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Park-People Relationships and the Importance of Forest Products in the Livelihood Strategies in Rural Thailand

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Abstract

The creation of protected areas inside forests might promote the goal of conservation but may neglect the livelihoods of rural households if their needs are not considered in the design and implementation of these policies. Forest products are an important source of income, both for subsistence and cash, for many rural households in the Global South.

The research study was conducted in northeastern Thailand in Nakhon Ratchasima Province with the aim to identify the use, role and potential of the forest in the livelihood strategies of the people living in the village Wang Nam Khiao. First, we investigated what characterised the access to forest products, and how the access was mediated. Second, we investigated what income sources were important for the villagers, here including the role of forest products. In addition, we examined the villagers' dependency on forest products and their rationales behind their collection. Finally, we investigated how ecotourism could be an alternative livelihood strategy in the future.

The data was obtained by applying both quantitative and qualitative methods and analysed through several analytical frameworks. It was found that the access to Thap Lan National Park (TLNP) and Sakaerat Biosphere Reserve (SBR) differed greatly through formal and informal arrangements. In TLNP the laws were not strictly enforced and the relationship between the villagers and the TLNP law enforcers seemed well functioning. In contrast, a conflict over access to forest products was exemplified in SBR. Collection of forest products was usually not the main source of income for most households surveyed, but was still important to a certain extent, especially for landless and unemployed households. The forest had different functions such as gap filling, safety net or poverty prevention. It was found that the villagers had many rationales for collecting forest products, both economic and cultural. In a perspective of future sustainable livelihoods around the forest, opportunities such as forest conservation through better harvesting management and ecotourism were explored, and further research would be needed to fully measure the impacts on the villagers' livelihoods of such alternatives.

Keywords: Access, dependency, ecotourism, forest products, livelihoods, NTFP, protected areas, Thailand