

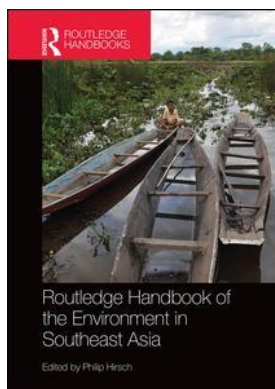
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PART 1

Introduction

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1

INTRODUCTION

The environment in Southeast Asia's past, present and future

Philip Hirsch

Introduction

The environment is one of the defining issues of our times, and it is closely linked to questions and dilemmas surrounding economic development. It is at once a global issue, sometimes understood in terms of the very future of the planet, and a local one, involving people's intimate interaction with their immediate surroundings. In this book, we choose to explore the environment at an intermediate scale, that of a world region – specifically, Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia is one of the world's most economically, demographically and ecologically dynamic regions. It is also one in which a host of environmental issues raise themselves at a societal and political level in response to the largely human-induced biophysical changes besetting the region. Many of these changes are a direct response to developmental pressures and population growth and movement. In turn, the environment is embroiled in key socio-political shifts that accompany the region's rapid pace of development. In other words, the environment is firmly embedded in the wider social, economic and political dynamics of the region as a whole and of its constituent countries.

Southeast Asia conjures up many environmental images. Aesthetically, and mirrored in tourist brochures, Southeast Asia is often imagined and presented from elsewhere as a region of verdant forests, pristine coastlines, terraced hillsides and exotic riverscapes. The region is also one whose rapid economic growth is associated in documentaries, newspaper reports, academic studies and travellers' experiences of it with congestion, pollution, resource depletion and conflict. For increasing numbers of the 600 million people living in Southeast Asia, the environment has, since the 1970s, emerged as a thing to be enjoyed, protected, concerned about, managed and weighed up against material progress. Meanwhile, the majority continue to depend on the environment for their subsistence, livelihoods and well-being. These contrasting imaginaries present us with a stark reminder that 'environment' evokes very different things to different observers from without and within.

The environment both unites and divides. As a unifying force in Southeast Asia, environmental concern has brought together disparate groups and interests in a number of high-profile campaigns, for example around opposing dams, protecting forests and wildlife, and improving urban quality of life. Concern over environmental degradation as a threat facing humanity in an era of climate change can give a sense of common purpose. Shared rivers, oceans, atmosphere

and natural heritage have catalyzed agreements and institutional responses among countries in different political camps and with histories of conflict. They have also brought together diverse social forces and interest groups in defence of treasured environmental assets deemed to be under threat. These galvanizing aspects of the environment are as evident in our region of focus as they are in the rest of the world.

But the environment has also been a flashpoint for conflict. Debates over sustainable development have often pitted those arguing for measures to accelerate rise in incomes as a priority in low- and middle-income countries – and indeed in many high-income countries – against those concerned about the effects of rapid economic growth on our resources and our surroundings. Competition over natural resources potentially sets one country against another when such resources straddle national boundaries, and more generally underlies a great deal of conflict at a societal level within countries. Thus, we find conflict over water resources in international river basins such as the Mekong, or transboundary haze impacts from Indonesia affecting Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. We also see differences over appropriate uses of the environment engendering conflict in diverse livelihood and economic activities. Shifting cultivation is at once represented as a sophisticated use of challenging environments based on accumulated ecological knowledge enshrined in cultural practices, and as a primitive and destructive threat to the region's forests (Forsyth and Walker, 2008). Economic planners promote dam construction as the cornerstone of some countries' economic and energy futures and even put it forward as the region's solution to climate change through fossil fuel substitution (Hirsch and Sciortino, 2011). Others have long opposed dams as destructive of the region's rivers and disruptive to the hundreds of thousands of people whose livelihoods depend on the resources and ecological functions provided by rivers and whose homes are under threat of inundation by large reservoirs (for example, Lohmann, 1997). Urban residential and industrial expansion is part and parcel of the region's success story in moving millions out of poverty and uplifting economies to middle-income status, while pollution, congestion and ecological footprints of urban areas and industrial zones generate myriad environmental problems with direct threats to human health and other aspects of well-being. Fencing off forests in national parks where people have been living for many generations creates heated discussion in the conservation world (for example, Bryant, 2000). Southeast Asia is at the centre of many such conflicts and debates.

