



Rediscovering community conserved areas in South-east Asia: peoples' initiative to reverse biodiversity loss

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In several South-east Asian countries, after a long history of marginalisation and loss of control over natural resources, indigenous peoples and local communities have recently been trying to regain rights over local resources and establishing various forms of community-based resource management. The paper provides information on the status and trends of community conserved areas (CCAs) in the region and examines some of the main challenges to overcome in order to achieve recognition and support of CCAs.

HUMAN SETTLEMENTS have been shaping South-east Asia's environment for thousands of years. Until the beginning of the 19th century most people lived in villages and towns dotting this mostly forested region. But major social, economic and political changes in the past two centuries have had a tremendous impact on biodiversity and people. For instance, from 1970 to 1990, 31.4 million ha of forest was lost. About 50% of coral reefs are threatened (Burke *et al.*, 2002) and 65% of mangroves lost (UNEP 2001). Most of this loss has been taking place since local communities were earlier deprived of their use and control of local resources by colonial administrations and since the 1970s by industrialisation and global trade policies.

Simultaneously, since the 1980s, some governments started to admit that since they have not succeeded in sustainably managing natural resources, local communities and indigenous peoples need to be involved. Traditional and indigenous knowledge systems have also been gaining recognition in this context.

Rediscovering community conservation and sustainable use

In the past three decades, although supporting legal instruments are only now evolving, there are increasing community conservation initiatives and community involvement in non-governmental organisation (NGO) or government conservation initiatives. While there is no fully reliable data on the exact number or the total area covered by community conserved areas (CCAs), there are indications of hundreds or even thousands of community forests in Thailand², more than 500 community-based coastal resources management (CBCRM) initiatives in the Philippines³, and a large number of community forests in the highlands, as well as a growing number in Indonesia and Cambodia (see Boxes 1–4). Not all these local initiatives are operating successfully, but learning networks are being set up to help overcome shortcomings.

The wide variety of CCAs are of three categories: (i) based on traditional and customary beliefs and practices; (ii) externally motivated (NGOs, Government agencies, donor agencies); and (iii) a combination of these two.

1. This paper is based on research undertaken with Sahabat Alam Malaysia (1991–1996), the Forest Peoples Programme (1997–2006), a study on Community conserved areas in South-east Asia sponsored by TILCEPA (2002), and field work in the Philippines and Malaysia in 2001–02 as part of a PhD study sponsored by The Open University, UK.

2. Communication with Dr Somsak Sukwong, Executive Director of the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC), Thailand, 2002. He also related that the Royal Forest Department's figure goes up to 10,000 forest areas, but the high number is due to the fact that it includes small-size tree planting in government-promoted areas, which cannot yet be confirmed as CCA.

3. Interview, Tanchuling 2001.

Ownership and access to natural resources

A critical (and sensitive) issue facing CCAs is the unequal power relation in ownership of, and access to, natural resources. Starting with the introduction of western land administration systems during colonial times and through the introduction of the modern state, most ecosystems that were managed by communities according to time-tested indigenous systems have come under the ownership of government agencies, with the resulting *de jure* alienation and marginalisation of the local communities (see also White and Martin 2002; Adams and Mulligan 2003; Poffenberger undated). After independence, with the government's focus on economic growth and the strengthened government-business nexus, local communities have increasingly also lost *de facto* control. This of course varies from country to country and place to place.

Many CCAs in the region have been started as a means by which communities claim their rights over their traditional lands and resources, be it individual and collective cultivated plots, fallow land, common forests, watershed and wetland areas, or fishing grounds. Addressing unequal relations and enhancing equity therefore requires a critical look and a creative approach to power relations and the political economy of resource management, to ensure a favourable policy and legal environment for CCAs.

Recognition and respect of traditional knowledge⁴ and customary practices

Traditional knowledge, conventionally ignored in formal conservation circles, is increasingly being shown to provide important lessons and tools in the search for new conservation approaches. Such knowledge and practices still play an important role in biodiversity management (such as the continuation of *adat* or custom in resource management in Indonesia and Malaysia), or are being revived (see Box 1).

Emphasising this, however, does not mean rejecting modern knowledge or technology. For example, many indigenous communities have been carrying out community resource mapping, using a combination of traditional knowledge and sophisticated GPS and GIS tools, to document their customary use of resources and develop sustainable management plans.

