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## Informal Agreements Regulating Access to Natural Resources in Protected Areas: A Sustainable Solution? A Case from Western Thailand

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### Abstract

Due to deforestation, a strong focus is being put on establishing protected areas world-wide. Thailand has been following this trend and protected areas are planned to comprise 25 % of the country in future. Thai law forbids any human activity in national parks, hence the establishment of a protected area is often a shock for local inhabitants, as they have to cease using forest resources. Based on data collected in a village in the Sangkhlaburi district in western Thailand, this study explores local approaches to manage coexistence between people and protected areas.

In order to avoid conflicts, a local division of the recently established Thong Pha Phum National Park arranged an informal agreement enabling the inhabitants of a neighbouring village to use forest resources for home consumption. However, this study shows that villagers with and without land ownership may not be evenly affected by these changes of access to forest resources. While the vast majority of landless people strongly depend on forest resources landowners decreased the collection of forest products. Additionally, as landless villagers have a less diverse livelihood portfolio, they have fewer opportunities of occupational change in case of diminished access to natural resources. Since it is most common to gather food we argue that landless villagers might be most vulnerable to sudden changes in the informal agreement. With no change in Thai jurisdiction the sustainability of such an agreement remains questionable, as it is largely based on social- and power relations. Due to the fragile character of this arrangement, villagers are inhibited to legally enforce their interests. This aspect of instability could possibly expose landless villagers to food insecurity in the future.

**Keywords:** Forest, informal agreement, land tenure, livelihood, natural resources, protected area, Thailand