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New Directions in Environmental Governance in Southeast Asia

The program of research on New Directions in Environmental Governance (NDEG) wrapped up in 2019. The research supported more than 20 graduate students enrolled in universities in five countries¹ as well as five university professors, with a goal of assessing the growing use of neoliberal market mechanisms and involvement of private sector actors (both for profit and not for profit) in managing forests, wildlife, aquaculture and fisheries.

Neoliberalizing changes in environmental governance have provoked heated debates among scholars and environmental groups. Some see these mechanisms as more effective than top-down state regulation; others see them as further marginalizing already marginalized small farmers, workers and fishers. NDEG's research did not resolve these debates, but instead highlighted how these projects play out in diverse ways in specific localities and communities. We argue that the implications for local resource users cannot be simply read off of how these projects are designed, but need to be understood in relation to local actions as well. We also found that the apparently neoliberalizing governance programs often adopted only some select ideas from the neoliberal governance package; market mechanisms were usually not important, while state regulation often remained more consequential than private sector action. Some examples of studies conducted by students and faculty illustrate these points.

Renee McWhirter (MA, Geography, York University) studied NGO efforts to reduce the consumption of wild animal meat in urban Vietnam as a way reducing market demand. Vietnam is considered an important global consumer of wild animal meat and other products including rhino horn imported from Africa. She found that Hanoi residents typically choose wild animal meat as a healthier and safer alternative to domesticated animal meat, given the country's scandals involving the chemical contamination of industrially produced foods. Local NGOs were aware of this, but they needed to tailor their programs to international donors whose understanding of wild meat consumption was shaped by orientalist ideas that most consumers are irrational and exotic men, rendering their programs not very effective. McWhirter's research is relevant for understanding the marketing and trade in wild animals in Vietnam as well as China, which are now blamed for transmitting the COVID-19 virus to humans, and are depicted in Western media in similarly orientalist ways.



Chattrabhorn Bua-in and Eza King photographs

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Keeping the focus on wildlife, Kyle Wagner (MA, Geography, York University) took up an ecotourism project in northern Lao PDR that sought to reduce wildlife hunting by paying villagers on the basis of the number of wildlife sightings by tourists, including those caught on camera traps. Project staff set the payment schedules (values of payment for different categories of wildlife), which were not negotiated with villagers. An ecotourism company working with a major international conservation organization set up the project with the idea that the payments would compensate villagers for lost subsistence and income due to the enforcement of hunting restrictions. In practice, the income to villagers from these payments were much less than the income from selling or consuming wild animal meat; and they benefited only a minority of residents. Kyle's research also explored how the project effectively suppressed a 'free' market in wildlife, in contradiction to free market principles.

In northern Thailand, NDEG supported a series of community-based studies of REDD+ (paying villagers for carbon sequestration through growing forests) and other projects involving payments to villages for forest conservation. The studies were conducted by Chiang Mai University graduate students under the direction of Professor Chusak Wittayapak. The researchers found that the monetary payments were unimportant for motivating community participation. Villagers were more interested in how they could use their participation in these projects as a vehicle for solidifying community land and forest rights, or conserving watershed forests. Communities were able to appropriate these projects for their own purposes in part because Thailand remains relatively (compared to the villages in Wagner's research in Lao PDR) open to community action, despite the authoritarian government.

In mid-2014, just as NDEG was gearing up, an international scandal erupted about unacceptable working conditions for migrant workers in the industrial fisheries in Thailand. The fisheries researchers involved in NDEG thus decided to focus on assessing the Thai government and seafood corporations' policy responses. We found that private sector actions that aimed to regulate working conditions in seafood supply chains had little demonstrated direct impact on working conditions, although further research is needed. Government policy responses—new laws and a much strengthened enforcement regime—did lead to significant improvements for workers, although problems continue and working conditions still fall short of what is considered acceptable in international labour conventions.² NDEG also examined the usefulness of framing unacceptable working conditions as human trafficking or slavery, which tends to position migrant workers as victims in need of rescue, rather than as workers who are seeking better wages and working conditions.³

Future research will examine in more depth the question of how work in fisheries ties into migrant workers' broader family strategies and aspirations, with a renewed focus on fisheries based in Taiwan and Thailand.

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Notes

¹ All MA theses can be found [here](#). Publications that outline the results discussed in this essay are also available on the [project website](#).

² See [ILO C-188](#)

³ See Marschke and Vandergeest 2016; Vandergeest and Marschke 2020a, 2020b.