Box 1. Reviving local ecological knowledge in community-based river conservation

The *Lubuk Larangan* (river protected area) system has been in operation by the Mandailing people in their territories (Mandailing Natal district of North Sumatera, Indonesia) since the 1980s. The protected river cannot be exploited by anybody during a closed season, generally one year. At the end of this period the public can participate in fishing activities in the river for a day, in what turns into a community festival. The participants pay a fee which goes to fund community development activities. The conservation monitoring is carried out by the community located close to the river and applies to all the people that interact with the river. Even before the spread of the *Lubuk Larangan* system, traditional conservation practices known as *rarangan* (prohibition) were applied to rivers and forests by the Mandailing. These were closely interlinked with the traditional land use system, governed by the traditional authority. The district government passed a decree to regulate the *Lubuk Larangan* system in 1988. The introduction of the *Lubuk Larangan* has created local solidarity, and provided economic benefits to the community, but more studies are needed on positive ecological effects.

Source: Zulkifli Lubis, Yayasan Bindu Nusantara, Sumatera, Indonesia

4. Traditional Knowledge (TK), Local Ecological Knowledge (LEK), Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are here used interchangeably, according to how they are used by data providers.



Mandailing people of Indonesia enjoying community fishing, once a year, according to the Lubuk Larangan rules.
Photo: Zulkifli Lubis.

Despite the above, it does not seem that governments and, in many cases, NGOs are paying enough attention to stopping the erosion of traditional knowledge and customary practices in order to employ them in practical initiatives. Indigenous and local communities also point out that traditional knowledge and customary use can only be practised if their rights to land and resources are secured.

Securing the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities

Recognition and respect of indigenous peoples' rights

One of the key factors in marginalising indigenous peoples is the failure by many governments in South-east Asia to recognise and respect their basic rights to land, resources and to determine their own future. The Philippines is the only exception. On 29 October 1997, President Ramos signed the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA). Although it is not considered perfect by the indigenous peoples, some are making full use of it to gain control over their resources and to develop sustainable management plans (see Box 2). Rights of indigenous peoples are to different extents recognised in the Constitutions of Malaysia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and Thailand, but implementation is still highly problematic.

Addressing the rights of local communities: Community Property Rights

Many communities have started to address concerns about being marginalised in decision-making. In the Philippines, coastal fishers have formed an extensive network of Community-Based Coastal Resource Management (CBCRM) initiatives throughout the country. They have set up more than 500 marine sanctuaries, and developed the concept of Community Property Rights, which could apply to terrestrial resources as well as coastal and marine resources. The CBCRM Resource Centre in Manila has been serving communities, and has linked up with people and initiatives in Indonesia, Cambodia, Viet Nam and Thailand in a project called CBCRM Learning Regional Network (CBCRM LeARN).

Community-based forest management (CBFM) was pioneered in the region even before CBCRM, in the 1970s. This approach continues to spread (see Box 3), but the situation remains patchy. As a result, at a meeting of the Forest, Trees and People Programme (FTPP) in April 2000, partners considered setting up a Good Forest Governance (GFC) in Asia project to improve the relationships among key actors in CBFM, and serve as a clearing house for best practices, lessons learned, and to monitor the effects of wider political processes on forest governance.

Box 2. The Tagbanwa of Coron Island

The Tagbanwa of Coron Island, Calamianes Islands, North Palawan, live on a stunningly beautiful limestone island surrounded by once rich marine resources, their main source of livelihood. By the mid-1980s, not having secure legal tenure, and faced with encroachment by migrant fishers, tourism entrepreneurs, politicians seeking land deals, and government agencies interested in controlling various resources, they were fast losing control to the point of facing food shortages. They reacted by setting up the Tagbanwa Foundation of Coron Island (TFCI) in 1985 and applying for a Community Forest Stewardship Agreement (CFSA), which they were awarded over 7,748 ha in 1990. They acted against the degradation of marine resources by dynamite, cyanide and other destructive fishing practices. They also used an Executive Order passed in 1993, to obtain a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADC) over 22,284 ha in 1998, with help from a national NGO (PAFID). They produced high quality maps of their territories, an Ancestral Domain Sustainable Management Plan, and used the Indigenous People's Rights Act to obtain a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) in early 2001. As TFCI Chairman Rodolfo Aguilar puts it "*we are a living example of how IPRA can be used successfully by indigenous peoples*". Subsequently, Coron Island was proposed to be gazetted as a Protected Area, but this has so far been rejected by the Tagbanwa out of fear that they would once more lose control, although they were promised majority participation in the management board. They prefer to stick to their CADT backed rights-based approach rather than accepting an uncertain participatory approach. Several other communities are considering using the CADT, which could prove to be a powerful legal backing to many CCAs.

