

ABSTRACT

This thesis, under the theme "Ecological Knowledge of Karen," is the outcome of the study on the knowledge system, thought and way of life towards understanding nature of the Karen community in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in Thailand.

The study was carried out by researching into the significance of the ecological knowledge of the community in self-subsistent farming, the system of managing natural resource, stability of such ecological management and its relation to the social order in the Karen community. In addition, the study includes factors and conditions that lead to changes in knowledge.

The Kruengbor village of Maechan sub-district, Umphang district in Tak province is selected as a case study. The villange is located in the east part of the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary. The village community was established more than two centuries ago and the village generations have sustained their practice of the systems of ecological knowledge.

It was found from the study that the most significant knowledge of the Karen community of Kruengbor is related to the farming system characterized by rotationa agriculture. This knowledge originates from the integration of the Karen consciousness of the five diverse elements of nature : forest, climate, plant, animal, and the gauardian spirits of nature. This complex knowledge is holistic, and concieves the diverse elements as intricately linked with each other. This profound

Karen consciousness of the diverse elements and their interconnectedness contributes to a large extent to the villagers' successful practice of rotational agriculture.

The most important foundation of the Karen knowledge is its cosmological perspective towards nature and its elements. Karen culture views human beings as just a part of the universal system of the interrelated elements of nature, the other elements include the earth, river, air and plants, all of which are believed to embody in them a "soul". This perception of nature does not allow for the owning or domination of nature by human beings. On the contrary, humans have to "plead" with nature and use it with respect. The Karen also believe that in order to maintain the balance between human and nature, the human way of life has to involve goodness and virtue.

With this knowledge and perspective of nature, the natural resource management of the Karen as typified by the rotational farming is highly ecologically sustainable. The natural resources are used economically and the amount annually used is sufficient for their annual household consumption. There is no greed for material accumulation. The non-permanent land ownership allows for efficient rotation of land utilization. The agricultural system allows for economic stability since the rice produced is sufficient for village consumption. A significant factor is that the fertility of the soil is maintained through the sustainable use of forest land in cultivation, that allows the land sufficient time for regeneration.

In researching into changes in knowledge, the Chakae village of Laiwo sub-district, Sangkhlaburi district in the west

part of the sanctuary was selected for comparison with Kruenbor. Chakae has been exposed to various "development" projects of government agencies, and the village community has been going through a cultural transition involving changes in the system of knowledge. The study points out that significant changes that undermine the ecologically sound system of knowledge emerge in the process of top-down government intervention based on the capitalistic development model such as imposing land taxation, changes compelled by formal education system, which alienate the community from its traditional way of comprehending and relating to nature. The intervention to government development projects without thorough understanding of the root of community knowledge, coupled with a "look-down" attitude towards Karen culture and beliefs, have created significant changes within the knowledge system and Karen perspectives towards nature. Such changes are resulting in a shift in the relationship between human beings and nature, which will eventually affect the management of natural resources.

However, the study also points out the dynamism of Karen culture that is emerging as a challenge to these outside changes. This dynamism unfolds from the long Karen history of struggle for ethnic survival, which has in the process created tremendous culture strength. In the future, this dynamism will be an important condition influencing not only the direction of the changes in the knowledge system, but also the community practices of natural resource management.