Ann Danaiya Usher, *Thai Forestry: A Critical History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. 248 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-73-2

During a recent field trip to the Khao Phaeng Ma Community Forest, Nakorn Ratchasima Province, I came across a uniformed person in camouflaged fatigues in the visitor and information center. I asked our guide why soldiers were stationed in their forest. With a slight smile in his face, he replied that the fellow was a forest ranger and not a soldier.

I guess I should have known better. Wasn't it in Central Europe where scientific forestry originated and foresters in a number of countries were called "forest police"? While today they are not called forest police anymore, they still wield substantial powers. But it is an interesting historical development that explains why state forestry in many countries, including Thailand, is what it is today—forest management that has timber production as its overriding objective and is at odds, to put it mildly, with local people living in and around forests.

In *Thai Forestry*: *A Critical History*, Ann Danaiya Usher provides a thorough analysis and fascinating account of more than 100 years of state forestry. She digs deep when she catapults the reader back in time to the origin of scientific forestry to explain contemporary issues, failings and conflicts in Thailand's forests and among its stakeholders. She leaves few stones unturned to illustrate the scientific basis and historical beginnings of teak exploitation, industrial plantation development and forest conservation in Thailand. She even takes me back to my alma mater, the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg, Germany, where the first forestry faculty was founded in 1787.

Scientific forestry puts foresters and timber production at the center of forest management. For almost two centuries, little consideration was given to environmental "services" that natural forests provide, such as biodiversity, and the role of local people who often depend on forests for timber, food and medicine. As taught in Freiburg and other central European universities, it had a tremendous influence on forest management across the globe. It reached Thailand even before the Royal Forest Department was established in 1896. Through some historical peculiarities, Denmark also put its mark on state forestry in Thailand, while the American vision of "conservation without people" deeply marked the country's strategies and actions to conserve whatever is left of its once mighty forests. While it led to a thriving forest industry until the logging ban was imposed in Thailand in 1989, it deprived people of the resources they need for their daily survival.

We learn all of this in 188 pages of text written in very accessible language, which makes it at times difficult to put the book down. If you really want to understand the current dilemma in Thailand's forests, you need to understand the underlying causes of different perspectives on forest management and how it all began,

which Ms. Usher provides very well in her engaging writing. Without this background knowledge on the origin of forestry and focus on producing timber, you can easily draw the wrong conclusions, such as that there is no basis for the way Thai foresters and protected-area managers go about their work.

The title announces the critical nature of Ms. Usher's account. Without doubt, not everyone will agree with her. She counters potential dissent with a very thorough analysis that is dotted also with critical voices from within the forestry administration. There is no doubt that many well-intentioned individuals work in the various government departments dealing with forestry in Thailand. But bureaucracies are extremely hard to change and it takes a crisis or the death of an honest forester such as Sueb Nakhasathien to provide the impetus for rethinking or a change in policy.

In 1994, Nancy Peluso provided a historical account of forestry on the island of Java in Indonesia. I always thought that this was a must-read. Ms. Usher's book falls into the same category, so I can recommend it very strongly as a must-read for those working in forestry in Thailand and beyond. In fact, it makes an excellent read even for those who do not work in forestry.

Those who know me are expecting some critical thoughts. I have two, with the first one being of a minor nature. In a few instances, Ms. Usher gets things slightly incorrect. For example, the German term *Waldsterben*, or forest death, does not refer to forest growth underperforming in second, third or fourth rotations, but to damage to forest ecosystems due to acid rain. But if you dig deep then there is always the risk of getting some facts not exactly right. This should not distract from the value of the contribution that Ms. Usher has made to the discourse on Thai forestry.

Is the book actually on "Thai forestry" as the title proclaims? In my opinion, it is on Thai **state** forestry. While we read much about the struggles of forest-dependent people, community forestry or the management of forests by local people receives little attention. It is only discussed in the forward-looking section of the last six pages of the book.

Thai forests are exclusively under the jurisdiction of the Royal Forest Department; the National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department; and the Department for Marine and Coastal Resources. However, local communities have been using and managing forests near their homes for centuries. Around 20 million people are considered to be forest-dependent in Thailand. They are estimated to harvest approximately THB 1–4 million worth of forest products per village per year. Almost 11,000 villages are managing community forests and more than 5,000 villages have registered their community forestry programs, covering an area of 1.2 million rai (or 196,667 hectares).

While such local forest management provides benefits to rural communities and indigenous peoples, it also helps to conserve biodiversity and enhances carbon stocks, important in the global fight against climate change. Tens of millions of rural people throughout

Asia are managing forests—their role could have received more attention by Ms. Usher. I am sure I am not alone with this request. For example, Elinor Ostrom, who last year won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, also spoke out against the dangers of a top-down approach to REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) during the Conference of Parties 15 in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December of last year. "Far more effective are approaches that gain the trust of forest communities, respect their rights, and involve them in forest use and monitoring, practices that are positively associated with maintenance of forest density."

Many others, including my former colleagues at the Center for People and Forests (RECOFTC), have echoed her sentiments. However, if you want to know why this is not the case in Thailand—yet—you need to indulge in reading *Thai Forestry: A Critical History*.

Thomas Enters