There are many different ways of thinking about and writing about the environment. Some of these are descriptive, either in the positive sense of the beauty, abundance and fecundity of nature or in the negative sense of documenting environmental degradation. Others are explanatory, identifying causes and culprits of environmental change and seeking to explain the impacts of such change on human well-being. Yet others are more analytical, relating the environment to aspects of history, geography, culture, politics and economy. In the voluminous work on the environment in Southeast Asia, we see a diversity of both environmental scholarship and more popular writing on the environment that is reflective of all these modes of imagination and expression.

The environment as a window onto Southeast Asia's past and future

While the Southeast Asian region provides a geographical scope for exploration of the environment as a multifaceted and contested entity, the environment in turn sets the region within a temporal frame of reference. In other words, the environment reflects ways of thinking about Southeast Asia's past, present and future. Before exploring the embedding of the environment

in the contemporary contexts revealed by chapters in this book, lets us reflect briefly on what a focus on the environment also tells us about ways in which we re-create the past and imagine the future of the region.

The Southeast Asian past is constructed imaginatively, scientifically and through documentary evidence. There is a strong sense of the past as more 'natural' than the present, raising questions of what we understand by the term 'nature' in relation to human presence. In Southeast Asia, the conversion of nature for human ends is particularly poignant in the history of the region's forests, as detailed in Seymour and Kanowski's chapter 11 in this volume. The rapid conversion of forested lands to cultivated and urbanized landscapes gives a popular sense of human occupation as destructive of a pristine past, and there is a normative assessment of human impact in terms such as 'degradation' to describe loss of tree density, biodiversity, carbon storage and other forest values. European encounters with the region's fecundity – as described, for example, by Neilson in chapter 22 through the writings of the nineteenth-century natural scientist Alfred Russel Wallace – and concern with subsequent deforestation lead to an understanding of loss of pristine habitat. This sense is strengthened by wilderness notions that come with protected area management influenced by the North American approach to national parks as places free of human habitation and other forms of impact, an approach within which many park managers and other conservation officials have been trained and which is further reinforced by the legal assumption of forests as state domain in the region (Vandergeest, 1996). Ironically, such understandings were, as Neilson goes on to show, matched by the exploitation of resources by colonial powers, often legitimized on the basis of rational scientific management.

These ways of imagining Southeast Asia's forest past and protecting its present sit uneasily with practices of shifting cultivation, as Cramb explains in chapter 12. Those who have been living in or near, or managing, forests for the longest period of time are often unfairly marked as culprits in forest destruction. In part, this is based on very selective or misinformed readings of the history of forest-human interactions in the region, but it is also based on dominant discourses on modernity and primitivism. As Lagerqvist shows in chapter 23, shifting cultivators in Laos are subject to programmes of control and resettlement, based on modernist ideologies of rational resource use and the state's desire to sedentarize populations and agricultural practices. Here, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such programmes often occur under the guise of area-based conservation. These are ideologies that others trace back to colonial interventions (Bryant, 1996). Yet early colonial encounters were not all negative in their portrayal of local cultural interactions with natural landscapes. Zerner (2003) suggests that the notion of markets and cultural interaction with nature as inimical to one another is ahistorical, as much a product of late twentieth-century conservation thinking as it is a response to an assumed threat to the environment from increasing marketization, and he shows that Wallace and others 'possessed a vision in which markets, natural landscapes and species, and human cultures intersect and interact' (p. 47).

Environmental history is dealt with in this book most directly in the two chapters that follow this introduction. Gupta, in chapter 2, presents the environment as a physical system subject to human impact. As such, he emphasizes the need for a good understanding of the geological, geomorphological and ecosystem histories of the region as a basis for its proper management – in other words, he makes a strong case for physical geography as a product of natural historical process. Boomgaard, in chapter 3, takes us into the field of recorded environmental history, and provides us with an approach to the present through an understanding of past encounters between external actors and pre-existing economic systems during pre-colonial and colonial times. In chapter 26, meanwhile, Zoleta-Nantes explores the environmental condition of the

Philippines as an outcome of such encounters as well as more recent political–economic configurations, matching Neilson’s approach to the environment as a product of political–economic configurations at key periods in Indonesia’s recent history (chapter 22).

