

The special section in this issue is devoted to research in protected conservation areas in Thailand, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their establishment.

Presently, there are about 185 protected areas (including all national parks and sanctuaries) in Thailand. The history of protected areas in Thailand began with the establishment of Khao Yai National Park in 18 September 1962. Nowadays, protected areas not only play a vital role in nature conservation but also provide places where ordinary people can still access nature and see wildlife. Without the protected area system, many globally important species would have been extirpated from Thailand by now, and Thailand's forest cover would be much lower than it is now.

The protected area system received a rapid boost after 1989, when the government decided that the concession logging system, riddled with corruption, was not sustaining the forest estate and was resulting in its steady degradation and fragmentation, and so cancelled all logging concessions. This was a bold move. A parallel problem, the existence of several million poor landless farmers, was causing destruction of the overharvested and burned forests. The Royal Forest Department (RFD) decided that the remaining intact forest should be turned into new protected conservation areas, which could be enforced by armed personnel, and the degraded forests should be turned into permanent farming area.

It was seen during its rapid growth that the protected area system could not be completely protected from encroachment by local people and poaching of wildlife. It was too large to protect effectively and its boundaries were not accurately demarcated until years later. A critical flaw in the system resulted from the outdated legislation of 1961 and 1962, which has never been fully corrected. The legislation empowered the RFD only to protect against violations, as well as promote tourism. It did not give the RFD a mandate to help integrate protected area conservation into the development goals of the Kingdom by integrating local people into conservation planning and implementation. The lack of cooperation of locals was the single—most difficult management problem facing protected areas worldwide, and international agencies such as the I.U.C.N. (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) urged countries to take measures to solve this problem. The slow-responding Thai bureaucracy has done little to do so.

Protected areas also have great value as research sites. This research is providing new paradigms in basic and applied conservation science. At the same time, it is revealing how effective the management of protected areas is. The environments within the protected areas have also been changing during the past 50 years, as a result of human influences both within and outside the areas.

The articles in this issue illustrate that researchers can provide much feedback regarding how successful protected areas are, and what needs to be done to improve them. Most scientific researchers are not passive observers, but get involved in conservation problems and issues facing the areas. The following articles illustrate the activities and viewpoints of some of the most active researchers in Thai protected areas. We hope that the next 50 years yields even more important research and that the findings will continue to prove useful to both science and conservation efforts.

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