

Policy on Forest Management in Thailand: A Case Study of Kho Hong Hill in South Thailand

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Abstract. Forest policy in Thailand is a top down approach. We analysed the problem of this using Kho Hong Hill as a case study. We found that the forest policy in the earlier stage did not recognize ecological value of the forest. Although the latter policies may state that forest conservation is aimed at 25% of the country, the forest area has still been decreased. This problem is portrayed in the case study of KHH as well. We suggest change in policy formulation approach to include local participation in policy analysis.

Keywords: Forest, Forest Policy, Public Participation, Kho Hong Hill

1. Introduction

Forest policy in Thailand is under the administration of Natural Resource Management Policy and Plan. The process of forest policy formulation is a top down approach, as most policies are determined by central government, in particular the Office of Natural Resource and Environmental Policy and Plan, and pass them down to regional, provincial and then local agencies. The Office is responsible for policy formulation to solve problems and maintain the environmental quality following the Promotion and Protection of National Environment Act B.E. 2535 (1992 A.D.), which is the legislative framework for enhancement and conservation of national environmental quality. The environmental policies and plans must be in accordance with the National Strategy, which includes government policies, the National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) and the Strategy Formulation as frameworks to determine guidelines for management of natural resources and environment. Local administration agencies have to implement environmental plans that were passed down. This is summarized as shown in figure 1.

The policy formulation in the past as mentioned above cannot respond to the needs and problems at local level. This is because policies have been determined top-down instead of top-up from local people. Besides, most policies are not prioritized because sometime they are formulated following political influence which often addresses immediate result rather than actual needs. Or they are formulated to gain people perception and votes which contribute to future election. The policies in such cases often do not respond to the real problems. In addition, lack of personnel, budget, and people participation adds up to make the matter worse, particularly in forest management. This means deforestation is still going on. Apart from the above mentioned reason, reduction of forest area in Thailand is also related to the past guideline of forest management, i.e. issue of forest concession. Political condition which opened up forest where communism resided in order to secure political stability also contributed to forest deforestation. Another reason is agricultural reforms under the National Economic and Social Development Plan since 1961. Examples of forest areas in Thailand which are the results from top down policy determination approach are Kalo forest in Yala province, Chaibadan National Reserved Forest in Lopburi province, Nongrong National Reserved Forest in Kanchanaburi province, Kached Pe Klaeng National Reserved Forest in Rayong province, Kok Yai forest and Kok Mai Ngam forest in Mahasarakham province, Phu Khwang forest in Mukdahan province, Huay Sai khao forest in Lamphun province (Green world, 2008).

In order to increase forest area, and conservation and restoration of forest, Thailand has to change forest management policy three times. Figure 2 shows that forest area in Thailand has declined continually. Before 1961 forest area in Thailand was 53.33% but decreased to 43% in 1961. The cause of reduction during this

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period was due to the need of the country to develop infrastructure and industries in order to expand its economy as guided by the NESDP (Wasi. *et al.*, 1993). In particular, roads construction to link different regions in the country and expansion of commercial crops such as cassava, sugarcane and flax has contributed to the reduction of forest area (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2008).

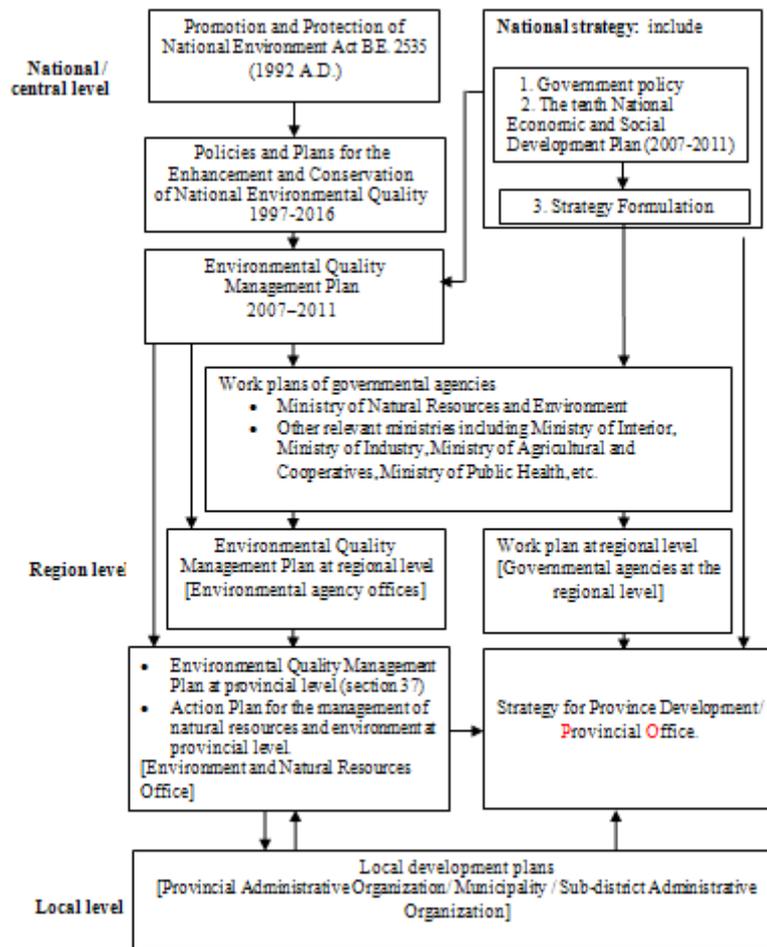


Fig 1: The link of plans, main agencies involved in natural resources and environment at all levels (Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, 2011). Modified by the authors.

