

The Forest Edge: Conflict and Cooperation over Nature in Khao Yai National Park

“The Forest Edge” was the first of a series of all-day seminars planned by the Siam Society on the theme: “Natural History in the Next Century: The Human Interface.” It was held in the Society’s main hall on Saturday, April 1, 2003, and lasted all day. The seminar dealt mostly with the difficult problem of poaching of the valuable wood (called *mai hom*, aloes wood, gharu wood etc., depending on the country) from the trees of the genus *Aquilaria* (Thymelaeaceae) which grow in evergreen forests of South and Southeast Asia. These trees are moderately common in the forests of Khao Yai Park (The species is *A. crassna*) and are the main prize sought by poachers who risk their lives to obtain the wood. Healthy wood does not have the aromatic qualities sought by traders; the trees must first be wounded by burrowing insects or physical damage, and become infected by a fungus that causes the wood to produce a resin and become dark. After being hacked out of the tree trunk, the darkened wood is sold to factories that distill out the resin, and either sell it or produce cosmetic or pharmacological products. The resin itself may be exported to Middle Eastern countries where it commands exorbitant prices. The trade in aloes wood has been going on for many centuries and is the cause of the most intractable poaching problems in forests of the region.

Work by the NGO WildAid has shown that hundreds of villagers living near the border of Khao Yai Park poach the wood, and for them it is the best living they can eke out of the forest. Some poachers come as far away as Cambodia, and are supported by traders or factory owners who buy the wood, supply them with tools, and occasionally get them released from jail. With support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Khao Yai Park officials have increased the number of patrols into the forest to catch the poachers, and have confiscated large amounts of wood from them. Aloes wood, or *mai hom*, poachers also shoot and trap wildlife to survive during their forays into the forest, adding to the problem.

The Siam Society seminar presented talks by Mr. Prawat Wohandee, the Chief of Khao Yai National park, villagers from around the park, and WildAid and WCS representatives who have studied the problem first hand. A panel discussion and comments from the audience followed. It is clear that this poaching problem cannot be solved by park officials and armed patrols alone. It must also be combated by enforcement of laws against trade and export of illegal forest products. The factories would seem to be the easiest to crack down on, but their owners all claim to be trading in aloes wood from neighboring countries. Everyone slips through loopholes in the laws.

The news is not all gloomy from Khao Yai; Ms. Thattaya Bidayabha, a student from Mahidol University, and her advisor Dr. Sompoad Srikosamatara, presented a case study in which gaur have been increasing in population on the eastern side of Khao Yai Park near a village which has ceased hunting activity and farming on the park border. The gaur graze in abandoned fields and can be viewed by visitors. Wildlife and villagers can peacefully coexist in protected areas, as long as the people receive some economic help and view the wildlife as beneficial to them.

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