

## Natural History in the New Century

We are in a new century, and the centennial celebration of the Siam Society is coming up next year. It's time to pause and take stock of the state of natural history in Thailand and the role of the Siam Society in its mission of promoting and encouraging specialized study in natural history subjects, etc. The Society has done many things in the past to promote the dissemination of information and about natural history and its conservation, although it could do much more. It is an all-volunteer organization that cannot easily exert sustained effort toward solving conservation problems, but it can provide information and leadership in suggesting better policies.

Rather than taking stock of the past (which one can learn about by browsing through past issues of the *Natural History Bulletin* and other publications), the Siam Society has decided to take stock of the *future* of natural history. It is doing this by conducting a series of seminars entitled "Natural history in the new century: the human interface," which is timed to overlap the centennial celebrations. These seminars will explore the interactions of local people with natural history (the environment in which they live and its plants and animals) and the involvement of people in its conservation.

There are several good reasons for concentrating on "the human interface." The first is that conservation problems more and more involve the lives of local people who have invaded every type of environment and exploited and modified most of them. Consequently, problems can't be solved without paying attention to the problems of local villagers and other exploiters and getting them to obey conservation regulations. Often, it is found that local people are the only ones even capable of implementing effective conservation action, provided they can be properly motivated. Conservationists have come to realize the critical role played by locals throughout the world, but the problem here in Thailand, as in other places, is that national conservation enforcement policies and laws ignore the needs, welfare, and potential value of local people entirely.

A second problem is that development projects in Thailand also frequently encroach on the environments and resources of local people and often force their eviction to less suitable areas to live. Typically, the local residents have no ownership rights to begin with. Local villagers in marine and coastal habitats are often in competition with large-scale commercial fishermen who harvest resources with no restraint and often damage the environment. The latter are typically subsidized by the government, which directly promotes over-harvest and destruction of the environment.

A gaze into the crystal ball thus finds environments of the future more full of people and strife. National "top-down" approaches to planning and implementation of policies are not working, and must be combined with "bottom-up" approaches with genuine local involvement. What is the best way to solve these problems? A number of recent conservation and natural history projects in various different environments have involved local people who have been found to be both the cause of the problems and their potential solution. Creating a win-win situation for conservation and local welfare is often possible, however, and may require limited participation of government agencies, provincial officials, and NGOs. Such experiences have been gained in diverse environments including forests, mountains, rivers, wetlands and coastal environments. The solutions must be adapted to the local culture and resources involved. Some local conservation initiatives have succeeded

while others have not. In all cases, the experiences gained have helped pinpoint the problems and suggested possible solutions for the future, which may be out of our reach now.

The first seminar on "Natural history in the new century" was held on March 1, and focused on "The forest interface" and the problems of poaching in and around Khao Yai National Park. The seminar was well-attended and was regarded as a great success. It resulted in a number of important documents and reports which the Society hopes to publish. Problems in different environments will be treated in future all-day seminars.

*Warren Y. Brockelman*