Others in this book also employ historical understandings to explain environment–human interactions in support of particular assertions. De Koninck and Pham Thanh Hai show in chapter 4 that agricultural expansion throughout the region has been rapid. They take issue with the common understanding that such expansion has mainly been a result of endogenous pressures such as population growth, showing that it has been based more on engagement of the region’s agricultural economy with global commodity demand. With specific country reference, Simpson reminds us in chapter 25 that Myanmar’s post-independence history has resulted in an almost total absence of environmental governance until very recently. Palmer’s chapter 29 on Timor Leste shows how historical practices embedded in culture provide openings for environmental management with reference to traditional practices whose historico–cultural resonance holds more potential for buy-in than do dis-embedded managerial approaches. Meanwhile, in chapter 24, Majid Cooke and Hezri use a temporal account of Malaysia’s environmental movement to show how it has brought together different class and regional interests over recent decades whose common concern over environmental justice unites at least some of them, thereby making environmentalism less of a middle-class preoccupation than it was originally considered to be.

If imaginings, memories and documentation of the past help us to understand the environment and its representations in Southeast Asia, and to see the region imagined as one whose tropical fecundity has given way to the ravages of economic development and other dimensions of human impact, the environment is also a part of desires and trepidations over the region’s future. The trope of sustainable development, which governs at least the lip-service paid to a more measured and rounded approach to national development strategies than economic growth at all costs, is predicated on recognition that ‘business as usual’ threatens many aspects of the quality of life that are valued by people and governments in the region.

Climate change is the issue that now most occupies time, thought, budgets and policy deliberations about the future. Ironically, climate change has perhaps the longest time horizon of any big environmental issue, yet it has generated a discourse that has found its way into everyday perceptions of current conditions. Popular explanations for the floods of Bangkok and subsequent drought in Thailand, for the movement of people away from areas of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam subject to saltwater intrusion, or for forest fires in Indonesia blamed in part on drier than usual conditions all invoke climate change. I have regularly been amused by the catch-all nature of the climate change box into which issues and development budgets are relegated. Whether it is the sellers at local markets in Thailand who smile when I decline a plastic bag for my fruit and vegetables and say, ‘*Klua look rawn, reu?* [Afraid of global warming, eh?]', or whether it is the Lao minister who suggested to me that I study the safe issue of climate change instead of the sensitive one of links between dams and resource pressures in her country, climate change often provides a remote and depoliticized surrogate to much more immediate and specific issues – and culprits – of anthropogenic environmental impact.

More than any other environmental issue, climate change is perceived as global in scale and scope, as a problem facing humanity as a whole. Yet it is also a regionally specific issue. Most work done on climate change at the regional level has modelled global circulation data in order to predict the regionally specific manifestations of climate change, often in combination with other anthropogenic impacts such as irrigation and hydropower development (Johnston *et al.*, 2010). In the case of Southeast Asia, the main message is that temperatures will rise and that the monsoon will intensify, meaning wetter wet seasons and drier dry seasons, with implications for agriculture, water availability, disease vectors and so on. However, there are also less obvious

regionally specific considerations relevant to climate change, particularly in a region where adaptation rather than mitigation is the dominant issue. In chapter 17, Salamanca and Rigg suggest that climate change in Southeast Asia needs to be understood in relation to the wider risk milieu in which people live and work, in cognition of historical processes and with reference to structures of society and economy that shape and constrain adaptation possibilities. Where mitigation in Southeast Asia is discussed, it is usually with respect to reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation and enhanced carbon stock (REDD+), as detailed in Seymour and Kanowski's chapter 11.

Other future concerns that attract increasing environmental attention include phenomena associated with urban growth. Some of these are about liveability. In chapter 15, Marcotullio shows that a close look at urban environmental issues in large Southeast Asian cities gives the lie to the idea, commonly associated with the concept of ecological modernization, that the environment becomes a concern at certain stages of development, and that modernization within a linear pattern of development leads to the adoption of technologies and the social concern that are necessary to ameliorate environmental problems. He suggests that, unlike the sequential unfolding and replacing of environmental burdens in Europe and North America, many of the health-related, pollution and environmental footprint aspects of Southeast Asian cities are synchronous, with far from predictable or predetermined linear patterns of improvement. In chapter 27, Grundy-Warr and Savage take a more evolutionary approach to the relationship between environmental problems and city growth in Singapore, suggesting that with increasing prosperity the city-level problems solved through technical means at one level, mainly geared towards urban liveability, are followed by emergent problems at other levels, notably the city-state's footprint at regional and global levels in its high-consumption phase. Environmental concerns are also differentiated spatially within cities as well as over time. Sajor's important reminder in chapter 16 of issues specific to peri-urban zones in Southeast Asia points us to the impending and future-costly problems in the making here.