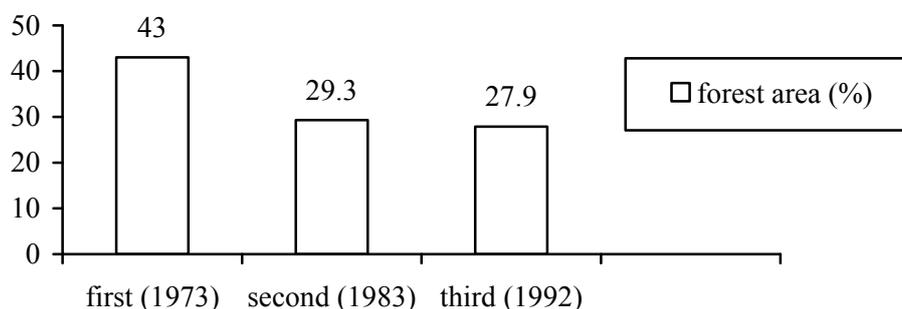


Fig 2: Reduction of forest area in Thailand during of policy change (Pantasen, 2002). Modified by the authors.

The result of such policy in reduction of forest area caused the government to reconsider and change policy forest in Thailand to increase forest area in 1973. This was the first policy revision. However, the forest area had continued to decline until only 29.3% of forest area was left in 1983. The government therefore revised forest policy again in 1983. This is the second policy revision. With this new policy, the target of the country’s forest area was divided into 2 categories: the forest for economic (25% of total forest

area) and the forest for conservation (15% of total forest area). It also promoted private sector investment and multinational corporations to plant fast-growing trees such as eucalyptus. Yet the reduction in forest area was still continued and only 27.9% of total forest area remained. Thus the government had to revise the policy again for the third time in 1992. This last revised policy is still in use up to the present time. The target of total forest area for conservation (25%) is larger than economic area (15%) (Office of Agricultural Economics, 1991). The revision of policy this last time happened because the country's forest area began to be in crisis as many environmental impacts such as droughts and floods have become more evidenced.

2. The study area

We have taken Kho Hong Hill (KHH) in Songkla province in the south of Thailand as an example to examine forest policy failures. The total area of KHH is 1,212.42 hectares. It is the last closest forest area to Hat Yai City, the major commercial city in the East South. It contains and provides many ecosystem services such as provision of oxygen, provision of water supply, carbon dioxide sequestration, and flood prevention. It also contains biodiversity value with variety of plants and animals (Sawangchotet *et al*, 2012). Despite its ecological importance, KHH forest area has still been converted to make way for agricultural land use, especially for rubber plantation. The traditional forest on KHH has been reduced and replaced by rubber plantations, and continue declining until in 2002 the area of 816.45 hectares (67.34 % of total area) was left. Seven years later, the forest area has decreased further and only 695.54 hectares (57.71%) remained in 2009. In comparison to forest area, rubber plantations increased from 341.05 hectares in 2002 to 441.18 hectares in 2009 (Ployninpet, 2012). The lost of forest land on KHH resulted in soil erosion and loss of natural ecosystem balance, and thus affect the potential for a clean water source. Shortage of water during dry season is now experienced by local community around KHH area.

3. Method

In this paper we analysed the forest policy problem in Thailand. The study was done using documents analysis and stakeholders interview. Documents reviewed include forest policies in regional, provincial and local levels, and research papers. Stakeholder interviews are land owners in the area, Sub-District Administrative Organization officers, Forest officials, and academic persons. Information collected are then analysed and synthesized.

4. Results

KHH is just a reflection of a failure of policy with economic-oriented growth. The encroachment on KHH forest started about 40 years ago, approximately about 10 years after the first national NESD Plan to expand its economic sector. This is partly a result of the policy which at the time did not focus on forest conservation. Although, there was an adjustment in the policy along the way to retain 25% of forest for economic purpose and 15% for forest conservation, it did not produce an increase in KHH forest area. Since the first policy goal adjustment proved that KHH forest area still being cut down, the second adjustment to reserve 25% of forest for conservation and only 15% for commercial purpose hoped for a better situation. Yet, despite the fact that the target of the country's forest policy is now to retain natural forest over commercial forest, KHH still lost its natural forest area.

KHH is governed under forest policies from national to local level, including the National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP), the Promotion and Protection of National Environment Quality (PPNEQ) 1997-2016, Songkhla Provincial Plan, Kho Hong Municipality Policies and Thungyai Tambon Administrative Organization Policies. The NESDP states that forest should be protected to maintain its fertility at least not less than 33% of total area and the forest for conservation area should be 18% of the country's area. The PPNEQ responds to the National ESDP by setting the goal to restore forest to 50% of the country's area: 30% for conservation purpose and 20% for economic purpose. This Plan states that utilization of forest and biodiversity should be in accordance with conservation and sustainable development. It is also suggested that the guidelines for operation are to enhance efficiency in natural resources utilization and management, emphasizing on reducing resource use conflicts and rehabilitating natural resources.

