

Natural History and the Thai Baht

Natural historians will all want to know how the devaluation—or rather the plummeting—of the Thai baht will affect their discipline in 1998. As of the printing of this issue the baht has gone beyond 50 to the dollar and is still taking a bath. Moreover, my spell-checker always prefers to call it “bath”, so maybe that would be an auspicious change. None of my banker friends seem to know when the baht, or bath, will hit the bottom, or indeed, if it even has a bottom. Under the assumption that the economic situation will probably get worse in 1998 before it gets better, we can try to make some predictions about how natural history will fare. Some consequences have already been felt in 1997.

The financial crisis affects natural history in many different ways. First, it is reducing the amount of funding for ecological research. Fortunately, however, during 1996 and 1997, funding for ecological and systematic research had greatly increased due to the establishment of the Biodiversity Research and Training (BRT) Program funded by the Thailand Research Fund and the National Science and Technology Development Agency. Funding for the BRT Program began at about 78 million baht per year and was increasing, until the draconian budget cuts (by about 20 percent) by the government in the last half of 1997. Still, this will not greatly reduce the effects of the program, because it will be forced to become more efficient in administration, and most deserving projects will still be funded. In addition, the government recently approved the establishment of a Center for Biodiversity in the Ministry of Science and Technology, which will probably aid and perhaps absorb the BRT Program. Although the Center for Biodiversity will not get off to a flying start, biodiversity research and policies will certainly continue to receive support. Already, the *Natural History Bulletin* has started to feel the effects of the BRT Program in the increase in research manuscripts submitted for publication.

It is sometimes argued that the financial problems of Asian countries will reduce destruction of the natural environment because large development projects such as dams will be shelved or delayed. But this is not, in the long run, much reassurance. The budget cuts that are occurring may unfortunately reduce the quality of environmental protection and pollution abatement in the region.

This brings me to the publication of the *NHB* itself. The current financial difficulties of the Siam Society were felt early in the year, before the fall of the baht, when increasing operating costs could not be met by the mostly static sources of revenue. The Society has responded by belt tightening and also by a renewed membership and fund-raising drive, but monthly operating expenses are still not covered by income. A cap has been put on the printing budgets of both the *Journal of the Siam Society* and the *Bulletin*, which will be hard to stay under, due to the hefty yearly jumps in printing costs. The cost of paper seems to be caught in an ever upward spiral.

The *NHB* has more than a dozen manuscripts in the pipeline for 1998 and more keep coming in. It will be difficult to stay within the budget set by the Council in '98, and more cost-cutting will be required. We may have to delay manuscripts to later issues, cut down on the number of color plates, or shop for a less expensive printing house. Nevertheless, we

will do everything to keep the *NHB* and the *JSS* going.

A major responsibility of the editors of the Society's journals is to explain and defend their budgets on the Council. Every so often the journals and their budgets are subject to various types of criticism, usually constructive, but often a challenge for the editors. Council members sometimes see lopping off the journals as an easy way of saving the Society's costs, as these regular publications do not bring in any obvious revenue that appears in the Society's balance sheets as such. The Publications Committee is quick to point out that most members of the Society consider the journals to be the main benefit of being a member, which are paid for by their dues. They are not being given "free" to the membership. Besides, the journals are the most lasting and important things produced by the Society. (If you as a reader of the *Bulletin* agree with these statements, you should remind the Council members of this at every opportunity.)

In conclusion, I believe that, despite the serious problems that we all face, the *Bulletin* and natural history in general will ride out the storm and survive without very serious harm into the next century, no matter how the bath fares.