Not all the future environmental concern is geared to the urban and industrial sectors. Most countries of the region have plans to increase their area under forest cover. Thailand (Leblond and Pham, 2014) and Vietnam (Meyfroidt *et al.*, 2013) have already reported increases in forest area since the 1990s, although what counts as forest remains a controversial and country-specific question, and increases in plantation forest occur in tandem with continuing clearing of old-growth forest. Other countries have programmes targeted at re-forestation. In turn, however, such programmes have implications for people living in or near forest reserves and national parks. In particular, as Cramb shows in chapter 12, shifting cultivators continue to face constraints on their livelihoods and sometimes eviction as a result of such policies. These have antecedents in colonial policy and are exacerbated by the domination of nation-states by chauvinistic ethnic majorities, whose attitudes are based on deep-seated notions of shifting cultivation practices as 'primitive' and 'wasteful' and hence not belonging in a regional future of modernity, prosperity and sustainability.

The increasingly prominent role of the environment in public discourse is thus a result in part of these concerns for the future. However, it is affairs of the present that tend to dominate rising interest in the environment across Southeast Asia. Let us now turn to the contemporary contexts in which the environment is embedded in the region.

The environment in present contexts

The regional approach of this volume demonstrates the extent to which the environment is embedded in its geographical, cultural, economic, societal and political, as well as historical,

contexts. A study of the environment is therefore simultaneously a study of geography, culture, economy, society, politics and history. In this book, we treat Southeast Asia as a regional context, but we also emphasize differences within the region to show how country context and local context at other scales also matter.

Geographically, the environment is defined by particular biophysical conditions and by conditions specific to place within the confines of borders and other anthropogenic constructs. Southeast Asia's tropical location determines the basic environmental conditions within which people interact with their surroundings. The broad division between insular and mainland Southeast Asia further provides geographical context, as do upland–lowland differences and interactions. Several of the chapters in this book pay particular attention to the biophysical factors shaping the region. In particular, Gupta's attention to the physical environment in chapter 2 calls for more attention to a basic understanding of physical geography, in a region where the teaching of the subject is quite weak at every level of the educational system, and yet where local experience produces intimate lived ecosystem and geographical knowledge among many with relatively little formal education. The region has been a rich source of ideas and empirical documentation of many aspects of human and cultural ecology, fields within which local environmental knowledge and associated indigenous management practices are of central importance (Conklin, 1957; Colfer *et al.*, 1997), and knowledge-making has become a central theme in contested environmental futures based on mixes of scientific-based, consultancy-based and locally based environmental knowledge production (for example, Hirsch, 2006).

Geographical context goes beyond the non-human physical surroundings. It also points us to the significance of place and space within historically defined borders, and different types of human settlement and economic activity. For example, Marcotullio (chapter 15) brings us to the specific geographical context of large cities, while Sajor (chapter 16) identifies the peri-urban as a key site of environmental change with its own specific problems and regulatory challenges. Salamanca and Rigg in chapter 17, meanwhile, apply geographical context to show that generic concepts such as adaptation to climate change only make sense when set within the conditions specific to particular places.

In a world where national borders still count for a lot, country context is important in understanding the ways in which environmental challenges are framed and particular motifs shape popular understandings about environment-related problems. Lagerqvist (chapter 23) takes the issue of resource abundance and resource scarcity in Laos to show how residual understandings of environmental conditions can depart from realities faced by a country's people, with implications for their well-being. At another level, Grundy-Warr and Savage (chapter 27) use the case of Singapore to show how an assessment of environmental performance differs depending on the scalar frame of reference and the ways in which we understand the environment. At one level, Singapore has been very successful in creating basic environmental amenity for its own people. At another, this has come at the expense of biodiversity and other natural conditions, and does not take account of the ecological footprint of the nation-state at a wider regional or global level. In some cases, sub-national context is also important. For example, Majid Cooke and Hezri (chapter 24) show how, within a single country, environmentalism has emerged separately based on the differences between East and West Malaysia. Le Anh Tuan (chapter 30) looks specifically at Vietnam's environmental problems and shows how a sub-national focus, in this case on the Mekong Delta, helps to forge a detailed appreciation of the close association between environmental conditions and human well-being.