Songkhla Provincial Office receives the national policies and translates them to Provincial Strategic Plans. One of the strategies is to conserve and restore natural and environmental resources for sustainable development. However, when examine deeper at the provincial action plans under such strategy, there is no action plans that correspond to the policy stated. Most action plans are concerned with either solid waste management or water resource rehabilitation and management. There is *no* action plans concerning with the KHH. At the local level, KHH is under political responsibility of Kho Hong City Municipality and Thungyai TAO. When we examine the policy of Kho Hong City Municipality, we found that one out of nine missions of this Municipality is stated as “*Develop physical condition of the City to make it clean and conserve natural resources and environment.*” Yet, the action plans corresponding to this mission comprise only once a year activity to organize a “Love Kho Hong Hill Day”, with no other specific plan to protect, conserve or restore the forest on KHH as the national plans intend. Similarly, Thungyai TAO does not have any specific plan to conserve or restore KHH. The only plan Thungyai TAO has is to improve the Ton Ya Plong Waterfall, a small waterfall in KHH area, to be a tourist attraction.

Though the goal of the national policies is to conserve forest to be at least 50% of the country’s area, it appears the goal is not reached or actually the policy is failed tremendously. Our analysis shows that this policy failure can be explained due to the following reasons:

All policy formulation is top down and does not conform to local context. The central policy may contain good intention, but without providing enough resources to implement such a policy, it is difficult to see the success of the goals achieved. For example, the government assigned the Department of Forestry, the only one who has absolute power in management of forest resource of the country and has exclusive authority to manage the forest. Due to large and scattered forest area around the country, however, the Department could not catch up with deforestation which happened all over the country because it lacks personnel and budget. Local authorities also do not possess enough personnel to accomplish so many tasks, not only environmental management, required of them from every Ministry.

The top-down policies are not oriented on local situations and needs. Since the first period of the forest policy to expand economic and the second period of policy to retain only 15% of forest for economic purpose had already encouraged people to intrude into forest area, the stricter policy during the third period of policy to increase forest area now means that the Department was to remove people who already settled in the forest out. This concept had led to conflicts with local communities living in forest areas countrywide. This is also the problem with KHH also. Rubber plantation owners do not want to move out or return the land which they intruded to the government because they feel that they had possessed this land before the government announced this area as forest conservation. Adding to the problem is the fact that it seems to be no governmental agency that is in practice responsible for KHH management. At present, people who possess the land on KHH do so with the concept of patriarchal right (they have occupied this land since their forefathers and have been handed down to them).

There is no specific policy on KHH. As seen in earlier discussion, there is no policy or plan to either use or conserve KHH. The local authorities appear to have little understanding of how to manage KHH, therefore the existing action plan for KHH is not strategic enough to protect it from further deforestation.

If there is no measure to seriously manage KHH area, the last forest in the city of Hat Yai may be totally lost beyond recovery.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The failure of past forest policies can be explained by several factors. First, it focuses too much on using forests for economic growth, without taking into account the potentiality of forests. The country economic and social development accelerated the use of natural resources including forest area, whereas environmental and ecological value of forest was neglected. The policies were formulated without analysis of updated or real forest situation and ignored the need of people. The policies do not specify the responsibility agencies to take action, plan and monitor. There is no prioritisation of policies hence the relevant agencies do not know clearly which policies are more important. They then responded in the way they see fit which may not be to the best interest of the country. Policies in the past do not focus on ecological value from forest such as

conservation of biodiversity, or preserving ecosystem services. The top-down policy formulation does not regard the potential and needs of local people. Only one central goal is applied for all forest area regardless of differences in social and economic contexts of each forest and people around it. This application of one level of policy such as central to another level such as local will fail because of the problems of sociological difference (Attewell & D. R. Gerstein, 1979).

Our suggestion to this problem is that policy development, formulation and implementation must be in accordance with the cultural community and should be done locally. The policy makers should hear public opinion in particular on land use and forest policy. They should also view possible trends by study the past situation of community. They can allow people participation and involve participation in every step, particularly on the implementation and monitoring on forest management. The community should be given opportunities to choose sustainable forest management approach appropriate to its own context (Thai Health Promotion Foundation, 2005) local people are the ones who receive benefits and impacts which are the result of any policy, they should be offered to play an important role in participating in management. They should have options to determine utilization from natural resources in local area in such a way that can sustain their lives continually. However, the governmental offices should change their role and be involved as their consultant to coach them to the desirable path instead of being police or watchmen. Policies should also be reviewed and revised more often in order to make policies up to date. By doing so, policies will arise directly from the real needs and thus respond to the problems and be guided by the governmental offices to ensure that the same path as of the nation's will be taken. By this, people will feel the sense of ownership and protect their natural resources to secure their own living in the long run.

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