

Policy on Reviews

One of the most difficult features to maintain in the *NHB* is the Reviews section. It has always been hard to get people to write book reviews. If a reviewer is not enthusiastic about the chore, or doesn't have the time to do it properly, it shows. I think it is time to shift the policy a bit on reviews, to make them a more useful feature for readers.

The purpose of the Reviews section is to make readers aware of recent publications on natural history of relevance to Thailand, and to evaluate their merit. It is the second of these functions that frequently produces headaches for the Honorary Editor, for several reasons. First, I must try to see that this is done fairly and objectively. In U.S. journals, for example, it is always possible to find a reasonably objective reviewer, as nearly any special field of research contains several hundred qualified experts. A reviewer, to be objective, should not be a colleague or friend of the author being reviewed, and also should not be strong competitor in the mind of either party. Researchers in Thailand on any given topic, however, are usually few in number, so that finding the ideal "objective" reviewer is difficult if not impossible. Either potential reviewers are friends and colleagues, or else competitors ready to pillory the author's book if given the chance.

One way around this problem is to seek a qualified reviewer abroad. I have done this on several occasions, and it usually produces an unsatisfactory review because the reviewer is unfamiliar with the local context and value of the work. The author feels shortchanged because the reviewer, though competent, did not appreciate the importance of his work or the conditions under which it was carried out. A case in point is the review of the *Forests for the Future* booklet published by the Forest Restoration Research Unit at Chiang Mai University: the reviewer did not fully appraise the work on its own terms, even though his relatively sparse comments were technically valid.

Once I receive a commissioned review, I cannot alter it to place the work reviewed in a better light. On occasion I have returned it to the reviewer with a request for additional analysis. As with any submitted material, the only grounds on which I will reject it are (1) it contains *ad hominem* comments (e.g., negative comments on the ability or qualifications of another person; (2) it is written in substandard English style; or (3) it contains (in my opinion) unscientific or unsubstantiated statements.

A reviewer should be familiar with the local context—and sometimes even the local culture—to write a meaningful review. Therefore I am not going to rely much on foreign reviewers unless they have a special interest in Thailand.

Another problem sometimes occurs when scientific "experts" review the work of amateurs which does not measure up to professional standards. Books by amateurs (and I should add amateurish works by professionals) play a very useful and important role and will be of interest to many of our readers, even though they do not contribute much if anything to science. These should also be reviewed on their own terms, with their own mission in mind. If someone gives me a review which seems overly negative, I may reject it with the argument that, well, if this book is all that bad, then why should we waste the readers' time with it. It is better to ignore it.

I enjoy reading fair and informative reviews, such as those that appear in top quality journals such as the U.S. weekly *Science*. When I see a lot of negative comments, however, I think it unfair, because the high pedestal from which the reviewer speaks is

undeserved, and the author of the work under review usually has no chance to reply. Negative comments often just reflect a narrowness or bias in the reviewer which undeservedly tarnishes the book. A conscientious reviewer will take pains to present the work in a way that does justice to the author's intentions, without being too judgmental; but if the work itself seems biased or controversial, the reviewer may also point this out and present alternative sides of the issue.

Another source of our difficulty is the apparent reluctance of Thai scholars to comment on others' work. To do so violates a cultural norm; it is not proper to directly criticize other people in a public forum if you wish to maintain any sort of normal, friendly relations. The *Journal of the Siam Society* does maintain a vigorous review section, but the reviews are nearly all by foreigners reviewing each other's books, plus a few Thais who have learned to wear Western cultural armor.

The *NHB* thus cannot hope to obtain enthusiastic informative reviews of every relevant work published in or about Thailand. We will try to obtain such reviews when we can find suitably informed reviewers, but this still leaves a gap. To fill it, We will establish a section for "Recent publications," which will be listed and annotated with brief information on contents and purpose, and ordering information. This will be done with the help of the editorial board, and any member or reader who finds any new publication worthy of notice. "Recent publications" will cover local publications that our foreign readers may not be otherwise be aware of, and so it will be of particular interest to those abroad.

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