The environment is embedded in cultural context in a number of ways. The environment itself could be said to be a cultural construct. Many of the contributions in this volume address

the construction of nature and other environment-related terms, while others take the physical environment as a given material reality. Several chapters focus on resource management as a more material and utilitarian approach to the environment. The essays that take a more constructivist approach sometimes find surrogate concepts that provide a bridge between universalistic notions of the environment as a field of concern, of policy and of study, on the one hand, and culturally embedded concepts on the other. For example, Palmer (chapter 29) highlights traditional prohibitions as a more effective trope for environmental management than more technocratic imported notions.

Ways in which people interact with and ‘manage’ their environment at a local level are also culturally determined, and in turn shape culture. The same applies to political cultures of environmental governance. The reflexive aspect of culture–environment relationships is reflected in several chapters of the book. Two of the chapters address a feature of political culture that is specifically associated with the region, the so-called ASEAN way (after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) of non-interference across borders, and to an extent an exhortatory rather than regulatory approach to managing affairs within them. Boer (chapter 8) addresses this political culture as a shortcoming in the ability of ASEAN to deal with affairs of cross-border impact, notably the management of the Mekong as an international waterway and the trans-boundary haze issue between Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and southern Thailand. Yet Kheng-Lian and Karim (chapter 19) take a less pessimistic but also cautionary view, seeing ASEAN’s environmental role as evolutionary and solidified by trust-building from within rather than something that can or should be a result of exhortation or castigation from without. The legal culture referred to in both of these chapters is not confined to international law and hence issues associated with national sovereignty.

Consideration at the political level also reminds us that cultures of governance and management vary from one country to another, so that – as we learn further in Grundy-Warr and Savage’s chapter 27 – Singapore has a highly regulatory culture with a close association between statute and implementation, whereas others – for example, Cambodia, as presented by Sithirith in chapter 21 – have a legal culture that is patchy in its implementation and easily corrupted by power and influence. Political culture also varies across the region, from more open systems that produce more confrontational environmental politics in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, whose civil society movements have grown in part on the back of environmental challenges, to those such as Laos, where the political culture is one of non-confrontation, and – at least until recently – Vietnam and Myanmar, where the authoritarian nature of single-party or military politics has constrained overt challenge from below.

There are also different cultures of science as a basis for environmental management. Once again, in a highly managerial state such as Singapore, the environment becomes an object of human manipulation for anthropocentric purposes, and technology is paramount in achieving these ends. In the case of the Mekong River Basin, on the other hand, Carew-Reid shows in chapter 20 that a combination of scattered planning and patchy data leads to a distinctly non-scientific approach to management, requiring surrogate planning processes – in this case, strategic environmental assessment – to inform decisions at the political level.

Environmental issues are also embedded in the economic context of societies in which they are discussed and managed. We have already identified economic development as the main overriding context in which the environment has become a concern in Southeast Asia. In chapter 4, De Koninck and Pham Thanh Hai argue emphatically that the economic imperative has outweighed the demographic one in extending the agricultural frontier into previously forested areas, and that this in turn has increasingly been predicated on external demand for agricultural commodities with the integration of the region’s economies into global patterns of

trade and investment. To this can be added the intensified regional cross-investment in agriculture and other land-based activity (Hirsch and Scurrah, 2015).

In a more sustained way, Barney (chapter 7) takes neoliberalism head-on, not only as a background economic ideology facilitating a particular growth path predicated on commodifying environmental assets, but also as a totalizing approach to nature in which anything and everything becomes subject to market logics. Furthermore, a feature of neoliberalism in Southeast Asia as a guiding set of economic and societal principles is that it more often than not co-exists within distinctly *il*liberal authoritarian political systems, constraining spaces of challenge in the environmental as well as other fields. By identifying the crucial role for markets within a neoliberal economic framework in shaping patterns and pathways of migration, Elmhirst (chapter 18) problematizes otherwise overly simplistic ways of understanding links between migration and environmental change. Of course, these links are two-way; whereas recent concern with adaptation to climate change (see Salamanca and Rigg's chapter 17) tends to frame the relationship in terms of environmental change driving migration, historical approaches see the causality in the other direction – another theme in De Koninck and Pham Thanh Hai's account in chapter 4 of deforestation through frontier expansion.

