

## The Times They Are a-Changin'

All things must come to an end, and yet the cycle of life goes on. This contradiction describes my feelings as I phase out my job as Honorary Editor of the *Natural History Bulletin* this year and next and turn it over to a new editor, as yet to be named. My work as editor began around 1980 as an apprentice to Dr. Tem Smitinand, the chief botanist at the Forest Herbarium of the Royal Forest Department. He asked me to take over the review and editing of the zoological papers while he continued to edit the botanical ones. He also assiduously reviewed current botanical literature for the NHB, something no editor has continued since. In 1986, I became Honorary Editor, but have relied heavily on Dr. Thawatchai Santisuk of the Forest Herbarium and other botanists for handling botanical papers. As editor, I have kept the format of the NHB simple but as attractive as possible to readers. I have expanded the editorial board and added some new features to the NHB. Standards of review and editing have gradually become stricter, and I think that this has gained respect for the NHB and encouraged more scientists to publish their work in it. Submissions to the NHB have been growing. The editing load has become too much for the Honorary Editor, however, and the Siam Society will have to come up with more resources and support to maintain, or to improve, the standards and appearance of the NHB.

The NHB has served an important role in Thai natural history—the scientific description and study of nature around us. It serves, first, as a repository or catalogue of newly-discovered species of plants and animals, or of species reclassified and given new names. For example, a few months ago the *Bangkok Post* and other Thai newspapers gave accounts of a new species of stingray collected in the MaeKlong River. In all cases, the papers did not take notice that the description and name of the new species was published in the *Natural History Bulletin of the Siam Society*, in a paper by Chavalit Vittayanon and Tyson R. Roberts. The poorly informed reporters should have made note, because without a formal name and published description, a species of animal or plant does not exist. Of course, the stingray exists there in the river, but without a published description, no one will know it, or list it, or do anything to save it from extinction. Fishermen will of course see it occasionally, but will probably not realize that it is different from some other stingrays.

The second important function of a natural history journal is to describe the distribution, abundance (or rarity) and conservation status of species in the country and region. This may be done by listing all the species in some particular group (plants or birds, for example) in a particular area, or a single species may be censused or surveyed over a large area. Such surveys allow us to assess the health of a given habitat, or determine the viability or conservation status of a given species. For example, that the tiger has been found to be extremely rare and perhaps near extirpation in Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary, Khao Yai National Park, and other protected areas is cause for serious concern. Is the reason due to poaching pressure, decline in prey species, competition with dholes (native Asian wild dogs), or to inefficient detection methods? These findings call into question the viability of many of our “protected” areas, especially Khao Yai Park.

As we name and classify species, we also attempt to name and classify types of habitats and ecological communities, such as mangrove forests, lowland broad-leaved rain forests, deciduous dipterocarp forests, etc. Ecologists like to classify habitats to facilitate

inventory of species, but also to help understand how climate, soils, and other physical factors affect the distribution of living things. Habitat classifications are always crude oversimplifications, and we tend to give them a sense of rigidity that they do not deserve. For example, the distinction between “evergreen” and “deciduous” forest is taken as a sharp and rigid dichotomy by foresters and ecologists, and is the basis for a major division in all tropical forest classification systems. An important paper in this issue (by Greijman and van de Bult), however, through a detailed inventory of plant species at different elevations in Mae Wong Park in western Thailand, shows that the transition between deciduous and evergreen forest is not sharp and actually occurs gradually along a broad gradient of elevation and moisture. Even the moist evergreen forests at the top of the mountain have about 15 percent deciduous tree species. Probably no broad-leaved forest in the tropics is 100 percent evergreen.

As the study of nature has progressed from a mainly descriptive activity (often just a serious hobby) to a more analytical and experimental science, “natural history” has merged with the modern disciplines of environmental science, ecology and conservation biology. The NHB has tried to keep up with the modernization of natural history and encourages the submission of more analytical and experimental work.

Another important frontier of natural history that has assumed increasing importance is its interface with the social sciences or, to put it more simply, with “people”. As rural populations have grown and Thailand has become more industrialized and export-oriented, conflicts with economic development and with local villagers have caused populations of species and habitats to decline. Officially created “protected areas” are gradually losing the war with poachers and with development projects such as highways and reservoirs. The resultant destruction of whole ecosystems is causing feedbacks that are making our environment less and less livable.

There are a few bright spots, however, and a few battles for the peoples’ support are being won. These provide some hope that formulas may be found that may provide the basis for new programs and policies that may halt or at least slow the destruction. The NHB is happy to feature studies that offer any hope in that regard provided that they provide accurate documentation of environmental effects and reliable methods of social analysis where relevant. A couple of papers in this issue focus on human-impacted forest environments. The NHB has already featured many articles on conflicts over the use of rivers. I am afraid that such studies will become ever more common in the future as pristine nature becomes less and less common.

Another thing that is likely to change in the near future is the *Natural History Bulletin* itself. A majority of members of the Siam Society, who pay for its printing, regard the NHB as too technical and scientific for their tastes. Only a minority of members are avid “natural historians”. The Natural History Section of the Society needs rejuvenation. One possible remedy for this problem is to include in the NHB more non-technical features such as newsy articles about events and issues, and reviews of issues and technical articles in more readable laymen’s language. This could be done without sacrificing the scientific standards of the technical articles and notes. Such changes will require both more funding and more work from members of the Society.

—Warren Y. Brockelman