Source: Author's field work, 2001

Box 3. Community Forest Reserve on Gomantong Hill, Kudat, Sabah, Malaysia

The native Rungus of Tinangol village, in the state of Sabah, Malaysia, directly depend on the Gomantong Hill for their water resources. They have never agreed to let the Forest Department take over the hill as a Forest Reserve, and have successfully stopped proposed conversion of the forests into an exotic species plantation. The hill is also the watershed for another seven villages, amongst whom there is a long-standing agreement to protect its 45 ha. Recently, new initiatives have forged a collaboration between the villagers and the Forest Department, to establish community watershed areas, starting with 5 ha. The Rungus farmers grow about 40 traditional varieties of rice, significantly contributing to agricultural biodiversity.

Source: *Persatuan Rakyat Tinangol (People's Organisation of Tinangol)*; PACOS; author's field work

Box 4. Conservation of River and Coastal Ecosystems in Trang Province, Thailand

Over 50,000 people sustained themselves along the Palian river basin and in the coastal area of Trang province, Thailand, till their lives were undermined by the destruction of the upstream rainforest, sago palm *Metroxylon sagus* forest, nypa palm *Nypa fruticans* forest, mangrove forest, and seagrass beds, due to development projects, dredging, intensive shrimp aquaculture and destructive fishing gear.

Yadfon Association has been working in 40 villages here, to change the situation. Fishers have organised to stop using destructive fishing practices, and successfully petitioned the local government to enforce regulations within the protected 3-km coastal zone. They have rejuvenated the coastal mangrove forest, the nypa palm forest, and the seagrass beds since 1985, while the rice farmers have started restoring and protecting the sago palm forest since 1998. As a result, coastal and inland ecosystems have become healthy, and income from enhanced livelihoods has increased.

Having proven sustainable management, they have requested the government to grant the right to manage these wetlands, independently or through a co-management arrangement.

Source: Pisit Charnsnoh, Yadfon (Raindrop) Association, Thailand

Some successful projects that started as CBCRM a decade or so ago, are now expanding to river and watershed ecosystems, providing a holistic approach to community-based management from the mountain to the sea (see Box 4).

The struggle for local community rights has, in certain cases, become the highest political agenda. In Thailand for example, the efforts of forest dwellers, small farmer and fisher communities, along with NGOs, resulted in the 1997 Thai Constitution recognising certain rights of communities. Much, however, remains to be done to implement this on the ground, and to secure rights in most other countries.

National recognition of CCAs

No review of existing and potential forms of conservation, including CCAs, has been so far carried out in any South-east Asian country. It shows that states are not taking the CBD Programme of Work (POW) on Protected Areas seriously. Concerning the establishment of policies and institutional mechanisms to facilitate CCAs by 2008 (as required by the POW), some first steps have been taken in Cambodia (through the Community Protected Areas Legislation of 2006, which grants communities the right to establish community protected areas, usually in the buffer area of protected areas)⁵. In some other countries, policies and laws have started to be developed to recognise and support community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) including forests (CBFM), coastal resources (CBCRM), marine sanctuaries (CBMS) or protected areas (CBMPA), and watersheds (CBWM). Many of these could be considered CCAs. For instance, various forestry, water, and natural resource laws in Indonesia recognise community self-governance over local resources. The Philippines, for example, have probably the richest history in the region in terms of CBNRM.

Fisherfolk managing mangrove forests that were planted by them in the 1980s, Trang Province, Thailand.
Photo: Yadfon Association.



5. Communication with Bradley and Ironside, June 2006.

However, these laws generally fall short of delegating responsibilities for management to the community level. There are also numerous problems associated with their implementation, including vagueness of wording, which easily allows for powerful actors to manipulate them in their own interests.⁶

Conclusion

During the past two decades, there has been a steady increase in the number of community-based projects in biodiversity management. Some of the most critical issues that still need to be tackled are the unequal power relations in ownership of, and access to, natural resources, and the recognition of indigenous peoples and local communities' rights, and their traditional knowledge and customary use. A much more active approach is needed in order to respond to indigenous peoples and local communities' efforts, initiatives and demands as well as to fulfil governments' obligations under international law.

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New book on marine CCAs

For more in-depth information, there is a new publication: *Atlas of Community-Based Marine Protected Areas in the Philippines*, edited by M.N. Lavides, M.G. Pajaro and C.M.C. Nozawa, Haribon Foundation for the Conservation of Natural Resources, Inc. and Panama Ka Sa Pilipinas, Philippines. E-mail: act@haribon.org.ph

6. Morris, Igoue and Lasgorceix, based on AMAN, 2006; and communication with Eghenter, July 2006.