Several contributions in this volume consider the economic embedding of environmental questions in terms of a wider political economy rather than within an economy-versus-environment frame of reference. Two chapters independently frame their analysis in terms of three broad sets of competing interests: commercial, conservation and subsistence. In chapter 11, Seymour and Kanowski suggest that historical changes in forest management are best understood in terms of the interplay, conflicts and trade-offs among commercial exploitation, biodiversity and local livelihood needs. Meanwhile, Sithirith in chapter 21 details the ways in which all three sets of interests have been articulated through territorialization in Cambodia, leading to overlaps and hence conflicts that are based on a poor mismatch between policy initiatives and livelihood circumstances of the country's rural poor. Zoleta-Nantes shows in chapter 26 how the Philippines' multiple environmental problems are rooted in the country's history and practices of dominant interest groups, at the expense of poor farmers, fishers and small-scale entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, Neilson shows in chapter 22 how the environment and political-economic systems at different points in Indonesia's history have been mutually constitutive, currently embedding the environment within the context of decentralization, global resource demand and emerging modes of environmental regulation.

On a different tack, Middleton shows in chapter 13 that water resources management cannot be treated in isolation from the economic interests in rivers, particularly those of the energy sector. This is further complicated in the era of neoliberal governance by the fact that most new large hydropower dam projects are now owned and run by the private sector, giving a primary interest in profits rather than in broader and multifaceted societal benefit. Similarly, Bush and Marschke (chapter 14) show that management of fisheries in the region can only be understood with reference to key economic imperatives, including the overcapacity of fishing fleets (sunk capital), markets at regional and global levels and the force behind the 'blue revolution' that has brought capital into aquaculture.

The political context in which environmental issues have emerged into prominence pervades many of the contributions to this volume. At a theoretical level, the most robust analysis of the environment *as* political lies in the field of political ecology. In chapter 6, Vandergeest and Roth show not only the contribution that this global field of enquiry and critique has made to understanding the environment as a political entity in Southeast Asia, but also the extent to which this world region has been a cradle of political ecology's cross-disciplinary evolution.

Other conceptual chapters take dimensions of the environment as a political and governance field in thematic, resource-specific and country-specific ways. Thematically, Forsyth (chapter 5) explores environmentalism quite critically, exposing ways in which its representation as a new social movement in Southeast Asia tends to paper over the significant class interests with which different strands of environmental critique are imbued. He also reveals the simplifications associated with authoritative claims to knowledge in many strands of environmentalism in the region. Laungaramsri (chapter 28) demonstrates the crossing of so-called new social movements around ecology and gender with class issues, using this to help explain the woeful lack of intersection between feminist and environmentalist campaigns in Thailand despite a superficial convergence of values and interests around social justice. In chapter 24, Majid Cooke and Hezri also show the different class origins of environmentalism in Malaysia, but in this case they reveal how the movement has become more inclusive, through what they term ‘familial’ processes, rather than fragmented or internally conflict-ridden. Meanwhile, Fisher (chapter 9) examines the theme of decentralization in environmental governance in the region, showing that despite the lip-service paid to devolution, participation and so on, there has not been a significant devolution of real authority in this arena. Statist appropriation of transboundary environmental governance is shown by Contreras in chapter 10 to constrain responses to key disputes as civil society is shut out of institutional means of dealing with impacts that transcend national borders. At a country level, Le Anh Tuan (chapter 30) makes a strong case for more grassroots involvement in dealing with environmental issues, given the close ties between social and economic well-being and environmental conditions in places such as the Mekong Delta.

Some of the country essays in the volume pay more direct attention to the political position of environmental concern. In chapter 25, Simpson shows how recent the official attention to environmental governance is in Myanmar, and the extent to which it has come from outside with the country’s opening up since 2010. This must raise questions over the extent to which the environment is now embedded within the new political system, despite the more liberal political milieu that prevails in Myanmar and the growing awareness not only of the environmental legacy issues associated with decades of neglect in a context of rampant resource extraction, but also of the new challenges that come with large-scale foreign investment and an impending acceleration of the country’s economic growth. Lagerqvist shows in chapter 23 that the political establishment in Laos has wedded itself firmly to a programme of economic growth based on resource extraction, in a political setting where critique is severely constrained.

