestry in Thailand. This seminar should bring together foresters, monks, and village heads to discuss how to manage future collaborative work. A social forestry project committee should be established to advise and direct subsequent work.

Second, a field survey should be carried out to gather data on the monks' involvement in social forestry all over Thailand. Data can be gathered from a sample of temples using rapid rural appraisal (RRA) methods. The data from this survey should then be analysed, and the results used to design the broad outlines of a pilot project for collaboration between the monks and the RFD.

Third, a second seminar should be organised to present and discuss the results of the field survey, and the recommendations for a pilot project. Participation in this seminar should be limited to the members of the social forestry project committee and the field researchers with some external participants.

Fourth, after the design of the pilot project has been revised in accordance with the findings of the second seminar, the project should commence. At least one pilot project should be carried out in each of the regions of Thailand (north, northeast, central and south). The implementation and initial results of the projects must be carefully monitored and evaluated. Based on the recommendations arising from these pilot projects, after an initial one-year review, guidelines can be prepared for gradual expansion throughout Thailand.

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