About this book

This book takes the environment as a field of argument. There are two main dimensions to this approach. First, and most intuitively, there is a great deal of difference of opinion, debate and conflict over the importance of the environment, the extent to which it is a problem area, effective means of dealing with environmental problems and appropriate use and management of natural resources and other environmental assets. Second, and fundamental to the basic organizing principle of the book, the environment is a field around which key positions are articulated and cases made for a particular way of understanding interactions between society, economy, politics and natural resources or amenities, based on data and reasoning. Each of these positions and cases sets out specific lines of thinking about and understanding of a particular environmentally conceived problem, its derivation and its solution. Each chapter in this book therefore has an environmental argument at its core and can be read as an essay in its own right.

Following this introduction, the book is organized into three further sections. These are based on different thematic approaches to the environment, on a range of specific environmental problem areas and on the context of individual countries or regional groupings respectively.

Part 2 comprises a series of essays that address the environment from diverse disciplinary or conceptual angles. Each of these employs the regional context to address a key approach to understanding physical manifestations of environmental change and its human causes and implications. Each essay employs a provocative argument and, in some cases, gives an indication of the counterarguments in theoretical and/or applied terms. The essays in this section of the book in particular should appeal to environmental scholars and other readers beyond those interested specifically in Southeast Asia.

Part 3 addresses themes and issues from a more empirical angle, looking at a range of environmental and natural resource sectors. It is framed around contemporary and future challenges. Most of the chapters in this part also have applied and policy messages. Like those in part 2, each chapter also has a key debate at its core, contributing to a central message of the book – that the environment is a contested entity and cannot be understood outside its social and political context.

Part 4 investigates environmental change, environmental awareness and environmental policy and practice on a regional, sub-regional and country-by-country basis. While at one level this part serves as the alternative axis of a matrix with the cross-cutting themes and problem areas covered in parts 2 and 3, it departs from straightforward and standardized country-by-country (and sub-regional) coverage. Rather, it shows how environmental issues and movements are framed by the particular historical, political and economic circumstances of the countries in which they occur. Further, each chapter in this section focuses on a salient aspect of the environment in its particular country context, contributing to, rather than attempting to synthesize, the wider literature on the environment in the country in question. It also shows how the environment is being regionalized as a material issue within ASEAN and as a concern around which social movements and international policy deliberations coalesce at a regional level.

Beyond the book as a wide-ranging account of environmental phenomena and issues in Southeast Asia, many of the essays are significant synopses of long-studied issues in their own right. Without dismissing the significant contribution of each and every chapter, several of the chapters illustrate this aspect of the book. Vandergeest and Roth in chapter 6 make a succinct statement on political ecology, providing a particularly useful guide to this sometimes nebulous and even elusive field of study. The fact that they situate it regionally, in a region where empirical studies have contributed a great deal to the development of a field with wider geographical application, helps to ground the reader's understanding of political ecology and begs a comparative approach with other world regions – bringing back the calls, in one of the discipline's founding volumes, for a regional political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987, p. 17). Cramb's essay on shifting cultivation in chapter 12 has the potential to become a seminal piece on a subject that has generated volumes over a long period of time, but around which academic and policy debate shows few signs of resolution. In chapter 20, Carew-Reid provides a unique insider's reflection on the Mekong by a key actor in an immensely important regional process, the strategic environmental assessment of mainstream dams, in what is a rare exercise in introspection by a seasoned practitioner. Sajor's article on peri-urban environmental issues in chapter 16 takes the reader to a geographical context – the interface between city and countryside – that has been grossly neglected in the rather bifurcated work on rural and urban environments in Southeast Asia and many other parts of the rapidly developing world. Laungaramsri makes important observations on

feminism, environmentalism and class in chapter 28. Palmer's approach in chapter 29 to ritual in environmental governance is an erudite discussion of how the environment as a category has the potential to connect with 'insider' constructs rather than be adopted through universalist managerial notions. Kheng-Lian and Karim's chapter 19 on ASEAN similarly reminds us of the tension between imposing universalistic principles and gaining local acceptance in a more embedded environmental approach. Ultimately, it is this embedding that brings us back to the regional rationale for the book's scope.

In sum, the purpose of this book is to be wide-ranging and balanced, but not encyclopaedic. The material in the thematic, sectoral and country-based chapters presents a rich array of the myriad environmental issues of the region. It is based on many years – and, in some cases, decades – of empirical research and analysis by key authors in the field. Yet the book is intended to be read as much for scholarly understanding of how environmental issues are approached from diverse theoretical perspectives, and for provocative arguments around the environment embedded in its various place-bound contexts, as it is for its detailed empirical account of the many environmental problems and challenges faced in Southeast Asia.

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